



21 Conducting a Meeting

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This information leaflet is about conducting meetings and is of particular interest to parents who must perform this task within the parental participation structures: Governing Boards, Parent participation Organizations, Parents' Committees, Special Needs Advisory Committees. To learn more about the duties belonging to the Chairs of these various bodies, refer to the other leaflets already produced by the FCPPQ, in particular:

Leaflet 1 : Parent Participation Organization, Helping schools be their best!

Leaflet 12 : The Governing Board at the Heart of the School

Leaflet 14 : The Parents' Committee–Focal point of Parental Participation

Leaflet 17 : Chairing the Governing Board: A Rewarding Challenge!

Leaflet 18 : The Relation Between the Governing Board Chair and the School Principal

Leaflet 15 : The Special Needs Advisory Committee

Resources

To obtain reference material and to find useful tools or competent resource persons, please contact the FCPPQ.

We offer :

- Advice;
- Information brochures;
- References;
- Training workshops.

Visit our web site www.fcppq.qc.ca or contact your regional association through the Parents' Committee at your School Board

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A craft that can be learned



"The animator is an assistant who, by paying attention to the process of the participants in a group, supports and motivates them to assume their responsibility to move toward the goal they have set for themselves." Henri Saint-Pierre, writing in the forward of *Animateur compétent, groups efficaces*.

"Practice makes perfect"

This old saying applies very well to conducting a meeting. It is useful to know the techniques, but it is even more important to master the hands-on practice—by practising!

The person in the Chair's position has learned a lot, what to do and not do, by seeing others chair the many meetings in which he/she has participated. Inevitably, these experiences evoke images, some positive, some less so, of what a meeting is. Does the person remember lively, well-organized, effective activities, or boring, disjointed evenings that led nowhere? Were the meetings momentarily satisfying, a real pleasure or a total and boring waste of time?

This store of images is useful to any Chair, no matter how little experienced, as he/she recalls them and uses them to advantage in a variety of circumstances.

With a minimum of self-confidence and good preparation, a Chair can succeed in properly conducting a meeting. The pages that follow may provide additional means to help a person become a better Chair.

Meetings, meetings, meetings...

What constitutes a meeting? To start, it is a good idea to ask what are the essential elements of any meeting and to draw some conclusions that will be useful for leading a group..

An assembly of people

Chairing a meeting is first and foremost chairing an assembly of people, that is a gathering of individuals who form a more or less homogeneous group.

Even within an assembly considered to be homogeneous, for example parents from the same school, people are different by reason of their needs, their interests, their ideas, their socioeconomic conditions and so on, despite the fact that they are together in the same room and are pursuing a common goal.

This is one of the most important pieces of information to consider when leading an assembly: you are working with people, a very complex natural resource to be sure.

An event

As simple as this may seem, it is good to remember that a meeting is an event. It occurs at a specific moment in time and within a certain dynamic. Consequently, no two meetings are alike, even when the same people are gathered in the same place. There is movement, action and reaction. Distances are created, reconciliations



effected, setbacks are experienced, and progress is made. The animator must become part of this dynamic and at the same time motivate the group by means of this meeting event.

A tool

The meeting is a tool, a working framework for achieving objectives. A tool functions well when it is used correctly. The meeting exists solely for the purpose of attaining a goal or pursuing one or several objectives. It is important, on one hand, that the participants know why they are there and why the group exists and, on the other hand that they feel they can contribute to the mission or the action of the group.

First observation: we don't hold a meeting for nothing. As foolish as it may seem, sometimes groups meet just to meet. If they have gotten into the habit of holding the meeting on the first Monday of every month, the content better be worth the trouble, every time. If not, the meeting will be deathly boring for the group!

Second observation: holding and conducting a meeting is all relative. If we lose sight of that, we risk becoming uncompromising, showing a lack of respect or losing touch with reality. The simplest techniques and the most complicated rules can only be attached to a realistic idea of what a meeting is.

To chair, to lead, to conduct

Chairing a participation body, leading a group and conducting a meeting are different tasks. In the pages that follow, we will not make distinctions between these terms because they are usually entrusted to the same person. We will discuss how to conduct a meeting by referring to the various roles of the person who chairs the session: animator, architect, stage manager, referee and psychologist.

The animator of the group

Leading the group should become the primary concern of the person conducting a meeting, either the Chair of the group or a special moderator.

Pay attention to the participants

Preferably, the Chair or a person designated by the Chair welcomes participants, thereby establishing initial contact and encouraging people to feel part of the group: we can't insist strongly enough on how important this is. A poor welcome or a late start creates an uncomfortable situation that must then be put right.

Throughout the meeting, participants should continue to feel that they are welcome, are useful to the group and are receiving personalized and egalitarian attention.



For more on this subject see
the FCPQ Leaflet No. 24
"Conflict: A turning point."

Create a favourable climate

The responsibility for the climate of a group does not fall exclusively to the Chair. However, the attitude shown by the Chair and the impressions this person creates greatly affect the climate: confidence in the other members and openness are qualities that must be highly developed by the Chair.

The layout of the surroundings, including the placement of furniture, the temperature, ventilation and lighting, also contributes to a good climate in the group. The Chair sees to this before and during the meeting.

Work in a relaxed atmosphere

Making good use of humour is an asset when conducting a meeting. A stressed-out Chair who won't allow the group a few moments of humour or relaxation undermines the unity of the group.

Allow people to express their feelings

At times, the climate can be strained. This is an opportune time to allow participants to put into words what they are feeling at that precise moment. Expressing feelings helps to better understand and control them. The time given to this exercise is never wasted.

Do not let conflicts degenerate

Disagreements occur frequently in a group, and that's normal. However, sometimes they degenerate into open or undeclared conflict. The Chair can play a direct role in this kind of situation, especially by refusing to let the group seek someone to blame and by allowing people to reformulate their points of view and express their feelings.

Remember the objective

More than any other participant, the animator must fully understand the mission of the group and the objective of the meeting or of a particular point of discussion. He/She regularly ascertains that group members clearly understand why they are there and reminds them, if necessary. For example, an information meeting is not the same as a decision-making meeting; adopting a project does not automatically mean that it is up to the group to implement it.



The architect

The Chair's first task is to plan the work: the Chair is the architect of the meeting in the sense that it is up to him/her to prepare the work plan and to see that it is carried out.

Set the agenda

The Chair's work begins well before the start of the meeting with the preparation of the agenda. He/she can do this alone, but usually other people assist with this task. It is important however that the Chair assume the leadership.

The subjects on the agenda often come from several sources. There are usually provisions in the rules of internal management for certain steps such as adopting the agenda, the minutes, dealing with correspondence and so on. The group's plan of action normally should reflect members' expectations. Also included are the points postponed from the previous session and, inevitably, new business due to circumstances, outside obligations and so on.

It is especially important to establish a balanced agenda: allot time for information, a discussion period, space for the unexpected, and so on.

Remember also that the agenda belongs to the assembly, which can deal with the plan as it wishes.

Exercise care with the notice of meeting

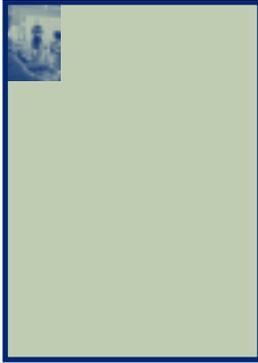
People may think that the notice of meeting serves no purpose, especially if the rules of internal management already provide for specific meeting dates. On the contrary, it can be very useful, serving to highlight the importance of the meeting and its objectives. A brief message from the Chair accompanying the notice motivates people to come prepared and to see the meeting in a positive spirit.

Have well-prepared documents

Poorly prepared content leads to meetings that go nowhere or produce mediocre results. Information feeds the group: too little leaves people frustrated, too heavy, and it becomes indigestible. Documents should be made available reasonably far ahead of time as a way of showing respect for people. It's also a good idea to meet invited speakers beforehand and to acquaint them with the objectives, the relevant procedures and the time set aside for them.

Personal preparation

Leading a meeting requires the Chair to be particular in his/her own preparation. The documents have to be read and time given to think about and review them and to communicate with resource people if necessary. Bungling preparations may cause the group to fail in their work.



The mental preparation should also match the type of meeting planned, in other words, whether it targets information, training, negotiations, problem solving, project development and so on.

Use the animator's tools appropriately

Charts, tear sheet stands, overhead projectors, videotape recorders and computer slide shows (Power Point) are some of the tools that a group may find helpful if they are used properly. Incidentally, nothing is more disagreeable than having to put up with malfunctioning material or the clumsiness of a person who doesn't know how to use it. Better to move on rather than break the rhythm of the group.

Oversee evaluation, division of tasks and supervision of work

Planning the work activity continues both during and after the session.

After each decision, the Chair sees that the resulting tasks are divided up. The Chair must also ensure that the group evaluates its work, at the end of every session.

Afterwards, the Chair makes sure that the tasks are executed in accordance with the decisions made, to avoid compromising the next meeting.

In Governing Boards, the duty of enforcing decisions falls to the principal, but the Chair can support the principal in this work.

The stage manager

On a sound set, the stage manager makes sure that everything works; he/she keeps an eye on everything but does not take the place of the director who is the master craftsperson. This image illustrates the Chair's role concerning content. The Chair oversees it all, but the master craftsperson is the assembly.

The Governing Board is a special case because the principal authors the main proposals submitted to the assembly. Once the principal has presented the proposal or document, the Chair reassumes his/her role as stage manager and the assembly expresses an opinion or reaches a decision on the issue.

Initiate the work and specify the objective

The Chair introduces each item on the agenda. It is important to clearly specify the objective associated with each agenda item: information, discussion, decision making, and so on. Confusion over this issue creates awkward situations that are sometimes difficult to get out of. Be very clear from the start and intervene if a participant strays from the objective.



Ensure information is adequate and the subject is understood

A good discussion can't begin unless participants have received sufficient information to understand the issues in question. The Chair sees to this task. Knowledge is essential for thought and action.

Once the work is initiated, the Chair should be attentive to the group and ensure that the issue is clearly understood. A person's posture, gestures and facial expressions are generally meaningful in this regard. If necessary, it is worthwhile to go back and add information, clarify terms, and so on.

The stage manager

Reformulate spoken contributions and make connections between them

Participants are not equally skilled as communicators. Most speak clearly and precisely, while some are more intuitive and less strong as speakers. Sometimes a contribution has to be reformulated. It may even be necessary to interrupt a speaker who is being repetitive, piling up examples and connecting thoughts willy-nilly, convinced that no one understands what he/she is saying. Tactfully, one can say, "If I understand correctly, you want to tell us that..."

Reformulation can involve simplifying remarks, clarifying, seeking nuances or questioning.

One of the difficulties of working in a group is often the lack of attention to others' contributions. The Chair can make the connections he/she considers appropriate in order to encourage people to listen and share ideas.

Get back on track when things are getting out of hand

A sequence of speeches can lead the group far from the main issue. It is easy to alert the group that they are straying from the objective.

Conversely, we sometimes forget to point out how the work is progressing. This type of intervention permits the group to appreciate what has been done, gain satisfaction from the progress made and be encouraged to continue the work.

Summarize the advice or hypotheses

After people have finished speaking, the Chair must summarize the opinions expressed, the hypotheses advanced or the consensus reached. Differing opinions can be noted, but avoid listing all that has been said or colouring the summary with personal opinions.

This type of summary can also be made as you go along, to avoid having to go back. It is essential to summarize before making decisions.

A good summary of the discussion, prepared by the Chair, greatly facilitates the secretary's task.

The debate referee



The Chair also plays the role of referee. He/She sees that everything is working according to the rules and the established plans. In a sport, the referee should act so that play progresses normally and is exciting, both for the players and the spectators. To this end, the referee does not hog the limelight but allows the talents of others to emerge.

In the same way, the Chair does not just "play the best players." Out of respect for the rules, the Chair has to see to it that the group achieves the desired results and that the partners enjoy working together.

Master the group's operating rules

On this point, the first requirement is to fully understand the group's operating rules. Education bodies that include parents have two sorts of rules: operating measures defined by the Education Act (e.g.: quorum, voting, etc.) and rules of internal management, adopted by the group.

The Chair should have the texts in question readily accessible to refer to them as necessary and to remind the group of them. Better still if the Chair can quote them from memory!

Make sure the agenda is adhered to

It is also the Chair's responsibility to see that the agenda adopted by the assembly is adhered to. A meeting that is supposed to end at ten o'clock ends at ten o'clock. A Chair will receive high praise for competence if all the objectives of the meeting have been achieved and it is only a quarter to ten. Timing each part of the agenda can help the group adhere to the schedule, but should not interfere with the quality of the decisions. Often, a meeting that runs overtime is due to a poor evaluation of the time needed to deal with all the agenda items. If it took longer to prepare the agenda than the time allotted for the meeting, it's a good bet it will run overtime!

The Chair is not the only one who must stick to the schedule. All participants should be made aware that their contributions have a direct effect on the length of the debate and the meeting.

Despite everyone's careful attempts to keep to the schedule, it may happen that the group does not succeed in forming a clear idea or making a decision about an item. Better to postpone the agenda item than to get bogged down. With a little distance, it is often possible to identify a solution.



Granting the right to speak

This is an essential responsibility assumed by the Chair. Simple when the group is just a few people, this task is much more difficult in an assembly of several dozen people. The person seated beside the Chair can be asked to take note of the order in which people ask to speak. When the room is full, there is bound to be a long lineup at the microphone.

The order in which people have asked to speak is not an absolute. There are times when one should turn to a resource person or to the person in charge of the file, such as the principal on a Governing Board, for clarification on the subject under debate.

A systematic round table discussion is not always advisable. Even though it is a valid technique in certain circumstances, it is usually tedious, creates tension that makes the participation of some members more difficult, obliges others to speak against their will and often results in unnecessary repetition.

Voting or making a decision

When it comes time to vote or to make a decision, the assembly takes over. However, the Chair can help the group through the process to ease the passage from discussion to decision making. In many cases, the vote will be superfluous because the group will have already reached unanimity or arrived at a consensus on a proposal.

In all events, the Chair has to ensure that the decision well and truly reflects the wishes of the group.

Assembly procedures—when should they be enforced?

Several codes exist for deliberative assemblies, the most familiar in Quebec being the Code Morin. English-speakers may be more familiar with Robert's Rules of Order. These codes are not legally binding in educational bodies unless they have been adopted by a resolution of the group. We can use these procedures as guides for writing the rules of internal management without succumbing to a sort of "procedure-itis" that confuses most participants and takes precedence during discussions. Note also that the assembly always remains in charge of its procedures. Nevertheless, it is not above the law.

In short, the Chair must demonstrate both firmness and understanding in enforcing the rules and conducting debates. There's a good reason that the animator is sometimes called a "moderator"!

The part-time psychologist



People are
the natural resources
of the group.

The last image describing the role of the Chair is that of psychologist. Though not a doctor of psychology, the Chair takes advantage of personal experience with human relations to conduct the meeting.

Differentiate between types of participants

The people who make up a group play varied roles. For example, creative people bring new ideas, lovers of action are in a hurry to reach a conclusion, intellectuals like to discuss. It is important to recognize the personalities around the table in order to understand what each person brings to the dynamics of the group. An inventory of these resources could be prepared and used: one person is excellent at compiling a summary, another at helping the group relax, etc.

A good animator immediately recognizes three categories of participants in a group: the positive assets, those who endorse the group's objectives and cooperate with them; the negative assets, those who, by their behaviour, unfortunately interfere with the group's effectiveness and the non-assets, those the animator must encourage to contribute to the group. Quickly learn with whom you are dealing: it's reassuring!

Count on the leaders

The Chair must also spot the true leaders in the group. They don't have this label stuck on their foreheads and they don't all look alike. Some are natural leaders; others are leaders by opinion. The Chair can count on them and, at times, accommodate them.

Encourage the non-assets

Shyness, lack of self-confidence and embarrassment about speaking in public are feelings that deter people from making a meaningful contribution to the group. Without passing judgment, the animator has to elicit this contribution.

Keep certain participants under control

Other participants speak with ease, at great length and often. The Chair must hold them in check and help them to contribute more effectively. This will be easier to do if the Chair establishes a good relationship with these people.

Be aware of relations between people

The Chair should also be aware of the ties and relations between people, the interest groups and even the personal conflicts that may exist between certain members. For example, a board or a committee composed of representatives from different groups does not behave in the same way as another made up of individuals who are there for personal reasons.

The maturity of a group is evident when the relations between people help rather than hinder them as they devote themselves to pursuing the common goal.

Know yourself, especially in your role as animator

We know from experience that the animator's personality also figures in the evolution of the group. It is essential for the animator to know his/her own motivational systems: Am I concerned most with action, ideas, people or work methods? What are my personal predispositions and my observable non-verbal behaviours?

Knowing how you behave as an animator is also essential. Am I authoritarian, democratic or do I tend to have a laissez-faire attitude?

This method of separating animators into three categories is a widely used. The authoritarian leader tends to impose his/her ideas and prescribes work methods rather than proposing them.

The democratic leader puts the concerns and the findings of the group first. He/She does not carry the whole responsibility personally but has confidence in the group.

The laissez-faire leader takes things as they come, which is a hindrance to the group, as it does not feel it is in good hands.

Moreover, these behaviours can vary depending on the day, life's events and the wear of time.

Conclusion

The preceding chapters can be summed up in three words: climate, content, and procedures. The affairs of the group take place at these three levels and the Chair must pay attention to each of them. Every animator tends to emphasize one or another of these dimensions. While preparing mentally, the Chair must remember that they are all important.

Being conscious of what is happening in the group on these three levels shows that the Chair has mastered the role of animator.