



Making Meetings Work

Conquering the challenges and getting great results

Boards, Committees & Governance Centre
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Foreword

Over a lifetime of starting up and running large progressive organisations I've spent more time than most thrashing things out; but it's still mildly shocking to realise that I've probably spent about six years' worth of working weeks sitting in meetings. Six years!

The problem is, those organisations wouldn't have been started, and wouldn't have run well, if I hadn't had those meetings.

Knowing what I know now I can see there were some I could have skipped, and many that could have been run more efficiently, but I can't see any way that I could have got those things done without working through issues, and keeping people in the picture, and coordinating activities, and all the other things that meetings do.

Meetings! Don't like living with them, can't work without them.

So here is what I know about how to make meetings work for you. I hope it can help you keep your own group together, motivated, and focused on your mission until you reach your own Meeting Nirvana.

Dr Rhonda Galbally AO
Chief Executive Officer





Contents

1. Introduction: Why Meetings?	4
2. Names	6
3. Style and Function	7
4. Before the Meeting	9
• The agenda	9
• The minutes	11
• The meeting papers	11
• The mail-out	13
5. The Chair's Meeting	14
• The powers of the Chair	16
• The functions of the Chair	18
• Managing the meeting	19
6. The Secretary's Meeting	22
• The venue	24
• Building the agenda	25
• Minute-taking	28
7. The Treasurer's Meeting	31
• Planning the budget	31
• Monitoring the budget	32
• Risk management	38
8. The Member's Meeting	39
• Debate	41
• Questioning	44
• Speaking	45
• Voting	47
9. The Staff Member's Meeting	49
• Status in the meeting	49
• Function in the meeting	51
10. Meetings: The Bad News	53
• Malcontents	54
• Dominants	56
• No-shows	58
• Bureaucrats and outlaws	60
• Passengers	61





II. After the Meeting	63
• Paperwork	63
• Tasks	64
• Next meeting	65
• Development and change	66
II. The Board's Meeting: The Board View	68
• Strategy	69
• Oversight	70
• Renewal	72
• Ten quick ways to improve board meetings	72
APPENDICES	75
• 1: Glossary	76
• 2: Sample Meetings Policy	79
• 3: Sample Standing Orders	81
• 4: Sample Conflict of Interest Policy	84
• 5: Board Effectiveness Quiz	86



I. Introduction: Why Meetings?

There's a very old story about the first man to fly the Atlantic solo.

Charles Lindbergh became famous around the world in 1927 after touching down in Paris in his airplane, *The Spirit of St. Louis*, and the story is that as the streets of New York heaved with hysterical crowds celebrating the triumph, a secretary burst into the office of a downtown tycoon. "Sir, sir, Lindbergh's flown the Atlantic! He made it!"

"Hmph." Said the tycoon, scribbling on at his desk.

"Sir, didn't you hear me? A man has flown the Atlantic! Solo! All by himself! Alone!"

The tycoon looked up.

"Miss Brough, all by himself, alone, a man can do anything. Come and tell me that a committee has flown the Atlantic – then I'll be surprised."

There's no doubt about it, committees have had a bad press. But we can't do without them. People have to work together, and this has to be organised, and after a while most ways of organising it tend to converge on much the same sort of thing: a board, or a committee – some sort of collection of people. And whatever that body is called, it needs to meet.

Those meetings can be good or bad. That is what this book is about.

The ideal meeting:

1. Everyone arrives five minutes early, and the meeting starts on time.
2. Everyone has made a thorough reading of the meeting agenda and has already clarified any technical points they don't understand.
3. The agenda is well structured and perfectly balanced with just enough information to make it informative but not so much that it takes a long time to read or is hard to follow. Items are presented in logical order.
4. The Chair is well acquainted with meeting rules and politely ensures all participants abide by them, ensuring the meeting bubbles along smoothly.
5. Other participants are similarly well acquainted with the rules and are respectful of the Chair's authority.





6. All participants make a contribution and no one person dominates the debate. Debates are conducted courteously.
7. Participants speak only about issues to which they have something to contribute. They refrain from bringing in irrelevant information or repeating ideas already raised by others. Their contributions are well-considered and concise.
8. Participants are satisfied that their views have been heard and are happy to accept all decisions – even those they have voted against.
9. All participants are clear what their responsibilities will be and what actions they need to carry out before the next meeting.
10. The meeting finishes on time (or early!).

All these are good things. None of them happens automatically.

A smoothly running meeting flows out of a smoothly running organisation, one that has its priorities and its policies and its procedures settled and accepted ahead of time.

If the meeting isn't working, that's almost always a symptom of deeper problems in the organisation. You need to go back and fix them.

For everything else, you have this book to help.

We've divided the book into sections to make it easier for you to find the information you need when you need it, but ideally, each person involved in your group's meetings should be across every section we cover here. The Chair should know what the Secretary's responsibilities are; each general meeting participant should know where the Chair's responsibilities lie.

While in many places we refer in this book to board meetings, in reality all of this information is equally true of whatever type of meeting you are running.

Remember too that the advice we give here should not be treated as Gospel. Ultimately, it's up to your own group to work out its own way of operating.



2. Names

In the community sector the same thing may have many different names, and some names may apply to many different things. To simplify matters a little, we've settled on using one name throughout. So in this book:

Board	means the governing body of a not-for-profit organisation, community group or school – and covers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Councils• Boards of Directors• Committees of Management
Board member	means a member of a governing body – and covers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Members• Directors• Trustees
Chair	means the board's head person or the person in charge of the meeting – and covers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• President
Chief Executive Officer (CEO)	means the (paid) head manager of the organisation – and covers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Managing Directors• Administrative Officers• Principals
Community group	means any not-for-profit organisation – and covers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Associations• Not-for-profit companies• Nonprofits

More definitions for terms used in this book are provided as Appendix I.