



**Part
8**

How to Organize and/or Facilitate a Community Meeting that Will Leave Everyone Smiling

Whether you are writing organizing documents (values statement, mission, vision), or working through a controversial topic, if your model of governance is direct democracy or includes a community input process, there will be times when your community needs to meet to discuss an issue and perhaps arrive at a decision. Facilitating such a meeting is a skill we are not born with, but which can be developed. This guide provides some tips for facilitating a productive and positive meeting, or finding an outside facilitator to help you.

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How to Facilitate a Community Meeting

Note: There are a ton of resources available for learning to be a facilitator. (A few are listed on page 8.) This guide is certainly not comprehensive, and we do not wish to reinvent the wheel. This is an effort to synthesize and summarize some of the top lines from our efforts to gather resources in one place. We urge would-be facilitators to consider taking a workshop from professionals. But in a pinch, here are a few tips:

Define the topic

- Any discussion needs one or more seeds: a question to be answered or a proposal to be supported or challenged.
- Does your community have a number of issues that need to be discussed? If so, are they interrelated and hard to separate, or can you address them one at a time?
 - Whichever strategy seems best, make sure participants know ahead of time what the scope of the discussion will be, in order to keep things focused. If someone goes off on a tangent, it is the responsibility of the facilitator to redirect the discussion back to the topic at hand. It is okay (in fact, needed!) to acknowledge the tangential views expressed, and then park them to be picked up later.

Define the goal

- Why are you having this discussion? How will you know when you're done?
Is the goal to arrive at an actionable decision, or is it simply to provide a forum for participants to air perspectives, positions, and grievances?

For example:

- Actionable decision:
 - What style of music or dancing the group, or a particular event, will focus on—whether a particular event is all one style (squares, contras) or an evening of mixed styles
 - Whether or not to have an advanced dance or jam
 - Whether a pub sing is strictly traditional songs from some agreed repertoire, or if modern pop songs are also welcome

- What role terminology will be used at the group's events (also see the bonus guide on role terminology)
- What will be our criteria for banning someone from future participation?

Or:

- Forum for discussion:
 - How can we increase diversity at our events, and is this even something we should/want to do? Is this a problem or not?
 - Do we want to expand our mission to include something new? (e.g., are we a recreational organization that produces events, or are we a community organization with goals related to some larger social benefit?) What are the pros and cons?
- How will your world be different after it has taken place?
 - We will all (all those attending) use the terminology we just agreed on
 - We'll discover birds-of-a-feather groups, and continue the discussion in those
 - My group is going its own way, but I'd like to hear others' thoughts
 - So that our decision is not completely unlike everyone else's
 - In case there are points we hadn't considered

Make sure everyone knows at the start what the end goal is.

Taken together, defining the topic and the goal can be understood as “framing the question.” This helps you structure the discussion and strategize how to get from here to there.

Define the participants

- Who are the stakeholders? Stakeholders are anyone who is affected by the final decision or course of action.
 - Stakeholders are historically viewed as primarily those whose cooperation will be needed to carry it out, because if they feel no commitment to the decision or action plan, they will have little internal motivation to pursue it. Success will then require external motivators (such as money or other rewards), or enforcement mechanisms. Voluntary cooperation based on internal motivation (buy-in) is far easier to implement.

- A social justice approach aims to pivot the limited view of stakeholders to also value, prioritize, and include those who will be affected by the decision(s) but who perhaps hold little power. You may not *need* their buy-in, but having it will result in greater peace in the community. If those with no power are not happy with a decision or course of action, discontent will fester.
- Brainstorm everyone who should be invited to be heard. Depending on the issue, stakeholders could include callers, musicians, sound techs, existing dancers, new dancers, dancers you've lost, people who do publicity, organizers, door-sitters (who have to explain your procedures or norms to people walking in), etc. What do you owe to each of these in terms of listening, giving weight to their concerns, and care in letting them know the final decision or course of action?

Define the timeframe

- If the goal is an actionable decision, it may require several hours. If questions arise that need time to be researched or if next steps are identified that need time to be carried out, the final resolution may require returning to the process in days or weeks. It can be useful to identify what you think the entire timeline for the process will look like, and to share ahead of time what the start and end times will be for a given session. Time limits can help you bite off manageable chunks of work, and they help ensure that participants don't become exhausted. You don't want to settle on a final resolution simply because everyone feels like they're being held hostage until you do and therefore they ultimately agree to something they are not really satisfied with. That will simply result in continued disagreement in the future.

Preparation for the convenors or organizers

- Physical space: A facilitated meeting is hard work. You're probably having it because there is some problem or big point of disagreement that needs to be discussed, so the atmosphere may be tense already. Being comfortable can help keep people in a positive frame of mind. Try to have comfortable seating, good lighting, comfortable temperature, etc.
- Refreshments always help, and they don't have to be fancy.
- Bathroom facilities
- Materials: Flip chart, pens & markers, Post-its, tape, etc.

Preparation for the facilitator, if you are doing your own facilitation. (If you're hiring an outside facilitator, they will have their own process.)

- Outline the flow of the discussion. Break the issue down into steps, or questions for consideration. Plan an outline for the total time available—how much time will you spend on each step or question?
- Think about criteria for the final decision (discussed more below).
- Try to recruit someone to be a scribe so that you can focus on facilitating rather than also taking notes.
- Prepare ground rules for participation.

Preparation for the participants

- Articles for everyone to read: Providing some basic background enables the group to come together with some common starting place or understanding of an issue.
- A survey for everyone to fill out: Getting some concrete input ahead of time can give you information about what people care about most and can give you, the facilitator, some ideas about which seeds will lead to a productive discussion and which will lead to an unproductive discussion. This can help you decide which topics to address together and which to save for later. (See “Define the topic,” above). For example:
 - What do participants value most about dancing? Choreography? Connection to each other? Connection to the past? Costume? Exercise? Improvisation? Getting it right? Style of music?
 - What role terminology do participants prefer: Historical? Traditional in this community for the last few decades? Gender-neutral? Particular terms (name them)?
- Understanding the range of differences among participants can help you plan for what will need discussion time, and where there is already pretty broad agreement.
- Maybe some other preparation work before the meeting.

Setting the Tone

Consider the possibility that participants share an interest in dancing and nothing else. Do not make pre-assumptions about shared values, shared political views, or other shared interests. Such common ground likely exists to some extent, but it is not universal. If there are strong underlying differences, especially in values or political views, it can be difficult to establish common vocabulary. It is important to make space to discover unshared assumptions, and to set ground rules for working well together.

Present ground rules that you have prepared ahead of time, or ask for a quick brainstorm from participants for ground rules for working well together. Some ideas are:

- Mutual respect: no interrupting, no shaming. Affirm the validity of other points of view, even if you disagree.
- Space for everyone. Step up, then step back.
- Respect and manage emotions. If you feel passionately about this topic, that's valuable. It's okay to use strong language, to yell or cry. Just don't yell at someone else. Direct your emotions toward the topic, not toward others. If others become emotional, give them space and support.

Structure for discussion

There are many options for structuring discussion, so this is just a brief overview. We recommend you consult some of the additional resources listed below.

- Who and what
 - Everybody all together, one topic at a time
 - Breakout groups, with different groups tackling different topics, and then reconvening and sharing ideas as a large group
- How
 - Popcorn style: just speak up when there's space
 - Hand-raising
 - Round-robin: going in order around the room
- These are important considerations because there will usually be some participants who are more assertive than others. You don't want to allow one (or a few) dominant people to shape the whole discussion, and you also don't want to shut anyone down or put anyone on the spot.

When things get heated or there are deep differences

When things really get fraught, you are moving from facilitation to conflict resolution. Conflict resolution and mediation are different skills from simply facilitating a discussion. Again, there are tons of existing resources on this topic. Some are listed below. We suggest taking a workshop or reading some of the suggested literature for more complete guidance. But again, in a pinch, here are some tips:

The real issue is, how do you handle dance/music politics, and how do you mend fractures?

Some methods and tactics that may be useful:

- Break up factions; quiet interventions before a meeting can help with this.
- Depersonalize the issues and don't acknowledge the factions. Talk about priorities and possibilities and don't talk about what divides people.
- Talk about the action (e.g., gender-neutral calling), not the people (e.g., "the people who like gender-neutral calling").
- Don't label anything with people's names or a group's name. Say instead, for example, "a group that uses gender-neutral calling reports..."
- Put ideas out anonymously and let people play with them.
- Figure out fun and playful ways to explore issues, knowing that the hard reality is that any decision will cause the loss of some people.
- Remain open to people surprising you.
- Show appreciation.
- Beware of ageism and any other presumptions.

Criteria for final decision or next steps

- Consensus
- Vote—what threshold to carry?
- Something else?

What considerations will drive your choice of priorities, among stakeholders, among things people care about, etc.? A final decision is likely to be a balance among competing preferences, so it can be helpful to think ahead of time about how you will identify that balance. A good test: how will you defend the final decision to people who complain about it?

One of the most important outcomes of a facilitated discussion is that in the end, everyone feels that they had the opportunity to express their views, that they were heard and respected, and that their priorities were considered (and are reflected) on par with everyone else's.

Problem solving and conflict resolution are a balancing act among competing interests, and the result is usually a compromise. For a compromise to work, each member has to feel that their wishes, if not granted, were at least taken into account, e.g. "You are giving up some of what you want so I can have some of what I want." The Quakers are good at this and have a useful tool, which is approximately, "I have heard all the points of view. I understand them and accept them as valid. I also believe that everyone has heard my point of view and accepted it as valid. I see this solution as the best balance available to us. I don't like it, but will stand aside: I will follow it, will not resist it and will not disparage it."

There is a balance between being true to your morals/fighting for justice and compromising to resolve conflict and move forward. The goal is to find that balance. We should not expect people to abandon their ideals, but when there are one or two holdouts against an otherwise accepted solution—especially if they are long-standing and respected participants—an organizer can ask them to stand aside. They are only likely to agree if they feel that their concerns were truly heard. This is especially applicable in the context of generational change and issues around tradition vs. the evolution of our music and dance activities.

Additional resources for learning how to facilitate a meeting yourself

- Many communities have a **community mediation center** of some kind, also sometimes called a dispute resolution center. Search online for one in your area.
 - *Note:* look for “community mediation” or “dispute resolution,” not legal mediation centers. Legal mediation involves lawyers to help individuals resolve legal disputes. Community mediation is for neighbor-to-neighbor issues.
 - Mediation centers often offer training in facilitation. If you or someone in your community are interested in developing this skill, this might be a worthwhile investment of time and money, rather than hiring an outside facilitator for just one time.
 - Through the [National Association for Community Mediation](#) (NAFCM), you can [search for a community mediation program](#) by city or state.
- **Braver Angels**
 - This is a nonprofit organization that brings together people across political divides (usually Democrats and Republicans). They have trainings on how to facilitate those meetings. There is a small fee to become a member (currently \$10-20). You apply to be a facilitator, and then they train you. Their process is focused on debating an issue. A proposal is posed (e.g., “building a wall will keep the U.S. safe and only legal immigration will take place”). A bipartisan leadership pair (one Democrat and one Republican) then facilitates the debate. They may pre-choose two people to start the debate, representing opposing views. There are ground rules for speaking (for example, no interrupting). The process forces people to really hear what others are saying. Many of these debates are online and free to view. It could be valuable to watch the process and see if you can apply it to a dance question. You could do it without the pre-lined-up speakers, just choose peo-

ple to speak. This could be a useful process for debating an issue within your community, but it does not necessarily lead to an actionable decision. As such, it might be appropriate for gathering community input for a decision-making model of an empowered board, and it could be a good first step for direct-democracy governance, but an additional step would be needed to make a final community decision.

- **Technology of Participation (ToP) Facilitation, from [The Institute of Cultural Affairs \(ICA\)](#)**

- “The Institute of Cultural Affairs International is a global community of non-profit organizations advancing human development worldwide. ICAI is about empowering an authentic and sustainable transformation of individuals, communities and organizations. [...] Processes of social change often engender conflict between those who want to perpetuate the past and those who want to change the future. We stand in the center in order to facilitate a transition, both honoring the past and building consensus for future change.”
- [ICA-USA](#) has identified the “moral issue of our times” to be climate change, and therefore focuses on “engaging communities, organizations and individuals in programs of sustainability.”
- [ICA-USA’s ToP methodology](#) “is an integrated set of facilitation methods, tools and approaches that foster authentic participation and meaningful collaboration.” “These methods [...] have been developed to help groups think, talk, and work together.”
- [ToP facilitator training](#) “will help you increase group participation, get more ideas into the mix and make group decision making more effective. It will provide you with practical tools for designing and orchestrating meetings as well as conversations and workshops. ToP courses include valuable tools, contexts and guidelines that will deepen your capacities as a facilitative leader. You will be able to create lively and effective teamwork, build respect and trust and encourage group creativity. ToP facilitation will help you focus the group’s energy on common goals, form consensus and build commitment.”
- “ToP facilitators are also able to design specific programs to train facilitative leaders that can be delivered on site in a community or organization.”

- Many colleges and universities offer degrees in peace and conflict studies. For facilitating problem-solving in your community, we recommend that you look for a workshop where you practice mediation skills, rather than a whole degree program, but if conflict resolution grabs your interest, a few such programs that we know of are:
 - Master’s program, UNC Greensboro
 - Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, VA, offers a range of peace and reconciliation classes
 - Certificate in Facilitation at Georgetown University
 - **Mediation training from [Community Mediation Maryland](#).** CMM’s process is more aimed at mediation between two people rather than a group. They focus on really considering power dynamics—making sure everyone is on equal footing and that people aren’t being policed. For example, participants are allowed to yell, curse, etc. There are no “tone police”. They emphasize that expression is cultural, and folks can express themselves however they want. The facilitator’s role is to find the nuggets of meaning or need or values in those tirades. This may be less applicable to a song or dance situation, but it is a source of facilitator training, so we’re including it here as an option.
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Hiring an Outside Facilitator

Why hire an outside facilitator?

- Facilitation is a skill that improves with experience. If your community is facing a very controversial issue that is creating a lot of conflict and threatens to seriously damage the unity of the group and possibly the viability of your events (low turnout could eventually shut down a dance), it might be a worthwhile investment to bring in an expert to help you reach a resolution.
- A facilitator is supposed to remain neutral. They are like the referee or umpire in a sporting event. They must be committed to being fair to advocates on all sides of the issue, and the participants must trust that they are impartial and will remain so throughout the discussion. Organizers, board members, and other community leaders may very naturally wish to contribute their own opinions to the discussion and therefore may not want to take on the responsibility of being the facilitator, as they are, ideally, mutually exclusive roles.

How to find a facilitator in your community

- Again, search for a community mediation or dispute resolution center in your area. These organizations provide facilitation services and/or have a list of local professionals who have been trained in dispute resolution. (Look for “community mediation” or “dispute resolution,” *not* legal mediation centers).
- In addition to searching for an organization like a mediation center, you can simply search for individual mediators in your state. For example, mediate.com lists mediators by state and city. The mediators listed rank themselves based on criteria that a state mediation organization has established. Note that they pay to get listed. There are certifications, and certification costs money, so there could be lots more that are good but don't pay to become certified (which is why it's also good to check with a local mediation center). Conversely, the ones who pony up for certification may not be the most skilled, so once you identify someone, be sure to ask for references from past clients, and then check those references. Ask the former client about their experience with the mediator, while steering clear of the topic of the mediation. Here are a few prompts:
 - Did you feel that, in the end, your issue was resolved to the satisfaction of all parties?
 - What did you like about the mediator's style?
 - Was there anything you didn't like about their style?
 - Without divulging details of your issue, can you give any examples of how they helped you discuss your differences?
 - Would you hire this mediator/facilitator again?
- The ToP Network (mentioned above) “consists of over 130 licensed trainers and certified facilitators who deliver facilitation services and training across the nation.” [Certified ToP facilitators around the country, including the U.S. and Canada, are listed here.](#)

Additional Resources

The Mediator's Handbook, by Jenny Beer and Caroline Packard, currently in its fourth edition, available on Amazon.

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most, by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen
This is aimed at individuals for how to take part in a difficult conversation. Available new or used online, and is probably in most libraries.

Cool Tools for Hot Topics: Group Tools to Facilitate Meetings When Things Are Hot, by Ron Kraybill and Evelyn Wright

This is directed at meeting facilitators and has a lot of practical tools. Published by The Little Books of Justice & Peacebuilding. \$5 or \$6 online, from a variety of vendors (just search).