

# A Quick Guide to Holding Effective Meetings

Running meetings that keep to time, enable constructive discussion and give everyone an opportunity to have their voices heard is a difficult thing to achieve, particularly if these meetings are being held on Zoom (or any other video conferencing platform). More often than not, people talk over each other (making it impossible to hear what is being said), and meetings drag on chaotically, leaving those present tired and frustrated.

Using a set structure and hand signals to communicate, however, can resolve such communication issues and can create harmonious, inclusive and even enjoyable meetings. As can using Zoom's breakout room capacity (if you are holding meetings online) as it enables people go off into smaller groups where they can discuss an issue in depth, before sharing their ideas with the larger group.

To have constructive, harmonious and enjoyable meetings that keep to time, it is advisable to use the following components:

- Facilitators
- Note-takers (minute-takers)
- Hand Signals
- Breakout Rooms (on Zoom)

It is also important for each person participating to trust the facilitator and to use the hand signals responsibly (please see the 'note to participants' section at the end of this document for more information).

The rest of this document will explain what is meant by the components listed above (the content has been adapted from Extinction Rebellion's various People's Assembly manuals), and is divided into the following sections for ease of reference:

## Facilitators

Every meeting should have a lead facilitator, who is responsible for ensuring that the meeting runs to time and that those present are able to share their ideas without chaos breaking loose. The facilitator does not need to remain the same across consecutive meetings. Indeed, it is more effective if this responsibility is shared out and people take it in turns to take on this role each meeting.

The facilitator's role is to look out for the hand signals, prioritising them appropriately, and to ensure inclusivity - no one person should dominate. If one person is speaking for a long time, the facilitator can request that the person rounds up, using the appropriate hand signal, or if one person repeatedly wishes to make a point, the facilitator can prioritise those requesting to speak

who have not yet spoken. At the start of the meeting, the lead facilitator should request that people put themselves on mute and only unmute when they are speaking – this prevents any background noise interference and also ensures that the meeting is not interrupted with people’s exclamations or comments.

## Inclusion

The facilitator should moderate participation to ensure that everyone is able to speak, should they want to. The facilitator can engage participants by inviting people to speak and by, conversely, asking people not to speak. If people have not spoken, invite them to engage with a topic by asking for their opinion. If someone has occupied a lot of the airtime, explain that you would like to ensure everyone who would like to speak is able to and/or that you are conscious of the time. Rounds can also be used: after someone has shared an idea or proposal, each person in the group can be invited to share their response and comment in turn. As can timers, so that people contribute for a set amount of time, and the round up signal is used to inform them when that time is up. These approaches can ensure that the meeting stays inclusive and can prevent some voices from dominating.

The facilitator should also be sensitive to people’s needs. Give people the opportunity to share whether or not they have specific disabilities, inviting people to do it privately should they wish to). So many disabilities are invisible, so you should never assume that people do not have them.

Using breakout rooms can help maintain inclusion as it gives people a chance to talk in smaller groups, which is particularly useful for those who are shy. If breakout groups are used, then each room needs a facilitator, who will ensure that the discussion keeps to time and that everyone is able to participate, as in the main meeting room.

## Pace

The facilitator should be aware of the pace and the fact that many people will not speak English as a first language. Ask anyone speaking too quickly to repeat what they are saying or slow down, and build in time for quiet reflection. Having one minute’s silence every 20 minutes, for example, allows people to rest their minds and reflect on or process what they have heard. As can having a short 10-20 second pause after every speaker.

However, it is also the facilitator’s role to ensure that what needs to be discussed in the meeting is discussed. Suggest that times be allocated to each agenda item, and have the group prioritise items, so that the pace of the meeting is relaxed and not too rushed, with some items possibly moved to the following meeting or to be settled by email or other means outside of the meeting.

The facilitator should also be aware that people may need concentration breaks. If it feels like concentration is dipping, give people a chance to take a break, to look away from the screen, to dance together to some music, or to play a game. This can help re-energise the group.

## Building Trust

Facilitators can build trust into their meetings by giving people space to check-in and check-out at the beginning and end of a meeting. These are not only great ways of entering and closing the space, they are also ways of including everybody, and giving people the chance to learn more about each other. For ideas on types of check-in, see [Getting to Know One Another](#).

It can also be a good idea to read out a regenerative culture reminder, or some kind of statement to capture how the group present can work together, after people have checked-in, but before going through the agenda. If needed, use the example below.

**A Reminder:** *We are transitioning to a regenerative culture. It is a culture of respect and listening, in which people arrive on time to commitments. And deal with conflicts when they arise, using short feedback loops to talk about disagreements and issues without blaming and shaming. It is a culture in which we cultivate healthy boundaries by slowing down our yeses and returning tasks when we are unable to follow through. It is a culture in which we look after ourselves and others, understanding that it is natural to make mistakes: they are a key part of the learning process and provide opportunities for growth and development. It is a healthy resilient culture built on care and support. We are all crew.*

## Minute-Taker / Note-Takers

The lead note-taker is responsible for keeping the minutes and recording what is being said in the main meeting. Again, unless this role is part of someone's job description, it is good to rotate who is the note-taker, so that everyone can have an experience of fully participating in the meeting.

If breakout rooms are used, then each group should appoint a note-taker, who will record the group's discussion and share the key findings back with the main group when the breakout rooms are closed.

## Hand Signals

### **Point (or 'I would like to speak'):**

When someone in the group wants to say something, they should point their index finger up and wait for the facilitator to let them have their turn in speaking. It is vital that people do not talk over anyone else and wait for their turn. If someone, who has not yet said anything, puts their finger up to speak, whilst others have spoken a lot, then the facilitator should give that person priority over the 'stack' (the queue or order of speakers based on the order they raised their finger to speak).

### **Direct Point:**

If someone has directly relevant information to what is being said, then they can make the 'direct point' hand signal and the facilitator will let them provide that information immediately after the person speaking has finished. Think of the direct point hand signal as being like brackets, which are used to add critical information that a speaker is not aware of e.g. "the meeting has now been changed to Wednesday". The direct point signal is not an excuse to jump the queue just to make a point. It is important that people do not abuse this signal as otherwise it can make all present lose

trust in the process.

### **Wavy Hands (I Agree):**

The 'wavy hands' signal of approval is used to show agreement or support for something someone has said. It instantly indicates how much consensus there is towards something and can highlight how popular an idea is. If everybody erupts into a forest of waving hands during a breakout session, for example, the note taker can see that this is one of the more popular points made and it will become one of the key bullet points fed back to the main meeting room.

### **Clarification:**

If someone says something that is unclear, people can hold their hand in a 'C' shape as the 'clarification' signal. The facilitator will then pause the discussion giving the person who made the signal the opportunity to ask a question to clear up any confusion. This signal should be given priority above all others as it means that someone does not understand something and it may thus inhibit their ability to engage in the discussion.

### **Technical point:**

If someone has information that is immediately relevant to the running of the meeting, they make a 'technical point' signal by making a 'T' shape with their hands. This is only to be used for concerns external to the discussion that need to be addressed immediately e.g. "We only have ten minutes of this meeting left" or "I am the note taker and I need the loo so can someone else take over?" The facilitator should stop the discussion to address the technical point.

### **Round Up:**

Facilitators need to ensure that no one speaks for more than necessary (two minutes is a suggested maximum amount of time as it encourages people to be concise). If someone has been speaking for two minutes (or whatever the set amount of time is), the facilitator makes the 'round up' hand signal by repeatedly making a circular motion with their hands (as if they are tracing a ball). This must be done sensitively, but firmly as it ensures that no one person dominates the meeting.

### **Speak up:**

If someone is speaking too quietly or they cannot be heard, others can ask them to raise their voice by raising and lowering their hands with palms open and facing up.

## **Break Out Rooms**

To brainstorm ideas or discuss a subject in depth, use the breakout room feature on Zoom, as it will give people space to discuss their ideas in smaller groups. Please note, breakout rooms can only be created by the person who is logged in as the host (though the host can transfer hosting to another person, if desired).

Whoever is the host must look at the control panel at the bottom of the screen for the button stating Breakout Rooms.

The host should divide the number of participants in total by the number of people wanted in each group, and Zoom will automatically assign people to rooms. Once they have done this, they can look at the lists to check that all rooms have the right number of people.

If certain people need to work together, the host can manually assign people to rooms.

The host can also set the options, such as timings, for the breakout rooms (see the example outline below), and can communicate with all the breakout rooms by using the broadcast button to send messages about timing or other important points to consider.

For each breakout room to run effectively, it will need a facilitator and a note-taker. The note-taker should be responsible for feeding the key ideas back to the rest of the group. If there are several breakout groups then consider having a limited number of ideas to feedback to ensure the meeting keeps to time e.g. each group might be asked to choose three key ideas for their note-taker to feedback.

## Note to Participants

You are each responsible for creating a considerate space in which everyone is able to participate. It is, therefore, important to reflect on your own involvement in the meeting.

To create a constructive, harmonious and engaging meeting environment, consider the following points:

- Mute yourself when you are not speaking as it ensures that you don't distract attention away from the speaker.
  - Respect the facilitator's role to hold the meeting and to intervene to give everyone a fair chance to speak; it is likely there won't be time for everyone to say everything they want to say, so please allow space to make sure others are heard too.
  - Please think before you speak and consider whether what you are saying is vital or not. Ask yourself: "Why am I talking? Do I really need to add my view in here? Is what I am saying necessary, or do I just want to speak?" You don't need to repeat what someone else has said, that's what the jazz hands are for.
  - If someone has said your point, put your hand down so the facilitator knows that you are giving up your place in the queue stack, otherwise keep it up.
  - Let someone who hasn't spoken in awhile go ahead of you. So when it's your turn, say "X hasn't spoken in a while, take their point ahead of mine".
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