

Exhilarating Meetings

Meetings are a forum for like-minded people to come together, share ideas and plan for change. Since they are by far the most effective medium for planning and delegation, it's worth trying to get them right!

Good meetings

Good events and actions are rarely spontaneous; they are thought up and planned in meetings. But it's important that meetings don't take over your lives! They need to be balanced with socialising and with taking action.

Good meetings should be:

- **Open** - accessible to everyone, no matter what their experience, background, or beliefs. Remember that social change is brought about by active minorities and that everyone in your group should feel like they belong.
- **Effective** - a meeting needs to produce results. Social change is not for navel gazers. You should stand out because you get the job done!
- **Informed** - intelligent debate and discussion makes sure that the most effective and relevant method or solution is agreed upon.
- **Democratic** - try to avoid alienating anyone with the discussion and decision making structure of your group - spend time early on finding group procedures that everyone is happy with to avoid conflict later! Review them regularly.
- **Organised** - it's easy to equate organisation with hierarchy, and some groups don't like hierarchy. But organisation and hierarchy are not the same thing. Meetings need to be structured in order to ensure they are democratic and effective. Active facilitation, agenda setting and using delegation are all positive methods for achieving non-hierarchical organisation.
- **Enjoyable** - Yep, meetings can (and should) be fun and dynamic, especially when they take into account the rest of this list!
- **Empowering** - we want people to walk away from meetings feeling better for having been there, believing they can make change happen, and looking forward to taking action and being involved.

Top Tips

- Pay attention to how your meetings work - they're really important;
- Use your meetings for different things - not always planning;
- Facilitation is a really key skill for effective and inclusive meetings - consider having a workshop on it for your group.



Hilary Benn listening to P&P students in Leeds

Varying your meetings

Of course, not all meetings need to be planning meetings. There are many different things you can do with your meetings. Try to vary the structure and content of your meetings on a regular basis:

- You might want more information, or inspiration - so **invite in a speaker** to talk to you about a campaign or their experience of creating change.
- You could also invite a member of the P&P staff to deliver one of our world-renowned workshops for your group, which are both useful and fun!
- You might want to learn or share skills with other groups on your campus, or other P&P groups in our network, so **organise training days** (the P&P support office and your Regional Rep can help!).
- You might want action - so don't just talk about it - get together and do it!
- **Join with other groups** on actions and events where you share a common interest.
- You might just want to socialise after a hard term's activity - so have some fun. Go out and play together! Maybe once or twice in the year, take a longer break as a group, and do something you will all enjoy!
- You could **work on a variety of issues** - some long-term, some short-term, some local, some global, so there's something for everyone.

Top Tips

Some groups benefit from holding their planning meetings separately from their main meetings, so new or occasional members don't have to sit through the admin. Find out about different structures for your meetings.

Exhilarating Meetings: Welcoming and inclusive

Make new people feel welcome

- **Appoint a 'doorkeeper'** to meet and greet people - especially new ones - as they arrive at a meeting.
- **Introduce everyone** at the start and **consider using name badges** so everyone is on an equal footing.
- **Explain how your meetings work.**
- **Explain the group.** Outline what you've been doing to set the context.
- **Avoid in-jokes and jargon.** Not everyone knows their WTOs, P&P, NGOs etc - make sure these terms are explained the first few times in every meeting.
- Make sure you **explain agenda topics** before launching into discussion.
- Don't be afraid to **stop and give room for questions and clarification.**
- **Create plenty of opportunities for new people to take on tasks.** Do it as soon as possible, but don't give them more than they feel capable of.
- If new people come back a few weeks in a row, **ask them what their first impressions were...**

Top Tips

- Check everyone knows who you are, and understands each topic, before discussion;
- **Lively, interesting and upbeat** should be your watchwords!



London P&P members enjoy some ice cream after a hard days work at a Regional Gathering

Be inclusive

- **Think about the venue.** Is it welcoming or are you all huddled conspiratorially in the darkened corner of a smoky pub? Not all venues suit all people. Not everyone likes pubs; not everyone is comfortable in a 'religious' building like a Chaplaincy.
- **Leave room for latecomers**, then greet them and recap enough for them to be able to join in the discussion. Remember that there are reasonable excuses for being late for a meeting.
- **Organise seating so everyone can see each other**, and so that everyone feels equal (sitting in a circle is best). It makes for a friendlier meeting if you sit close together, rather than dotted around a huge room, so put out just enough chairs. You can always add more.
- **Focus on the issues and the campaigns.** They are the reason that people have come (unless they fancied you on a stall) and that's what they'll want to know about.
- The one assumption you can make is that **everyone who turns up has some interest in making a better world.** That gives you all a huge amount of common ground - so remember your shared vision and not the little differences in ideology or approach. Always look for the common ground.
- **Don't expect everyone to work the same way you do.** You may be a direct action nut, but others might find any action in public intimidating. You should try to find actions everyone is happy with, or accept that your group can work in different ways. Welcome diversity!

Keep it upbeat

- **Actively facilitate** the meeting. This is a really vital skill to develop in your group, see the [facilitation](#) pages for more information.
- **Plan your agenda** to keep the meeting positive, for example by putting some quick, easy decisions at the top to start off with a sense of achievement.
- You might want to **schedule a social time before or after the meeting**, so that the meeting itself is focussed and short - some people get frustrated by constant digressions.
- **Start with an icebreaker** to wake everyone up!
- **Keep it all participative** - for example when looking for ideas, use "brainstorming".
- **Have a break** in the middle of long meetings, maybe keep blood sugar levels up with a snack.
- **Smile!** Check your body language - keep it friendly, welcoming and relaxed.

Exhilarating Meetings: Setting the agenda

Agendas help you ensure not only that everything gets discussed, but that you don't spend too long dwelling on relatively unimportant topics.

Why use an Agenda?

- You'll **get through everything** you wanted to .
- The **meeting won't drag on** too long (if you enforce the timings rigorously).
- You **won't spend too long on unimportant topics**: if that happens, you can move on and agree to come back after the other agenda items have been covered.
- Everyone has a hand in deciding what is discussed, so they feel **involved**.

Setting the agenda - democratically!

- You could **e-mail it around** and ask people to add items.
- One person can **invite contributions and compile them**.
- Some groups simply **pass a sheet of paper round at the start of the meeting**. This is good, but advanced notice to make sure the right people and information are present is better, allowing the facilitator to prepare for the meeting.

Whatever you do, **prioritise** your agenda items, **get agreement on the agenda** at the start of the meeting and put it up where everyone can see it.

Action Points

You can save time and effort by just writing down **action points** and **key decisions** during your meeting.

- **Action points** say what action is needed, who is doing it, and when it needs to be done by. Use delegation tools to get people involved in taking on action points.
- **Read them out at the end of the meeting** to remind everyone what they agreed to do! Go over them at the start of the next meeting to check they've been done. You should also **check the ideas and action points that you think have been settled on for agreement before writing them down**.
- **Key decisions**. You might want to put down the rationale behind the decisions the group takes and the policies it sets.

Minutes

Taking minutes can **help involve people who can't make it to a meeting**, and if there are people on your email list who don't come to meetings, you might well find that they read the minutes, send along useful ideas and even come along and get involved. **Keep them short and concise, just detailing the key discussions, decisions and action points**.

- When you send round the minutes, **ask if anyone has any changes to make** - people often take different ideas away from a meeting!
- You might also want to rotate the minute-taking, unless one person is really keen on it.

Sample Meeting agenda

Introductions 10 mins

- Go round - get everyone to introduce themselves, why they're interested in P&P and what type of thing they like to do.
- Go through the meeting agenda (stick it up on the wall so everyone can see it).
- Get someone to volunteer to take minutes or 'action points' of what is decided and who is going to do it.
- Play an icebreaker.

Action points 5 mins

- Go over action points from the last meeting.
- Make a note of any that haven't been done and ask someone to follow it up.

Campaigns 20 mins

- Progress on Go Green campaign.
- Stall in SU.
- Big action next term.

Plan some facilitation tools to use and delegate responsibilities for action points.

P&P events 10 mins

- Planning going to Shared Planet.

Any other business 5 mins

- Social in next month.

Bring meeting to close 5 mins

- Go over responsibilities for Action Points.
- Decide the date of your next meeting.

End of meeting and going to cafe

Exhilarating Meetings: Delegation

Spreading the workloads for campaigns and actions around the whole group will improve group cohesion and knowledge, allow you to get more done and help ensure no-one feels overburdened or excluded.

Why delegation?

- **Empowerment.** Delegation requires the sharing out of information and responsibility, which spreads power.
- **Sharing and developing skills.** Delegation makes sure that knowledge and skills aren't just held within a few key members of the group. This will help with **attracting and keeping new members, developing effective campaigners, the sustainability of your group** over the coming years and the **stress levels of key co-ordinators**. A win-win situation!
- **Greater Impact.** Not all people have the same skills and talents. By involving the whole group in planning and preparing actions you'll be much more effective.
- **Improving democratic decision making.** People will be much more likely to take on roles if they're involved in the decision making of the group and a project was partly their idea.

Top Tips

- Encourage new members to take on responsibility even if it seems like it would be quicker to do it yourself at first.
- Encourage active participation in decisions

How to delegate

Here is a suggested process for delegating roles:

- **BRAINSTORM** all the roles
- **LIST** them
- **EXPLAIN** what they are, how long they'll take, what they're for
- **OFFER SUPPORT** for new people wishing to take roles on. Some groups have an apprenticeship model - deliberately grouping skilled individuals with interested individuals, who shadow them and learn from their skills and experience.
- **SHARE OUT** the roles. You can do this through small working groups or skill-sharing pairs taking chunks of work and reporting back. You could write the tasks on cards and then get everyone to take the one(s) they feel most comfortable with; if there are still cards left over you've probably taken on too much. Alternatively, hand the cards out and trade with each other for the ones you want to or can do.
- **Don't guilt trip** people into taking on roles, but you could encourage them to think about their priorities, and the part they want to play in making a difference.

Example: Running a Stall

List of things to be done:

- 1 hour running the stall (x10)
- 1/2 hour setting up and taking down the stall
- 1/2 hour booking and publicising weekly meetings (x10)
- 5 hours designing poster
- 1/2 hour printing posters
- 1 hour putting up posters (x3)
- 2 hours writing to Vice Chancellor
- 1 hour writing press release for the student newspaper

Make sure everyone is happy with the roles, then go through the list putting names beside them or distribute the roles on pieces of paper.

Obstacles to delegation

There are lots of reasons why we don't delegate:

- too much of a hurry
- egos
- shyness
- knowledge
- worry that things won't get done

Usually we've got a lot to do and not enough time, so it seems easier to do the job ourselves than take the time to explain how it's done to anyone else. However, make the time to coach others and share your experience and you'll leave your group stronger than when you arrived.

Exhilarating Meetings: Speakers

Speaker meetings can inspire your group, attract new members, and equip you with more campaigning knowledge. There are plenty of willing speakers around, so here are our tips for a good speaker meeting.

Before the meeting

- **Find a speaker!**
- Most speakers will expect **travel expenses**, and some may charge a fee for their talk. Check your budget and find out how much your group is willing to pay.
- Try to **book the speaker well in advance**. Good speakers often have a whole range of future commitments so it is important to approach them early.
- If you **plan to invite an individual**, send them a **letter of invitation** broadly outlining what you would like them to talk about. If you plan to **invite a speaker from an organisation**, **ring up well beforehand** and explain what you are looking for. Ask for the name of a specialist in the organisation and then send a letter of invitation.
- **A follow-up phone call a few days after posting the invitation** is always a good idea. In many cases, speakers will be pleased if they don't have to write a letter of acceptance back. A phone call will also help clarify any questions the speaker may have.
- Once the speaker has accepted, send a **speaker's brief** (see right).
- **Try inviting them for dinner** - quite often they'll say yes, you'll get an interesting chat, and they might even stay in touch afterwards.
- **Advertise the meeting to your members and the general public**. Good speaker meetings are a very effective way of involving new people!

During the meeting

- **Make sure someone from your group has prepared to facilitate the meeting and introduce and welcome the speaker**. It always looks good if you have some background information about your speaker.
- **A glass of fresh water or tea/coffee** will be appreciated by any speaker.
- **Thank the speaker and the audience for coming, then plug your group**: announce the date and topic of the next activity/event, and the next meeting.
- **Refreshments** after the meeting will help create a sociable atmosphere after a meeting, and also creates time to talk to the speaker and potential members about the group.
- **Display some publicity materials on a table and have a mailing list ready**. Ask those attending for the first time to leave their contact details.

After the meeting

- **Make sure the speaker will be able to get back home okay.**
- **Send a letter of thanks to the speaker.**
- **Review the meeting.**

Top Tips

- Use the speaker meeting to recruit new members
- Make sure speakers know what's expected of them



Swansea University P&P invited a Fairtrade Cotton Farmer to speak during Fairtrade Fortnight 2007

Speakers Brief

Include:

- Date and time; venue and directions; title of session or event.
- The **format of the session**: how much time for the speaker and Q&A?
- **Areas** the speaker should cover.
- Ask them to **end on a call for action** - that's what we're about!
- Number of people you expect, and their background.

Exhilarating Meetings: Icebreakers and energisers

right] box] Top Tips

- Don't be scared to try them, they work!
- Be sensitive to people's needs and don't coerce people into taking part.
- Use one half way through a meeting to ease tension or if it's getting boring.

Icebreakers do exactly that - break the ice! They wake people up, encourage participation, and make sure you don't all feel like a bunch of strangers. You need to judge the mood of your group, or it could fall flat - how cheesy do you think you can go? Sometimes a short break or stretch might be all you need. Here is a random mixture of more varied games to choose from...

1. Name volleyball

Use this in a group that has never met before. Everyone stands in a circle. A ball is thrown from one person to another, but the thrower must shout her name before she throws the ball. After a short time the thrower has to shout not her own name but rather the name of the person to whom she is throwing the ball. If you have no ball, use an imaginary one or something else.

2. The vampire game

Everyone stands in a circle with one person, 'the vampire', in the middle. The vampire walks towards someone with arms outstretched, as if to bite their neck! The victim must make eye contact with someone else and that person must then shout out the victim's name before the vampire gets to the victim.

3. Mingle, mingle, mingle

Ask all the members of the group to dance around each other in no particular direction chanting 'Mingle, mingle, mingle'. Tell them they will have to get into groups when you shout out a category. "For example get into groups of 3!" or "Get into groups with people with the same colour hair!". They have to hold onto the people in these groups.

4. Tangle

Everyone stands in a circle with their eyes closed and their arms outstretched. All walk forward and grab two different people's hands from the other side of the circle. Everyone opens their eyes and the group finds itself in a great big knot! The aim is to untangle the knot, but working as a team and climbing over/under arms in the way etc. IT'S GREAT FUN!

5. Touch blue

Have everyone touch something blue on someone else, something yellow, a knee, some glasses, etc. Call the next thing as soon as people touch whatever has been named.

6. Rain

A facilitator talks the group through this energiser. Get everyone to stand up. Start tapping your head lightly with your fingers imagining soft rain. Let it slowly get heavier the further you move your hands down your body. Let the rain turn into a thunderstorm on your calves. Clap them hard with your hands. Then move your hands back up your body, ending with soft rain on your head.

7. Fancy me

Everyone gets into pairs and then forms a circle with one of the pair squatting down in front of his partner. One person in the circle does not have a squatting partner, but tries to wink at one of the squatting people to entice her to



P&Pers enjoy the Rubber Chicken icebreaker at the Forum 2008

Image © Rich Lott

come and squat in front of him. If you are winked at you must try to quickly get away before your partner behind you restrains you by tapping your shoulder. Once a player has managed to get away, a new space has opened up with a lonely partner who must decide who they fancy! Having two or even three lonely people in a circle increases the fun and alertness of the game.

8. Friend or foe

Each member of the groups chooses a 'friend' and a 'foe' without indicating who they have chosen to the other participants. When the leader indicates the start of the game each member must try to keep as close as possible to her chosen friend and as far away as possible from her foe. In practise this means that the participants constantly giggle and jostle around the room as they flee their foe and chase their friend.

9. Zip zap boing

Everyone stands in a circle. A MAGICAL ball of energy is used, which must be kept alive by moving it round the circle; the more energy the group puts into their actions the more energy the ball stores! There are only three ways to move the ball around the circle.

- You can ZIP the ball to the person standing next to you, using a big, sweeping gesture with one arm, either to the left, or to the right, saying "zip" as you do.
- You can ZAP the ball by putting your arms together outstretched across the circle to someone (you are not allowed to ZAP the person standing next to you), and saying "zap".
- Or if you have been ZAPPED you can either ZIP the ball on or BOING it back to the sender (jump in the air and shout BOING). You are not allowed to ZAP if you have been ZAPPED.

You can always use more muted hand gestures if you don't think your group will want to leap around.

10. Count to ten

In this game, you sit round in a circle, and attempt to count to ten as a group! Only one person can say each number, and anyone can say the next number at any time. The catch is that if two people say a number at the same time, you have to start again. No signalling is allowed between players, so it's all down to good observation and concentration. It's harder than it sounds! If the group manages to do this easily make it harder by asking everyone to close their eyes or getting the group to try to count to 20.

11. The sun shines on...

Form a circle and take one seat away. One person stands in the middle and calls out something like "The sun shines on everyone with green trousers". Everyone with green trousers then jumps up and moves to a place vacated by someone else who has moved. The last person who is left without a seat remains in the middle to call out something else.

12. Something nice

Go round the circle with everyone introducing themselves and saying something nice that they've done that day - a really positive way to start a meeting.

13. Trust Circle

Everyone forms a circle facing inwards. One person stands in the centre. They allow themselves to relax, and fall backwards, safe in the knowledge that their team-mates will catch them and then 'bounce' them gently round the circle. The tighter the circle the less risk of accidents!. Allow everyone that wants to, to have a turn.

Facilitation: Introduction

Facilitation is one of the best ways to make your meetings efficient, and your group content with the way decisions are made. With a little effort your meetings will be a whole lot better.

Meetings: don'tcha love'em?

How many times have you been in a meeting that...

- ...went round in circles?
- ...was dominated by just a few people?
- ...went on longer than planned?

Group meetings are an essential part of campaigning. They are our discussion forum, our main planning tool and an opportunity to share successes and disappointments. A good meeting not only gets work done, but also involves, supports and empowers.

Good "facilitation" can help to make all these things happen and prevent difficult meeting problems from occurring.

So what is facilitation?

Facilitation moves away from the idea of leadership such as a 'chair' to the idea of service. The facilitator(s) is/(are) a **neutral servant of the group** who encourages **participation**, maintains **group processes**, **resolves conflict** and makes agreed **tasks happen**. Facilitation involves the whole group and not just one person.

Chair vs Facilitator

In comparison to a chair, the facilitator is:

- **appointed at each meeting** rather than elected;
- is **given power by the group** rather than having power over them;
- **doesn't participate in discussions** unless stepping out of their role;
- **uses consensus** to take all views into account.

Outcome and Process

The facilitator(s) create a balance between **getting things done** and **feeling good about the way** they were achieved. Facilitation can be broken down into **OUTCOME** and **PROCESS** roles. These are roles that need doing before, during and after meetings. The following pages look at these roles and useful tools for fulfilling them.

Being a good facilitator

Anyone can learn to facilitate meetings and P&P does excellent training to help your group use these tools. A few skills and qualities will really help you:

- **Little emotional investment** in the issues discussed. Avoid manipulating the meeting towards a particular outcome. If this is difficult, step out of the role and let someone else facilitate.
- **Energy and attention** to the job in hand.
- **Good listening skills** including strategic questioning to be able to understand everyone's viewpoint properly.
- **Confidence** that good solutions will be found and consensus can be achieved.
- **Assertiveness that is not overbearing**, knowing when to intervene to give some direction to the meeting.
- **Respect** for all participants and interest in what each individual has to offer.
- **Clear thinking**, observation of the whole group and both the discussion and the process.



Aston University P&P use facilitation techniques during a group meeting
Image © Jennie Dodson

Was the meeting successful?

Outcome	Process
What got done? Did problems get solved and things planned to meet the objectives of the group?	How did it get done? How did people feel? Did the meeting make good use of everyone's talents? Was it enjoyable?

Facilitation: Roles

The facilitator's role can be split into 2 areas: preparing for meetings and facilitating them.

Preparing for meetings

You need to prepare in advance to make the meeting as effective as possible.

- **The venue** should be comfortable and set up to encourage participation: a circle of chairs works well as everyone can see each other. Make sure there's enough light, air, food and drink and that it's quiet enough. Drinks slow a meeting down, but might be necessary if it's long.
- **Meeting times:** Will people have to skip a meal to attend? Falling bloodsugar leads to irritability and lack of focus, so have snacks on hand and plan to take breaks. Will people need to leave in a hurry? If so make sure all the important discussions are held at the start of the meeting, or keep strictly to time!
- **The Agenda:** Look at the [agenda pages](#) for how to make it as effective and participatory as possible. Make sure people who are due to report back will be there.
- **Support:** You could ask other people to take on some roles, such as timekeeping and notetaking or co-facilitate with another person, perhaps with less experience.

Top Tips

- Give everyone a chance to feed into the agenda;
- Keep an eye on the discussion, and intervene if it becomes unproductive;
- Suggest a participation tool to bring out the quiet people.

Facilitating Meetings

Once the meeting begins, there will be plenty to keep you busy! You will need time to practice, so don't get disillusioned if meetings aren't revolutionised overnight. There are lots of [tools](#) to help with all of these roles.

Key Process Roles

These are the facilitator's roles in making sure that everyone is happy and participating in the meeting.

- **Establishing common ground:** discussions turn to arguments when people focus on areas of disagreement and forget that these are small compared to the things they agree on. The facilitator can remind the group of this.
- **Bringing out and resolving conflict:** once the common ground is established, the facilitator can make sure disagreements are acknowledged, clarified, and dealt with constructively, rather than brushed under the carpet.
- **Preventing exclusive conversations:** The facilitator is there to intervene when two or three people take over the discussion.
- **Maintaining participation and democracy:** this might be the facilitator's key role. A healthy group needs equality and respect - everyone needs to feel they have been listened to and their contribution valued. So part of the role of the facilitator is to encourage the quiet people and keep some control on the loud and dominant ones.

Key Outcome Roles

These are the facilitator's roles in making sure the meeting reaches its conclusions as effectively as possible.

- **Keeping to the agenda:** keep discussions on the agenda item instead of rambling on or going to a different topic.
- **Reworking the agenda:** sometimes it will become apparent that the agenda needs to change. You should help the group to rearrange the agenda - altering time allotted to items, or agreeing that certain items can wait until another meeting.
- **Maintaining group focus:** always remember why the group is there, and drive discussions forwards to maintain this focus. Look out for areas of agreement and clear proposals for action. If the group is losing focus because of the lateness or length of the meeting, suggest a break, adjourn to another time or energise everyone with a [game](#) or a snack.
- **Recording decisions and [action points](#):** it's surprisingly easy for decisions to get made, then lost in the other business of the meeting. Ask for someone to act as a note-taker at the start of the meeting.
- **Testing for agreement:** you need to look out for when the group is nearing agreement, and can move on to a firm decision so that you don't waste time talking round ideas everyone largely agrees on. It's worth presenting the group with the ideas you're hearing and asking for some sign of agreement or disagreement (e.g. [handsignals](#)). If you get a clear indication one way or the other, you can ask someone to present a proposal for action to the group.
- **Evaluating the meeting** at the end to find out what could have worked better, and what lessons need to be learnt for the next time.

Three pieces of advice...

There are several misconceptions about facilitated meetings, understanding which will make everyone more effective in facilitated meetings:

1. “I need to make my point or no-one else will.”

It's easy to think your opinion is vital, and if you don't express it no-one will make that point. You'll be surprised how, if you wait long enough, someone will almost always say what you were thinking. Then you can use active agreement to show you agree. This adds more weight when you do speak up, means someone else may make the point more articulately than you would have, gives quieter members a chance to join in, and saves everyone time by not repeating points.

2. “I need to answer back when someone rebuts my point.”

In a facilitation model you need to imagine that all comments are thrown into a huge pot in the middle of the group. Your point has been heard, and carries equal weight to the rebuttal, so you don't need to defend it immediately (unless there is a specific question only you can answer). This avoids a potentially alienating or adversarial one-on-one disagreement, means that someone else may back you up if you give them the chance, saves time, and creates a more encouraging atmosphere for others to contribute in.

3. “We don't need structures.”

If you don't like hierarchy, great! Structured facilitation is the best way to break down the informal hierarchies that otherwise exist, and equalise participation from everyone

Facilitation: Toolkit

To help you facilitate meetings, here is a basic toolkit of ideas and processes that have been tried and tested, and are simple to use.

Outcome Tools

Handsignals

Hand signals help the facilitator see emerging agreements and common ground. They're a way of communicating without interrupting the flow of the meeting. Three simple signals are:

- **Raise a hand or forefinger** when you wish to contribute to the discussion. It helps to keep a speakers list ("stacking") so that that facilitator can call on people in turn, especially useful in a large group.
- If what you have to say is directly relevant to a comment someone just made, **raise both forefingers**. The facilitator can then get you to speak before someone who wants to make a new or separate point. This is not a way to jump the queue, it should only be used when the point you want to make only makes sense in light of the current point.
- **"Silent applause"** - when you hear an opinion with which you agree wave your hands or fingers in the air (the higher you wave them the more you agree). This saves the group a lot of time, and lets the facilitator see that a majority of people are/are not sympathetic with a view.

Handsignals can take time to get used to, but are well worth cultivating.

Meeting groundrules

This is a set of basic rules about how the meeting should run, agreed by the group at the start of the meeting. The facilitator can refer to them if anyone starts breaking them. The groundrules could include things such as **no interrupting** or **show respect for each other's opinions**. Groundrules must be owned by the group for them to be useful and can be revised at any time (using handsignals to check that the group are happy with additions or changes).

Using the group

Your **key asset is the group** you are working with:

- If you are ever stuck for how to move things on, **ask the group**.
- **Never pretend you have the answer** when you don't, it's vital you retain the trust of the group.
- Regularly **find out how they're feeling**: whether they need a break, want the agenda modifying and are happy with the decisions being made (using handsignals).

Other meeting roles

You can separate some of the facilitator's tasks off into separate roles, for support and to make your task easier! For example:

- **Recorder/Notetaker** takes down the key decisions and action points.
- A **timekeeper** keeps an eye on the clock and points out when the allotted time for an agenda item is running out.
- A **doorkeeper** meets and greets people on the way in, and checks they know the purpose and process of the meeting. Especially important for making new people feel welcome, and bringing latecomers up to speed without interrupting the meeting.
- **Vibeswatcher** watches the vibe of the meeting and suggests breaks or games as appropriate. This can help prevent conflict or boredom.
- **Co-facilitator** to help facilitate or step in if you want to join in a discussion.

Reframing

This is another key listening skill that helps show people that they have been listened to. It means **listening carefully** to what someone says, then **repeating it back succinctly** in your own words, to check that you have understood their point. It's a useful tool for clarifying and moving forward discussion. Make sure you personalise your statements - "it sounds to me like what you're saying is..." (this can be particularly when writing up people's points as you can clarify what they mean before writing).

Participatory decision-making

Perhaps the ultimate group tool, participatory decision-making is a process that enshrines all the values of a well facilitated group. It enables you to reach decisions that the whole group can actively support.

Participation tools

Active agreement

This is a useful groundrule, in which everyone agrees to **take an active part in making decisions**. When the group is asked a question or has to make a decision, the facilitator must insist on active agreement. Silent applause, or lack of it, is one way of showing agreement.

Active listening (or “think and listens”)

This is a technique for developing ideas and boosting confidence. People pair up and speak to each other, uninterrupted, for anything from 30 seconds to 5 minutes depending on the issue being discussed. The listener then succinctly summarises the other person’s points to check they have understood before they swap roles. It’s important that the listener makes a real effort to listen, including keeping good eye contact and remaining attentive! Each pair can then feed back the opinions of their partners to the whole group.

Go-rounds

Everyone in turn round the circle is given the same time to speak uninterrupted and without comment or criticism.

Breaking into small groups

This can help those intimidated by larger groups speak up and have their views fed back to the rest of the group.

Brainstorming

People shout out ideas without fear of comment or criticism. All the ideas are written up, however wacky, so that you can then discuss and refine them. This is an excellent way to get the creative juices flowing. If you have time, some people prefer to write their ideas on Post-it notes and stick them to the flip chart (presenting their point to the rest of the group). This means that there is less opportunity for louder or more confident people to dominate than with shouting out.

Talking sticks/Matchsticks

These tools limit the number of times any one person can contribute to the discussion, which allows everyone an equal space to talk and be heard. They are useful for examining your group dynamic, or to address problems out in the open.

- **Talking stick:** An object is placed in the middle of the group. Speakers take the item from the centre, say their piece and return it to the middle. Only the person holding the object is permitted to speak. The next speaker takes the item and so on.
- **Matchsticks:** Everybody is given the same number of matches. Every time someone speaks, they have to throw a match into the centre of the group. When you have no matches left, you can’t add anything more to the discussion. A useful exercise to get people to consider their contributions to the group and cut out repetitive or meaningless additions to the discussion, as well as equalising the number of contributions.



Using brainstorming during a workshop at a North West Regional Event
Image © Joe Bardwell