

## POOLING EXPERIENCE IN DISCUSSION

Mrs J Kimemiah

### Introduction

Experience of a group of people can profitably be pooled together, with a common objective in view, in a meeting. Meetings constitute a very important form of communication.

### Meeting

A meeting may be defined as a gathering together of a number of persons for any purpose. All meetings may be classified as either public or private.

A public meeting is open to the public.

A private meeting, however, is attended by members of the body holding the meeting or people with some other right or special capacity for the discussion of matters not of public concern. Private meetings include staff meetings, company meetings, meetings of clubs, trade unions, societies, aldermen, etc.

Why meetings? No organization can get along without meetings. They are work-sessions and a place for taking decisions. Some of the principal reasons for calling a meeting are:

1. To explain a new policy decision as it affects a Ministry, a department or a section of a department;
2. To review the operations of a department when things are not working to schedule;
3. To reach agreement on non-official activities necessary for the operation of official work;
4. To explore new and more effective ways of accomplishing official business within the broad official policy;
5. To set the tone of the department at the beginning of the year (or any agreed period), and to review the work of the department at the end of the year.

Causes of unsuccessful meetings. Some of the causes of ineffective, frustrating or boring meetings are:

1. Preparation - inadequate advance information, faulty composition of subject, Chairman vague about subject or purpose, bad handling of time factor.

2. Introduction - too long winded, incomplete or too short, muddled or confusing, key issues not defined, main issues not clarified.
3. Chairman/Leaders attitude - too autocratic, easy going, bored, uninterested, insincere, inattentive, overserious, pompous, flippant, tactless and prejudiced.
4. Control and guidance - irrelevant, rambling, latitude to overtalkative, diffident members ignored, discouraged or snubbed, private discussions, random allocation of time to major and minor issues, contributions ignored, disagreements or misunderstandings not clarified, intermediate phases of progress not summarized.
5. Conclusions - not summarized, minority views ignored, inaccurate quotations of contributions, unsettled points left in the air, action required not formulated.
6. Participation - many of the above causes arise because the leader did not develop a sense of participation in the members of the group. The sense of participation is not only a matter of the amount of talking done by members of the group but it is also their attitude of mind.

Not all meetings are expected to arrive at decisions or make recommendations. Therefore the amount of participation will depend on the kind of meeting, which can range for no group participation (which is rare) to the fullest possible participation.

Types of meeting Meetings vary between the following two extremes:

1. Highly formal - with Chairman, Secretary, agenda, minutes and formal rules of procedure.
2. Very informal - ad-hoc meetings about current business - probably colleagues on first name terms.

Between these two extremes, meetings vary also, depending on the amount of participation.

Some of the meetings which do not aim at full participation are:

1. Meeting called to hear a statement of policy
2. Meeting called to hear definition of responsibilities
3. Meeting called to receive instructions
4. Meeting called to receive explanation of new system or procedure

The problem solving meeting (Action Meeting) is possibly the most important. In this type of meeting one tries to transform a situation in which doubt, conflict or disturbance is experienced, into a situation which is clear and coherent.

A common example of a problem solving meeting is the post-mortem meeting. Because something has gone wrong or some mistake has been made the meeting is called to find out

precisely what went wrong, where it went wrong, why it went wrong, how can it be prevented from happening again.

At these meetings, if there is to be intelligent talking we must:

1. Know exactly what we are talking about
2. Keep our talks relevant
3. Know exactly where there is disagreement and why
4. Know exactly where there is agreement

In all meetings our activity - encouraged/inspired by the Chairman/Leader - should be a thinking activity and not random or emotional. Thinking means we want to know as much as we can about the causes, results of events and policies, the advantages of proposed courses of action, the reasons for people's views and the significances and results of our own views and actions.

Thought must be REFLECTIVE.

Discussion is more than a matter of free talk or conversation. Discussion is both thinking and talking and the talking is intended to aid the thinking. Good discussion

1. Stresses reflective thinking
2. Aims to understand a situation or difficulty
3. Aims to appreciate meanings and significance
4. Aims to analyse and solve a problem
5. Occurs in a group situation

Discussion is not debate. In a debate a person has made up his mind about something and wishes to convince everyone that he is right. We attend discussion meetings to learn in order that we may be in a position to make up our minds.

### Functions of a Chairman

A Chairman/Leader must know:

1. How to plan and prepare for a meeting
2. How to start a meeting
3. How to stimulate and guide discussion
4. How to get everyone to take part
5. How to prevent irrelevancies
6. How to give intermediate summaries
7. How to bring a meeting to a conclusion and to give a final summary so that everyone knows exactly what the meeting accomplished
8. The kinds of action that delay, handicap or wreck a meeting

If there has been thoughtful and constructive participation at a meeting the decisions that are made will lead to cooperation in action because there has been cooperation in thought. Matters should not be put to the vote. The interest should be in weighing judgements, not in counting hands.

A good Chairman/Leader should be able to lead a discussion. To do this he must:

Outline the subject clearly. State topic, problem or difficulty with which the meeting is to deal, outline situation giving rise to topic, problem or difficulty, state purpose of meeting so that everyone knows what is appropriate for discussion and what is not, define technical terms used, outline procedure to be followed. The vague statement of subject is the cause of the most futile discussions.

Guide the discussion Assemble all the necessary facts, draw out information, view-points and experiences, make sure all contributions are understood. Keep discussion on subject, avoid purely personal arguments, develop group participation.

Crystallize the discussion. Summarize the development of the discussion, refer to any changes of opinion, state points of agreements or disagreement, state intermediate conclusions as reached, make sure of understanding and acceptance of summaries.

Establish final conclusions reached Give final summary of course of discussion, state conclusion clearly, main points contributed, disagreement if any and the reasons for them. A final summary is necessary to make clear what the meeting has accomplished. Ask members whether the summary has been fair and complete and invite any comments.

Get agreement on action Show that a decision is a group decision arising from discussion, that the decision is based on conviction, assent or reconciliation of views. It is Chairman's/Leader's responsibility to summarize the reasons for the action and show how it is in the organizations interest.

To lead a discussion meeting a Chairman should:

1. Determine purpose of meeting i.e. know the objective e.g. to consider unsolved problems
2. Examine the subject - get facts and information on subject, determine points that need discussion, anticipate differences in viewpoint
3. Anticipate causes of delay - and obstruction i.e. prepare for difficult members and embarrassing subjects
4. Outline the discussion i.e. know final objective, intermediate objectives, frame appropriate questions, outline clear introduction, prepare a time-table

5. Be ready i.e. agenda, reading matter, announcements, arrange accommodation, prepare visual aids and other necessary material. Preparation does not merely involve collating documentary information but includes a verbal map - in other words there must be time to think. (Chairman/leader should have a preparation sheet)

Chairman's/Leader's authority Although a Chairman must guide, he must also exercise control and discipline, without necessarily relying on the weight of authority of formal rules of order. Collective thinking is wanted.

Questions can be used by the chair not only to ensure that everybody takes part and to make best use of member's knowledge and experience but also to open up discussion, to amplify and explain a member's contribution, to introduce a point which is being over-looked, to move discussion ahead from one point to another, to bring out the distinctions and similarities between various ideas, to encourage intelligent judgement on the ideas presented and not least, to exercise discipline.

The use of questions as a means of directing and stimulating discussion is one of the most effective techniques used by a Chairman/Leader. Questions can be general or specific depending on the nature of response required. Whatever the type of response or question the most effective are those which cannot be answered by a "Yes" or "No". The "why", "when" "where" and "show" questions are preferred; to be successful a Chairman/Leader must develop skill in asking questions - intelligent and purposeful - which is an art.

#### Personality traits of successful Chairman/Leader

1. Mental alertness
2. Sensitivity and perception
3. Concise and clear expression
4. Impartiality
5. Tact
6. Poise and self-restraint
7. Friendliness and good will
8. A sense of humour
9. Interest
10. Fairness

#### The Secretary and his/her duties

Every meeting must have a Secretary to maintain a record of decisions and agreements.

Minutes of meetings Such things as memoranda and shortened-layout letters are sometimes called minutes, and the term is also applied to short comments written in the margin of some document or attached to it on a separate slip of paper ('loose minutes'). When used in connection with meetings, the word means a record of what was done at the meeting, and this is what we are discussing here.

If the minutes are to be precise and not merely depend on the whims and fancies of a particular individual then they should be uttered by the Chairman in the process of his intermediate summaries. This means that in fact he dictates the minutes when he checks acceptance of the summaries. If the meeting agrees with the summaries, then it has for all practical purposes prepared the minutes. It is then hardly likely that a meeting will waste time at a subsequent session by contesting the minutes of the previous meeting. When a Chairman in effect dictates the minutes, the Secretary has merely to note the summaries accepted by the meeting and following the right practice, re-write them in the minutes.

Layout There is no universally accepted form for the layout of minutes, and many variations in detail are possible, but the following is an acceptable standard layout for any kind of minutes:

<u>MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF .....HELD ON (DATE),</u>	
<u>AT/IN (PLACE), AT TIME</u>	
PRESENT:	Mr X Y, Chairman) (Regular (List of Names) ) members of the body)
	<u>Action by</u>
Apologies for absence were received from: (List of Names)	
<u>IN</u>	(List of names and (Non-
<u>ATTENDANCE:</u>	posts) members specially invited or present to advise, etc.)
<u>Min. (No.)</u>	<u>HEADING</u> (Brief summary of background and/or discussion)
	RESOLVED: That...(verbatim text of the resolution)
<u>Min. (No.)</u>	<u>(HEADING)</u> The meeting closed at (TIME)
Confirmed:	----- Chairman
Date:	-----

Minutes of meetings are intended to be an accurate and concise record of what was done; they should definitely NOT be a complete record of all that was said. They record transactions, not debates, and THE SHORTER THEY ARE THE BETTER. Good minutes call for summarizing in its most concise form.

Facts and figures considered should be given in an Appendix, not in the body of the minutes. Reports from officials, sub-committees, and so on that have been received and discussed should also be treated in the same way. Minutes, especially those of company meetings, may under certain circumstances be accepted as evidence in courts of law, and it is essential that whatever is included in the way of facts, figures, and resolutions should be absolutely accurate. This is especially important in the the case of contracts, staff appointments, and other such matters where specific sums of money or details of salaries, incremental scales, conditions of service and so on are involved.

Here is an abbreviated specimen of the minutes of a meeting of a local authority:

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF BANDANI COUNTY COUNCIL  
HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER ON 23RD NOVEMBER  
1970, AT 10.45 AM

PRESENT: Councillor A B - Chairman  
Councillor C D - Vice-Chairman  
Councillor E F  
Councillor G H  
Councillor I J  
etc.

Apologies for absence were received from:

Councillor R S  
Councillor Mrs T U

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr B C - Clerk to the Council  
Mr D E - Treasurer  
Mr F G - Executive Officer  
Mr H I - District Health Inspector  
Mr J K - Committee Clerk

Min.67/70: PRAYERS  
A short period of silent prayer was observed before the beginning of business.

Min.68/70: CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES  
It was proposed by Councillor E F, seconded by Councillor G H, and

RESOLVED:  
That the word forthwith in Min.54/70, line 2, be deleted and replaced by the words as soon as practicable.

Min. 69/70:

CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS

The Chairman reported to the Council that during his visit to the Nairobi Show September he had approached a certain firm for assistance to Harambee groups operating cattle dips.

The company had offered to provide 120 gallons of 'Toxaphone' dip free of charge, and fifteen 5-gallon drums had already been received.

Referring to the Council's financial affairs, the Chairman drew attention to the care which its financial officers had exercised in controlling and supervising funds. Two cases of misappropriation had been reported to the police, and he wished to thank the officers for their alertness and vigilance.

The Council noted the Chairman's remarks, and endorsed his thanks to the Council's financial officers.

Min. 70/70:

REPORT OF THE HEALTH COMMITTEE

In the course of discussion of this report, Councillor K L pointed out that the Kalima Dispensary required extra staff and requested that this be noted by the Health Committee, and especially the sub-committee which was due to make a visit to all dispensaries in the County in the near future.

Proposed by Councillor K L, seconded by Councillor M N, and

**RESOLVED:**

That the report of the Health Committee as set forth in the minutes of that Committee's meeting held on 25th October 1970 be adopted, and further that the special needs of the Kalima Dispensary, as mentioned in the note heading this minute, should be recommended to the Health Committee's particular attention.

(During the discussion of this report Councillor Mrs S T entered the meeting)

(OTHER REPORTS OF STANDING COMMITTEES WOULD BE DEALT WITH HERE, EACH IN A SEPARATE MINUTE).

Min. 75/70

MARANI AFRICAN PENTACOSTAL CHURCH

The Clerk informed the Council that he had received a letter from the elders of the Marani Pentecostal Church, expressing their gratitude to the Council for agreeing to their application for a church site at Marani Village.

The Council noted the Clerk's report with appreciation.

(At this point Councillor F G left the meeting).

Min.76/70:

SEREMUNI HARAMBEE CATTLE  
DIP SITE

The Council received and considered an application from the Seremuni Harambee Group for the use of a piece of Council land situated at Seremuni Boma, which had in the past been used by the Department of Agriculture as a pig-breeding site but had now been abandoned, for the construction of a cattle dip on a self-help basis. After some discussion, in which it was pointed out that this land had no potential for any other kind of development, it was

Proposed by Councillor F G, seconded by Councillor Q R, and

RESOLVED:

That permission be granted to the Seremuni Harambee Group to use 1 acre at the extreme western end of the former pig-breeding site at Seremuni Boma for the construction of a cattle dip, subject to the approval of the site by the Veterinary Department, and to the pegging out of the area by the Council Surveyor.

(Councillor Mrs S T asked that her opposition to this resolution be recorded, on the ground that the site was too near to the Seremuni Secondary School.)

Min.77/70:

APPOINTMENT OF ASSISTANT  
MARKETS SUPERVISOR

Proposed by Councillor G H, seconded by Councillor E F, and

RESOLVED:

That the recommendation of the Staff Committee be adopted that the vacant post of Assistant Markets Supervisor be offered to Mr K E at a starting salary of £855 in the salary scale 7(b), £855-36 - £1,035x42 - £1,245 per annum on local pensionable terms and conditions of services.

The meeting closed at 12.15 pm

Confirmed:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chairman

Date:

\_\_\_\_\_

## EXERCISE

1. The following minute is badly set out and also contains a good deal that should have been omitted. Rewrite it.

Min.38/70: LAND FOR SELF-HELP SCHEME. An application was received from the Wandiri Self-Help Group for permission to erect a nursery school on Plot No.39, adjacent to Wandiri Market. Councillor N O expressed concern that the sanitary facilities provided might not be adequate, but accepted the Chairman's assurance that this would be closely supervised. Councillor D E said that in his view another nursery school was not required at Wandiri. Councillor J K, however pointed out that there was not, in fact, any nursery school within five miles. Councillor D E then agreed that there was a good case for the proposed school. Councillor V W asked whether the self-help group was in a position to put up a building of the required standard, adding that he doubted it; he was assured by the CDO that it was. Several Councillors then expressed their opinion that the group should be encouraged; Councillor D E remarked that development through self-help was very important in modern Kenya, and said that it deserved the whole-hearted support of all Councillors. He asked why it was that Councillor V W always opposed everything progressive. Councillor V W heatedly replied that this was a libellous accusation. The Chairman called for order, and Councillor O P then proposed that the request should be granted. When this was put to the vote it was agreed to unanimously.

2. Determine the five most essential qualities required of a successful R & D Project leader, and arrange them in order of importance.

Drive and enthusiasm  
Self control  
Imperturbability  
Balanced judgement  
Technical competence  
Courage  
Discipline  
Impartiality  
Approachability  
Balanced humour  
Sincerity  
Sensitivity and perception  
Creativity  
Mental alertness  
Tact

Procedure: Participants will be divided into three groups. Each group will elect a chairman. By group discussion each group will decide the qualities required and arrange these in order of importance. All the participants will finally meet at plenary to present their group decision.