



## Chairing a meeting - tips for effective chairing

### General concepts and principles

Manitoba workplace safety and health committees have two co-chairs - one from the employer's representatives and one from the workers' representatives. They must take turns chairing meetings - i.e. they must share power and responsibilities.

The co-chairs need to know and understand the committee's procedural rules and use them impartially. But there's more to running meetings than knowing those rules.

Effective chairs are mostly facilitators. At the same time, it's often assumed that the co-chairs have more authority than others on the committee. What they say may be given more weight than other people's voices. However, when chairs interject too much or express personal views, they often make it difficult for

others to participate (e.g. it's intimidating) and reduce the committee's effectiveness.

As a facilitating chair, you can:

- ✓ acknowledge the strength of group interaction and collective contributions (e.g. participatory activities);
- ✓ encourage participation and contributions with techniques such as brainstorming and open questions (see the *Six thinking hats* in CP. 17 and the text about open questions in Part B);
- ✓ share power and promote facilitation and leadership by others; and
- ✓ work to get group ownership of recommendations and decisions.

See Parts B and H of this manual for more details about tools for effective committees.

### Before the meeting

1. Work with the other co-chair to prepare the agenda. Review past agendas and minutes, request input from other committee members and check correspondence received since the last meeting. Ask for background information about topics to be discussed.
2. Organize the agenda (for more about this, see CP.3), including background information that is available. Distribute the agenda and relevant documents a week or more before the meeting. (The law requires that it be posted on the committee's bulletin board before the meeting and that committee members receive it at least three days beforehand.) Ask people to RSVP.
3. Encourage members to prepare a case about items they put on the agenda. (When contentious items get on the agenda without notice and members are not prepared for discussion, conflict is more likely.)
4. Encourage committee members to discuss agenda items with others (on and off the committee) so they are prepared to represent views and present relevant information.
5. Remind those who have responsibilities from previous meetings about what they were to do and ask that they be prepared to report their progress or actions.



## At the meeting

In general, the chair is responsible for promoting participation, sticking to the agenda, focusing committee members on the topic at hand, and ensuring decisions are made and recorded.

To promote participation:

- ✓ keep track of who is participating, and a speakers' list;
- ✓ use the ground rules (see CP.8) to remind committee members about things like interruptions and encourage others to do the same;
- ✓ use methods such as the *Six Hats*, brainstorming (CP.17), open questions, force field analysis (CP.7) and small group discussions;
- ✓ try to get everyone to contribute without singling them out in an embarrassing way;
- ✓ pay attention to body language (e.g. sitting back, people shaking their head);
- ✓ consider a "go-round" to promote contribution and let people "pass";
- ✓ ask strategic questions (e.g. "What would it take for us to move from situation A to situation B?", "What are the benefits of doing this?");
- ✓ don't get involved in the discussion except to facilitate moving forward;
- ✓ if you want to participate, hand over the chairing to the co-chair or someone else while you do that;
- ✓ deal with conflict as it arises (see CP.9 for some "ground rules"); and
- ✓ have regular evaluations about how the committee is doing things, at meetings and in other activities.

To help the committee stick to the agenda and focus on each topic:

- ✓ review the agenda at the start of the meeting to make sure that important decisions are made early on, while people are "fresh";
- ✓ check with the committee about the time for individual topics before the discussion starts;
- ✓ at the start of each topic, state what outcome is expected (e.g. review a report, make a recommendation) ;
- ✓ manage the time for each item and the meeting in general;
- ✓ encourage long-winded speakers to sum up or focus on key points;
- ✓ when someone strays from the agenda, quickly ask if others want to pursue that topic now or later, and sort out how to do that (e.g. "table" the discussion until later in the meeting, set up a committee to deal with it and report back at the next meeting);
- ✓ use your power and control sensibly to keep participants focused on the issue while allowing reasonable "room" to let people to explore the issue; and
- ✓ keep notes about the arguments and evidence in discussions so that you can summarize and paraphrase positions when the group seems to be stuck or is going around in circles.

To help ensure decisions and recommendations are made:

- ✓ make sure that decisions or recommendations are made;
- ✓ be prepared to summarise discussions and agreements that seem to be there;
- ✓ aim for consensus (i.e. what people can live with);
- ✓ if need be, ask for a motion (i.e. have someone propose the recommendation or agreement as a “mover”, and get someone else to “second” their proposal);
- ✓ try to write the agreement or recommendation on a flip chart or project it from a computer, so everyone can see it before giving approval;
- ✓ ensure recommendations and decisions are clear, name who will do what and set time lines;
- ✓ if taking a vote, be sure that those forced to vote ‘no’ have not been disempowered (e.g. have not been able to have their “say”);
- ✓ consider the consequences of using your power to break a tie;
- ✓ if there is a tie or no consensus, ask those concerned to bring more information to the next meeting, see if changing the proposal makes it more acceptable to everyone, consider setting up a subcommittees to report back ASAP, or allow more discussion (see CP.5 for other ideas);

Finally, the chair needs to pay attention to the person taking minutes. Make sure the note-taker has time to record important points of discussions and proposed agreements, decisions or recommendations.

For more information about chairing meetings, these resources will help:

1. “Skills, strategies and tools, Some specific activities” (Kit 3) in *The Kit: A guide to the advocacy we choose to do. A resource kit for consumers of mental health services and family carers*. Prepared by SPICE Consulting for the Australian Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services. Available on the web at: <http://www.mhca.org.au/Resources/CommunityDevelopment/index.html#TheKit>.
2. *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* (2nd Edition), by Sam Kaner, Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk, Duane Berger. The paperback version is 368 pages and is published by Jossey-Bass. It can be bought at bookstores or borrowed from libraries; it also is available as an “E-book” and can be downloaded (for a price) at <http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0787996416.html>.

