

how to...

Chair a public meeting

Activism guide • October 2016

How your event is chaired can be crucial to what you get out of it. Your role as chair is to facilitate the flow of the meeting; keep the meeting to time; and to ensure, as best as you can, that everyone feels included and able to contribute if they want to.

While chairing is a skill that you develop with practice, there are some easy rules you can follow to ensure your meeting runs smoothly.



Photo: Global Justice Now

Before the meeting begins

- Check how your speaker(s) would like to be introduced and how to pronounce their name.
- Confirm with the speaker how long they have to talk and explain that you'll pass them a note when they have two minutes to go. It's very unusual for someone not to go over time, even if they say they're not going to.
- Check that you have a way of keeping time.
- Ensure the meeting or session starts more or less on time.

Introducing the meeting

Welcome people to the event. Explain what the meeting is, the structure and who will be speaking.

Once you have introduced the speaker(s), if their time is up and it doesn't sound like they're coming to an end, give them a two minute note.

Chairing the discussion

Explain how long there is for discussion. You may want to give people a chance to talk in small groups or with the person sitting next to them first to reflect on the issues that have come up and any questions they may have. This gives everyone a chance to participate and can lead to a more lively discussion.

Explain that contributions don't have to be in the form of a question, but that it would be helpful if people could keep their contributions to a couple of minutes.

It's a good idea to take several questions at once as it stops speakers feeling they have to answer every question or every point, which can be difficult and a little exhausting. Taking people in groups (three is ideal but four or two could also be taken depending on the length and detail of contributions) takes less time.

Who's doing the talking?

Power dynamics which reflect structural oppressions along lines of race, gender and class in society tend to play out in meetings. For instance, while it's possible that a woman might end up dominating a discussion or make a long-winded speech, it's far more likely that if anyone does this, it will be a man, or even several men.

People who are more confident with speaking in public, or who consider themselves more experienced can also dominate a meeting. Some people also go to events with their own specific agenda which is unrelated to the topic of the meeting.

When taking questions, notice who is doing most of the talking and make sure everyone can participate.

Things you can do to encourage participation

- Try to call on women at the beginning of the discussion as men are often more likely to put their hands up to speak. This encourages more women to speak during the session than would otherwise have been the case.
- Give people a chance to discuss their questions in small groups before coming back to the plenary discussion. This gives everyone a chance to participate and can address some questions people have without needing to say them in front of the whole group.
- Speak confidently (although you needn't be overly formal) and this will give you the authority to deal with any difficult characters.

Taking people in groups also allows the speaker a little time to think about the points being raised and the audience themselves a chance to answer each others points and questions. That means you get more of a sense of group discussion, which can make for a more satisfying meeting.

Try not to call people for a second time unless it's quite a small meeting. If the discussion is feeling a bit flat, you could ask the speaker or speakers a question yourself.

Remember that you should prioritise having an interesting and lively meeting over being scrupulously fair with speaking times and taking people in the order that they put their hands up. Strike a balance between the time given to the 'expert' speaker and the perspectives of the audience members, which may even be what makes the meeting.

Wrapping up

- Allow the speaker(s) a little time to sum up the discussion and make closing remarks. If they have contributed a lot to the discussion already, this may not be necessary, but check with them.
- Remind people of any upcoming events or actions or how they can get involved with your group.
- Remind people to add their details to the contact sheet.
- Make sure you finish the meeting on time. Discussions can continue informally once the meeting has finished.