

10 TIPS FOR CREATING INCLUSIVE MEETINGS

Creating an inclusive and positive atmosphere in your meetings will encourage more rich and meaningful discussions.

The target audience for this tip sheet is anyone tasked with facilitating/hosting a meeting, lecture, workshop or the like.

1. BUILD RAPPORT

Begin relationship building with your meeting participants prior to the meeting.

Why? Having informal conversations (e.g., about meeting expectations) will help you adjust the plan of the meeting and give you insight about the communication style of the participants. It may also help participants to feel more comfortable and facilitate contributions during the meeting.

2. BE CLEAR ABOUT THE PURPOSE

Prior to the meeting, make sure participants are clear on the meeting's purpose and what is hoped to be achieved by the end.

Why? Clear notifications and agendas prior will ensure that everyone comes to the meeting with the same background information, reducing the power differential between participants. This makes them feel included when they arrive and thus, as able as everyone else to contribute to discussion.

3. PAY ATTENTION TO ROOM SET-UP

Set-up the room to facilitate eye contact.

Why? Facing one another so that everyone can make eye contact will help with rapport. Having everyone seated at the same level may reduce underlying power differentials between participants and help them to feel more comfortable making contributions to the meeting. Note that eye contact is encouraged in Western culture but may not be in other cultures. Being aware of cultural 'dos and don'ts' is also important.

4. WELCOME YOUR PARTICIPANTS

Greet participants and introduce them to others when they come into the meeting room.

Why? This will create a more comfortable and less silent atmosphere as people walk into the room, helping people to get comfortable with the space and other meeting participants. It also helps to break down power differentials between the facilitator and meeting participants.

5. SET GROUND RULES

Establish with your participants rules for how the meeting will proceed, and make them visible during the meeting.

Why? Discussing and establishing principles at the beginning of the meeting (such as no side conversations, acceptable vs. unacceptable cell phone use, not sharing what is discussed outside the room, etc.) encourages a respectful meeting atmosphere and thus, will help with participant comfort and the quality of discussion. Making the rules visible helps to keep them present in people's minds for the duration of the meeting.

6. ENGAGE PARTICIPANTS EARLY ON

Provide opportunities for interaction early in the meeting.

Why? This can break the ice for participants and set a precedent of participation for the rest of the meeting. Engaging participants in discussion does not have to happen with the entire group altogether; it could involve pairing off to discuss a topic with your neighbour or small group discussions instead.

7. ACTIVELY FACILITATE

Encourage participation by inviting comments and summarizing discussion regularly.

Why? Some individuals may need to feel invited to contribute before they will speak up at a meeting. Others may have misunderstood a participant's point but feel that they are the only one who has not understood and not be willing to question it publicly. Reflecting back what was said ("So what I think I heard you say was... Is that right?") can provide useful clarifications and summaries of discussion.

8. USE DIFFERENT PARTICIPATION METHODS

Round robin and small group discussions can elicit more opinions.

Why? Always using the same style of meeting facilitation can get boring and repeatedly privilege and marginalize certain people. Be diverse in your methods for gathering input. For example, the "round robin" method is when the facilitator goes around in a circle from one person to the next asking for feedback, allowing people the option to pass if needed. Alternatively, those who find it difficult to share their opinions in a large group setting may be more comfortable sharing in small discussions and then have their opinion brought back to the larger group confidentially.

9. USE INCLUSIVE WORDS AND BODY LANGUAGE

Use inclusive language and open body positioning.

Why? Meeting participants come from all walks of life and are part of all different cultures. Being mindful of the words you use will help to not inadvertently offend people (e.g., Saying that you 'won't be like a "Nazi" about the deadline for feedback' may seriously offend a Jewish meeting participant!). Be cognizant of whether you have your back consistently turned to certain meeting participants – they might feel like they are not being included by your body language and/or may have difficulty seeing or hearing key aspects of the meeting.

10. ENABLE ANONYMOUS INPUT

When you need everyone's contributions on a sensitive issue, offer methods for contribution that grant people the privacy they need to honestly share their thoughts.

Why? The purpose here is to create some anonymity while still enabling feedback and rich discussion. For example, ask people to write their opinion or vote on a piece of paper and leave it in a comment jar. The facilitator can either read out all of the comments or review them privately and discuss only the overarching themes seen in the comments.

If you would like a copy of this tip sheet, stop by the ECHA Administration Office (3-394).

Find out more about the Diversity & Inclusion Action Group by searching "Diversity Initiative" at publichealth.ualberta.ca.

This material has been adapted from the results of a workshop hosted by an Edmonton-based Community of Practice for Diversity and Inclusion. The content represents the views of those who advocate for diversity and inclusion in Edmonton, Alberta.



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