

The FemPhys Meeting Toolbox

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Before you meet:

1. Think about why you are meeting.

Answering this simple question for yourself before you organize a meeting clarifies many important details about the meeting: who should attend, what the structure should be, and what items should be on the agenda.

Not thinking about this before a meeting can lead to meetings that feel pointless or unproductive because no one has a clear idea of what should be accomplished.

2. Create an agenda.

Once you know why you want to meet (there may be multiple reasons), you can start to form these objectives into an agenda. Most meetings have time constraints, so this is the point where you should prioritise your meeting goals, and also think about how much time each item will realistically take. If your meeting will include something like updates or presentations from people attending the meeting, adding clear time constraints to the agenda also tells those people how much detail they should be prepared to go into.

3. Share the agenda. Allow yourself and others time to prepare.

Ideally, the agenda should be shared far enough in advance for all those in attendance to properly prepare. If you do not expect any prepared information from those attending the meeting, it could be shared same day.

If you are attending a meeting organised by someone else, it's important that you take the time to clearly organize your thoughts and information so that it can be easily shared with others in the time allotted. Neglecting to prepare for a meeting means that you will likely not present/update/share effectively or in a timely manner, thus wasting the time and energy of all those in attendance.

During a meeting:

1. Have a designated *Facilitator*.

The facilitator is usually the person who designed the agenda for the meeting. At the very least, the facilitator makes sure the agenda items are addressed, and that the group sticks to the timetable laid out in the agenda. This could mean telling participants when they are off task, tabling discussions or agenda items when it becomes clear that more discussion is needed than time allows for, and adding agenda items which were forgotten. The facilitator of the meeting orchestrates decision-making tactics. They suggest specific tactics like go-arounds, brainstorming, voting, etc., and ensure they run smoothly.

A more advanced facilitator draws consensus out of what participants are saying, and maintains an equitable group dynamic. This means recognizing when participants want to speak, but are unable or are not being heard; recognizing the mood of the room (are people engaged? displeased? tired?); identifying points of disagreement or stagnation and offering solutions like moving on for the moment or taking a break; restating the goal of the meeting, rephrasing what participants say to ensure they are heard and understood, and synthesizing the content of the discussion in brief out loud.

Some Final Notes on the complex topic of facilitation:

- The facilitator and the note taker are different jobs. They should be taken by different people to each be accomplished most effectively.
- Facilitators should ideally be aware of how much space they are taking up, both by speaking and by directing. The more time a facilitator spends on speaking, the less aware they generally are of their surroundings in the meeting.
- Facilitation cannot be practiced well by people who are emotionally invested in or affected by the content of the meeting.
- In many ways, active engagement and listening are the most important aspects of good facilitation.

2. Have a designated *Note-Taker*.

Every meeting should have a designated note-taker, who is recording and summarizing the meeting information in real time. Having meeting notes allows everyone to remember what was decided or accomplished. Meeting notes also proved an opportunity for those not in attendance to know what happened. Writing down goals and tasks can make people more likely to follow through. But most of all, having a note-taker is an accessibility issue. Not everyone is able to take their own notes, but notes can be useful for everyone, especially those who have a hard time processing auditory information.

3. Consider starting your meetings with a check-in.

A check-in is a go around where everyone is invited to share with the group a snippet of how they are feeling. This could include things they are excited about, or sources of anxiety or stress. It could be work related or not. It is in no way mandatory.

A check-in allows people to self assess what their emotional and work capacity is for that time, and could inform task assignments during the meeting. It also allows the group to give casual and friendly support, which can improve group dynamics.

4. Collect and review *Action Items*.

At the end of a meeting, it is useful to review and clarify the expected actions decided upon at the meeting. These are the *action items*. They should be delegated to specific people, and have clear but reasonable deadlines associated with them. Collecting these gives people a clear idea of what they are expected to do. A note taker can collect the action items at the top of the meeting notes, and the meeting notes can be sent to or shared with those interested.

Consensus-Based Decision Making

Making decisions is ultimately the goal of most meetings. *How* we make these group decisions can seriously impact whose voice is or isn't heard, how productive and realistic these decisions are, and how happy everybody really is with the decision. One method for making decisions that attempts to address these points is *consensus*.

Many guides to consensus include thorough, start-to-finish formal strategies for voting on consensus. For the purposes of this toolbox, we'll just take some of the most useful strategies. Links to more in-depth guides can be found at the end of this document.

1. What is consensus?

Achieving consensus amongst a group of people means that everyone agrees. Instead of a making decisions based on majority vote or dominant voices in the room, all participants in the meeting need to actively support the plan. A few people might stand aside (i.e. abstain) if they aren't very invested in the decision, but ideally this happens rarely.

2. How do you achieve consensus?

Many of the tools we've already discussed are essential for reaching consensus. Ensuring that everybody is on the same page with any plans made and feels that they

have contributed in the way that they wanted to typically takes far more time than other methods of decision making. Before the meeting,

- Participants need to agree on the goals of the group/meeting. If the purpose of the group is not to advance a mutually agreed upon goal, then consensus may be impossible to obtain.
- Participants should understand and commit to the process of consensus.
- Participants should participate actively in the discussion and implementation of the project.

In a meeting, the consensus process might look something like this:

- Idea/problem is presented with all relevant information.
- Discuss. What are people's initial thoughts? Concerns? Try not to jump straight to solutions---take time to think about the problem as a group.
- Look for a proposal. This can be the job of the facilitator. They can try to synthesize ideas and concerns from different participants to create a mutually agreeable solution. Make sure any proposals made are communicated to the group clearly.
- Discuss the proposal(s). Look for concerns and potential problems. Amend the proposal to address these concerns.
- Test for agreement. Depending on the meeting and problem, this might look like asking everyone explicitly whether they support the proposal, doing a check of nonverbal signs like thumbs up or thumbs down, or something else.
- If everyone actively supports the proposal, you've achieved consensus!
- If not, go back to discussion of the problem or proposal.
- If someone blocks the decision (i.e. has a serious issue with the proposal and will not allow it to proceed), consensus has definitely not been achieved. The group should go back to discussion and attempt to address serious concerns.
- Once consensus is achieved, make action items to put the proposal in motion.

3. Why use consensus?

A thorough decision making process of open and clear discussion where everyone's input is sought and valued addresses some inequalities that are present in many meetings. Consensus asks that participants care about what they are discussing, take concerns of minoritized participants seriously, and build communicative relationships.

4. Facilitating for consensus

A facilitator is often essential for drawing consensus out of a group, though facilitation tactics can be used by anyone. Here are a few tried-and-true tactics for an efficient meeting where people feel truly heard:

- Look at the other participants. If possible, make eye contact and assess participants' engagement or feelings about what's happening. Make adjustments based on your reading. Ask: "Are people feeling like ____? Should we do ____ instead?"
 - Is the discussion going on too long? Propose a different detail or agenda item is discussed. Write any unresolved points in a parking space for people to come back to later.
 - Are people uninterested? Change topics or take a break.
 - Are people on topic? Remind participants of the agenda and purpose of the meeting.
- Give everyone an explicit turn to contribute to a discussion with a go-round: ask a question and let everyone offer an answer in turn. Give a one or two minute max per participant if you've got time constraints.
- Paraphrase the discussion, especially when a point's been repeated several times or when something might have been ignored. Say things like, "I'm hearing that people want more opportunities to go to conferences," or, "Jamal suggested we set a yearly travel allowance. How do people feel about that idea?"
- Point out when a discussion has stagnated. This might be when there is an impasse, when there is too much focus on a relatively small detail, or when some participants aren't familiar enough with the issue at hand. Solutions might include breaking up into subcommittees to deal with logistical issues, restating and possibly reevaluating the goal of the meeting or group, changing the focus of the meeting to information sharing, or ending the meeting and rescheduling for a time when everyone is better prepared to discuss.
- Remind participants of the agenda and of the purpose of the meeting.
- Actively listen and engage with the discussion, pointing out things that people agree on, disagree on, and don't care about.

5. Troubleshooting and other resources

Some of the most common problems in consensus involve power differentials and resolving conflicts.

If someone is regularly dominating conversation and proposal-making, even if they mean well and are very invested in the organization, they can prevent others from participating and developing as individuals and as a member of the group. Identify this problem clearly to participants who are dominating, and make it about the effect of the behaviour rather than about that person. Potential solutions include rotating roles so that a typically dominating person is sometimes, for instance, taking notes, which often requires that a person speak rarely. Strategies like go-rounds can be used. Pauses in conversation can also be effective in providing space for people who don't usually feel like they have any.

Since consensus involves honest and genuine participation, addressing conflict efficiently is very important. In general, identify issues with specificity both in what the

problem is and why it is a problem. Be clear about what could solve the problem. Remember that no one is required to do anything---but that group agreements or codes of conduct may require that participants behave in a certain way in order to participate.

Persistent issues can often be addressed by bringing up the purpose of the group or meeting. Ask and answer, honestly, the question: “Do we all have the same goals?” If not, consider adjusting the group or reforming the problem.

For more on consensus-based decision making and facilitation to that end, see <https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/consensus> and <https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/facilitationmeeting>.

Accessibility

Meetings can be made much better for many people if we pay attention to ways that they can be made more comfortable and accessible. Accessibility is about paying attention to our environment, the people in it, and how they interact. For some people, a comfortable chair can be the difference between being able to pay attention and being distracted by chronic pain. Here are some quick tips on improving accessibility of your meetings.

- Take good notes! Individuals who have difficulty with auditory processing or who are hard of hearing or Deaf will appreciate it. So will people who have difficulty writing quickly or paying attention for the entire length of the meeting.
- Assess the space that you meet in. Is it quiet? Spacious? Are the lights bright? Dim? Flicker-free? Is it cold? Are there writing tools? Tables? Can you eat and drink in the space? Is it easy to find? Accessible by wheelchair? Think about whether there is a better space or how to improve issues presented by the space. For example,
 - cold room? Bring in blankets or a space heater.
 - fluorescent lights flicker? If possible, ask the maintainers of the space for flicker-free lighting, or bring in lamps.
 - hard to find? Post a map and clear signage to the room.
- Assess the meeting format. Is there enough space for everyone to contribute? Are materials gone over too fast? Is there too much content for everyone to be able to pay attention?
- Provide the agenda and any materials required well in advance. Use heading functionalities in word documents or PDFs to allow people who use screen readers to navigate the document.
- Plan breaks. Ensure participants know where bathrooms are. If the meeting is long, provide drinks and/or snacks.
- Regularly assess participation of individuals. If someone isn't participating, why might that be? Speak with them about it. Make modifications to the space or to the meeting format to try to make participating easier or more appealing.
- Plan to be flexible.

