

U.S ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION VIDEO
TRAINING PROGRAM**

PARTICIPANT WORKBOOK

MODULE 6.
ENSURE SUCCESSFUL MEETINGS



**PUBLIC
PARTICIPATION**

GUIDE

Engage the public. Preserve the planet.

Introduction

**It's a very important thing to learn
to talk to people you disagree with.**

— Pete Seeger

One of the tools we are almost certain to use in public participation is the public meeting. In fact, virtually every project where we work with stakeholders will involve meetings.

Good meetings don't just happen

In fact, the exact opposite is true. When meetings “just happen”, they usually turn out poorly. For a meeting to be truly successful, it must be carefully and thoroughly planned and communicated ahead of time.

Meeting Planning Components In Module 6:

1. Set Clear Goals for the Meeting
2. Get the Right Stakeholders at the Meeting
3. Establish an Appropriate Setting
4. Create and Present Information Effectively
5. Design an Engaging Process

SECTION 1: Planning for Successful Meetings

The total time and resources needed to plan an effective meeting is far more than the meeting itself, and almost always greater than you expect.

The five components of effective meeting planning:

1. Goals
 - Why are we holding this meeting?
 - What will this meeting produce?
2. Stakeholders
 - Who needs to be present?
 - How do we ensure that they attend?
3. Setting
 - Where should the meeting be held?
 - What kind of environment is needed for people to participate effectively?
4. Information
 - What information will be needed?
 - How will this information be presented?
5. Process
 - How will we organize and conduct the meeting?
 - How will we get participants to interact effectively?

Remembering to carefully plan for each component of your meeting helps to ensure that your meeting runs smoothly, and you achieve the desired outcomes. Each of these components is discussed in detail below.



Meeting Planning Component 1: Set Clear Goals for the Meeting

Meetings are expensive uses of both time and money.

It is important to create a clear “value added” to bringing people together.

Often bringing people together allows us to do some things that are not possible in any other way. However, ***we always want to take full advantage of bringing everyone together in the same place at the same time*** to produce a better outcome than other less resource-intensive activities.

Also, ***it is important to understand when not to hold the typical large public meeting***. Often, the most important decision we can make is not to hold a large public meeting at all. It is always difficult to get all the right people in one place at one time. There are other approaches that can provide effective ways to achieve the desired outcome.

Meeting Purpose

The first thing we need to identify for all meetings is a very clear purpose. Think about the following:

- The purpose must be tied clearly to ***how it fits into the overall process***, including what has come before and what comes next.
- The purpose must ***relate to stakeholder interests*** and identify why they should participate.
- The purpose should also ***create clear expectations*** about desired outcomes.
- It may be helpful to ***frame the key questions*** that are to be addressed, discussed, or answered as part of the meeting as part of the purpose.

Effectively ***communicate the purpose of the meeting ahead of time*** to all expected participants to ensure clear and shared expectations and help people understand how their participation will be valuable .

Meeting Outcomes

There are many possible outcomes of meetings that are valuable to our public participation programs. Clearly articulated outcomes help us to design appropriate and effective meetings, create common and clear expectations among all participants, and evaluate the success of the meeting afterward.

The four most common meeting outcomes we seek include the following:

1. Create Shared Learning

- Meetings provide the opportunity not just to share information, but to ensure everyone understands the information in the same way.
- More complex and technical issues take longer so more interaction for stakeholders to fully understand is necessary; meetings provide us the opportunity to work closely with them and help them to understand the issues at stake.

2. Get Public Input

- Meetings allow us to not only get stakeholder input but to also engage in more detailed discussion on what is behind that input.
- This leads to improved understanding of important stakeholder values, interests, and concerns.

3. Build Relationships

- The face-to-face interaction at meetings leads to improved relationships, which in turn enhances our trust and credibility.

4. Create Consensus

- Bringing stakeholders together allows them to work among themselves to identify common ground on community concerns, issues, and values.
- Working together with stakeholders also provides the opportunity to create specific agreements on decisions, actions, or options.



GROUP EXERCISE

Define Meeting Purpose and Outcomes

1. Identify a project where you want to hold a meeting. We will conduct a number of exercises for this meeting during this Module.
2. Discuss your goals of the meeting and write a clear purpose statement that describes what you hope to achieve.
3. Identify the specific outcomes you would like to achieve as a result of this meeting.

Purpose Statement:

Meeting Outcomes:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)



Meeting Planning Component 2: Get the Right Stakeholders at the Meeting

Meetings are an important part of establishing and maintaining relationships with key members of the public, but this can only happen if those stakeholders are actually present!

You need to get all key stakeholders in the room

Too often, public meetings are held with insufficient effort to convene all of the different stakeholder interests who need to be heard and who need to listen to each other.

First, Identify Who Should be Present

As we discussed in Module 4, meaningful public participation requires sponsors to identify the full range of stakeholder perspectives in a community. Use this understanding in determining who needs to be present at any given meeting to achieve your goals.

If any key voices are missing, the result of the meeting will be incomplete and may even result in having wasted everyone's time. Also remember to include internal stakeholders and other agencies whose involvement is important.

Second, Take Action to Ensure That Those Stakeholders Actually Attend

Knowing who you want at the meeting is important, but it takes very specific action to ensure that they actually attend.

Most important, you need to design the meetings to be meaningful to your public. Connect meetings directly to community concerns and interests and their ability to actually influence the outcome of the project. Make the meetings fun and interesting and ensure that people leave feeling that their time was well spent.

With an interesting meeting to communicate, you then need to create an active process to attract your stakeholders.

- Create engaging language and materials that lets people know why the meeting will be important to them and how their presence can make a real difference to them and their community
- Invite people personally through direct calls, emails, and announcements at other locations throughout the community

Your existing relationships are also critical to getting people to attend and to holding a successful meeting. Before you plan any public meetings, ***assess relationships with your stakeholders*** by asking the following questions:

- How are you perceived overall?
- Are you seen as a trustworthy source of information?
- Are you seen as a credible organization?
- Have you had credibility issues in the past?

If you have any significant issues with your public, you might want to make an effort to ***repair relationships and bolster your credibility, before you bring everyone together in a meeting environment***. If your relationship is too broken, you may need to partner with other credible organizations to assist in the repair process and/or in hosting the meeting.



GROUP EXERCISE

Identify Stakeholders to Attend Your Meeting

1. Thinking about the purpose and desired outcomes you have outlined in the previous exercise, identify the key stakeholder groups that would be important to participate in this meeting to achieve the desired results.
2. Think about each group and identify how you would invite them to help ensure their willingness to attend.

Key stakeholder groups	Strategies to get them to attend
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	



Meeting Planning Component 3: Establish an Appropriate Setting

Finding a place to hold a public meeting means much more than just a location to meet. How people feel as they arrive, the comfort and safety of the location, and many other physical and emotional factors are important to the ultimate success.

Think about your desired outcomes and the needs of your stakeholders in organizing your meeting space

Consider the following set of needs in planning your next meeting to achieve the level of results you desire.

Convenience and Safety

The most important thing to consider is what your stakeholders need in order to attend and feel secure at a given location.

- Meet on their turf, making sure the location is safe, accessible, and comfortable for those attending.
- Make sure the time and date of the meeting aligns with when they can be available.
- Consider child care needs and other obstacles that might keep key stakeholders from being able to attend.
- Consider the transportation needs of desired participants.

Functionality

Organize the space so that participants are able to interact and learn.

- Create good signage so everyone knows where they are going.
- Ensure there are plenty of materials and supplies for all planned activities.
- Consider how you can provide real-time presentation of results during the meeting in a way that all participants can see and hear.
- Ensure all A/V is working and can reach the entire space.
- Post key information such as the ground rules and agenda around the room.

Friendliness

We want to create a space that feels collegial and encourages people to interact with each other.

- Provide some level of food, even if it is just water and a minor snack.
- Try to arrange chairs facing each other as much as possible so that people can see each other and interact, avoid rooms with fixed seating such as auditoriums.
- Avoid using a dais or head table or stage as this creates an unwanted sense of power and separation.
- Post greeters at all entrances and instruct them to engage everyone in a friendly manner.
- Ensure all staff demonstrate the public participation behaviors outlined in Module 7.



Meeting Planning Component 4: Create and Present Information Effectively

If we are to get meaningful input from our stakeholders, then they need to understand the issues in a deep and meaningful way. Providing the information for this to happen is the job of the sponsor agency.

In identifying the information to present and how you plan to present it, consider the following key factors:

1. Determine What Stakeholders Need to Know

- Identify the current level of stakeholder knowledge about this subject and start from there.
- Identify the full set of facts needed by stakeholders in order to understand and provide meaningful input.
- Think about this information from the point of view of stakeholders to communicate all information in an understandable and accessible way.

2. Be Fully Transparent

- If in doubt, get it out. Nothing can destroy public trust faster than knowledge that information has been withheld or misrepresented.
- Important information needs to be reported as soon as it becomes available.

3. Account for the Human Learning Process

- People don't learn all at once, stakeholders need to learn about the project over time.
- Think about information needs over time throughout decision-making.
- Don't wait to communicate until near the end of the project or try to do too much in any one meeting.
- Consider the lead time stakeholders need in order to understand information and provide input so that decision-makers have time to consider that input before they act.

4. Use a Variety of Tools and Approaches

The nature of the information, the stakeholders we seek to reach, and the purpose of information are all important. Create your information to meet all of these needs. Consider the following approaches at meetings:

- Try to be as interactive as possible.
- Anticipate key questions and have good answers ready.
- Use smaller groups whenever possible.
- Create formats that encourage a dialogue environment.
- Avoid long, dry presentations.
- Use examples, stories, models, and visuals to enhance understanding.

5. Practice

- Don't present information for the first time at the public meeting.
- Practice in front of people who are not familiar with the project to test your effectiveness and anticipate the kinds of questions people will have.
- Try to get stakeholder feedback on how the information meets their needs and answers their questions.
- Select experienced presenters who are comfortable with both the information and the audience.

6. Leave a Legacy

Even with your best efforts to get people to attend, many of the people who need the information or should be engaged in a public meeting will not be present. Make sure to develop materials that allow people to understand the information, dialogue, and agreements that were present. Get that information on the internet and out to the public quickly.



Meeting Planning Component 5: Design an Engaging Process

Meetings need to be carefully designed and facilitated if they are to achieve your goals. You need to design your meeting to achieve each one of your identified outcomes.

All meetings follow a process. It is important to think about this process ahead of time, to plan it carefully, and communicate it to everyone. We generally do this through a meeting agenda which outlines the topics, activities, and outcomes of different parts of the meeting.

Agendas

The agenda describes your purpose and process and serves as a roadmap for the meeting. However, it is important to remember that an agenda is merely a guide and should not over-prescribe the exact nature of the time or dialogue that will occur. We want the participants to have the freedom and comfort to engage in important conversations.

Consider the following in creating your agenda:

- The agenda is not an outcome in itself, and we should never presume to understand exactly how long a particular topic will take or what additional topics might arise; do not miss the important outcomes we are seeking to achieve by being too fixated on the agenda.
- Be flexible and recognize that additional issues will arise.
- Avoid arbitrary timeframes in the agenda, the only two times that are really important are the start and the end.
- Create time for people to just vent, or to raise additional issues or topics.
- Leave a lot of time for dialogue.
- Don't try to do too much all at once, make sure people have the time to truly understand, relate, and discuss.

Ground Rules

It is important to establish ground rules at the beginning of the meeting to *create a common agreement about how all participants will behave*. Ground rules also allow meeting facilitators to provide behavior correction without singling out individual participants. Consider the following in creating effective ground rules:

- They need to be relevant and specific to the meeting, the participants, and the desired outcomes.
- They must be identified up front and agreed to by all participants.
- Keep them short, direct, and specific.
- 5 or 6 ground rules is generally about the most you should present.
- Post the ground rules in the room for everyone to see at all times.
- Remind participants of the ground rules as necessary to remind the group of their commitments.

Facilitation

For most meetings, you should engage an experienced person who understands group process to serve as a facilitator. Facilitators serve as overall meeting guides and help to ensure that the process is followed as designed. Regardless of whether you have a facilitator, all staff should understand and engage in facilitative behavior to ensure a good meeting.

The following behaviors create a positive environment and model the behaviors we are seeking from all participants.

Humility

You have to leave your ego at the door. Be open to the fact that we can learn from everyone.

Patience

Complex, multi-stakeholder processes take time. You and your staff have an overall knowledge and perspective that far exceeds that of your stakeholders and you need to give them the time they need to learn and provide input.

Flexibility

You need the ability to recognize and adjust when the meeting process is not meeting the group's needs.

Empathy

You need to demonstrate to the participants that you care about them and their issues. You can't fake it.

Respect

You must demonstrate respect to every single participant and to the process itself.

Energy

The group follows your lead, you need to monitor the group's energy and your own. You cannot facilitate an effective meeting with lethargy.

Humor

You need to be able to lighten the mood in appropriate ways at appropriate times.

Capture Results

It is important to capture an ongoing record of the meeting, most likely by writing on flip charts or using real-time note-taking to keep notes as the meeting moves along.

Some things to consider in capturing results include:

- Stop and summarize regularly with the group and orient them to progress by noting, "this is where we are, how we got here, where we are going."
- Identify when agreements emerge, help the group to clarify those agreements, record them clearly, and use them as foundations for future discussion.
- Have a recognized ending, rather than fade away. Let people know what they just did, what was decided, and what is next.
- Let everyone know how they can access a meeting summary and results.



GROUP EXERCISE

Design Your Meeting Process

1. Design an agenda for your meeting.
2. Think about the timing and how you will manage the process.
3. What information do you plan to present and how will you make sure it is understood?
4. How can you create spaces for interaction with stakeholders?