2: Teamwork

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2.1 Introduction

Local groups are often full of different personalities with varying availability, interests and skills. Effective teamwork makes tasks inspiring and fun, and gives everyone the chance to fulfil their potential. Perhaps most importantly, strong teamwork helps to ensure the sustainability of your group. The aim of this chapter is to help your group become bigger than the sum of its members.

2.1.1 What’s in this chapter?

This chapter aims to:

- help your group make the most of its members by working on the aspects that are within its control.
- help your group explore how it works as a team.
- provide practical ideas and techniques to help your group develop as a strong, collaborative team.

2.1.2 Case study: team building

These days, South Cheshire Friends of the Earth works well as a team. Group members each have a strong sense of what they’re trying to achieve, and each member contributes to the group’s objectives. The keys to their success are that they make working together effectively a priority, and they are willing to try new things to help them improve. Here are some examples of things that have worked well for the group:

- **January year planning meetings.** Each year, the group takes time to identify upcoming events and reflect on what’s gone well for them in the past. Local events are slotted into a large fold-out Year Planner, which enables group members to “visualise the year ahead”. The Year Planner is brought along to each group meeting so members know what’s coming up.

- **Sharing the role of co-ordinator.** “We’ve got two co-ordinators. I’m campaigns & education co-ordinator and Janet is membership and admin co-ordinator. It really helps. When Janet was sole co-ordinator everyone looked to her even for campaigns I was taking the lead on. By having joint co-ordinators, Janet now has more space to focus on boosting the group’s membership, and the whole group has got used to sharing responsibility around. It’s great when one of us is away on holiday too – everything doesn’t have to stop!” Tania, joint co-ordinator.
2.2 Campaign strategy meetings. Recently the group felt that their activities had become too frenetic and that they were trying to cover too much ground. They organised a campaign strategy day for their group. With the support of an external facilitator, they looked at what they’d achieved and what was most important to them. They agreed two campaign priorities for the following 18 months: Climate Change and Trade. Tania, joint co-ordinator, comments: “We’re a lot more focused as a group now – everything we do relates in some way to one of these issues”.

2.2 What is a team?

Teamwork is central to the good health and success of every local group. But groups are not necessarily teams. Developing and maintaining your team is an on-going process to which your group needs to commit in order to maximise its campaigning effectiveness.

2.2.1 Sustainable and empowering

It’s possible to achieve quite a lot as a Friends of the Earth group with a determined co-ordinator, or a collection of talented individuals working relatively autonomously. But this tends to be a draining and frustrating experience for those involved. Often, the group collapses when key members leave or decide they’ve had enough of taking the lead.

Strong teamwork makes Friends of the Earth activism sustainable. It creates a mutually supportive and motivating environment that supports successful campaigning, and continually develops and empowers its membership.

2.2.2 Team characteristics

Teamworking isn’t always easy, nor is it automatically successful. It’s also not an optional, occasional add-on, or a distraction from the ‘real business’ of campaigning. Teams face challenges and experience tensions, and they require nurturing to keep them healthy. Successful teams tend to have certain things in common. Most have a shared commitment to:

- a clearly defined mission statement or aim (e.g. to campaign for environmental justice);
- a strong process (how you work together) and
- one or more specific objectives (e.g. to get an MP to sign up to support new legislation on climate change within the next six months).

A team’s shared commitment to process and aims is demonstrated through:

- the use of agreed practices and behaviours;
- a willingness to pay attention to group process; and
- a sense of mutual accountability to members as individuals, and to the team as a whole.

“...It’s good to have a mission statement – it brings people together.”

Tania, South Cheshire Friends of the Earth
2.2.3 Team values

Commitment to goals
The whole point of being a team is that you're working towards shared objectives rather than individual ones. The shared objectives will probably include an overall team purpose and objectives.

Commitment to process
If teams are going to work together effectively, they need a shared way of doing things: a way of taking decisions, and agreed practices and behaviours. These needn't be formal. The important thing is that your whole team shares and understands them, and that they work.

Trust between members
Group members need to trust each other. This doesn't mean you all have to be close friends. It does mean you need to be confident of each other's commitment to the team, and to feel able to rely on each other and to be open about your views.

Conflict managed properly
Effective teamwork doesn't mean that everyone agrees with everyone else. Dynamic, successful teams are usually characterised by lively debates and disagreements. But it is important that the 'conflicts' are managed, so that they result in coherent, creative decisions. It's important that team members are:

- able to express and listen to disagreement, and to talk through it;
- prepared to listen to, and respect, different points of view;
- committed to finding the best way to enable the team to reach its goals, rather than focusing on making sure their idea is the one taken forward; and
- willing to implement whatever the team decides, even when the decision isn't the one they advocated.

Accountability
The team needs to carry out the things that have been agreed. Effective teams have a culture of openness, in which members are frank and realistic about the time they can offer, and about their ability to do tasks. They must also feel able to question others if they haven't done what they agreed.

Focus on results
Ultimately, your team has a shared purpose, and needs to focus on achieving its collective objectives. There needs to be a clear, shared understanding of the objectives and the key milestones towards achieving them. Within the context of the team, the objectives must be the highest priority for all members. There must be regular reflection and evaluation of the team’s progress towards its objectives.
2.2.4 **Case study: a shared commitment**

Hammersmith & Fulham Friends of the Earth decided to reassess its campaigns and activities, and put some fun back into them. Co-ordinator Paula White explains:

“A happy group will retain, revitalise and attract new members. We think it’s important that group members enjoy what they do and gain some satisfaction from it. This is particularly important for new members, who may find it difficult to get involved.

“We did a workshop where we all voted on types of activities (for example: days of action, press work, festivals, stalls, youth work, community arts) and types of campaigns. Individually we voted on what we felt a) had the most impact, b) we found most fun, and c) we wanted to do more of. We used the votes to discuss and agree our future approach. The group overwhelming voted for days of action as the most enjoyable. Stalls and marches followed. I think social events are another important factor in making things fun.

“The interesting thing about using a workshop is that it gives people a choice and puts the group in control of what they want to do. I think people are keener to focus on areas in which they have made an active decision to participate.”

2.2.5 **Contrasting approaches**

Here are two fictional examples of group approaches to a Day of Action. They acknowledge that it’s perfectly possible to achieve a lot without working as a team. In fact, you may even achieve the same results in the short term. But is this way of working healthy and fun for all members? And is it sustainable?

**Approach 1: going it alone**

After reading about the Day of Action in Change Your World, Mytown Friends of the Earth co-ordinator Maria attended the training day, ordered an action pack and informed the group that the action was to take place. She asked for volunteers and informed the group that she’d write the press release, unless anyone else was prepared to.

Maria had a hectic evening before the Day of Action. She gave a couple of interviews, worked through the preparations set out in the action guide, got last minute permission from the council to have a stall in the High Street and phoned round her volunteers to remind them to come.

On the Day, Maria struggled off the bus carrying the stall and materials. She was already feeling tired and irritable, and then the volunteers were late arriving. By 12.15pm the stall was set up and a lot of interest from passers-by. There was a lot of talking and persuading to be done. After a couple of hours, Maria wanted to take a break but the others weren’t confident about the campaign, and kept referring questions to her. She felt she should remain at the stall.

By 4pm, Maria was exhausted and decided to call it a day. They’d collected around 130 postcards, which she felt was a good effort. Now she wanted to get home and send out another press release before her headache became unbearable. A couple of the volunteers suggested going to the pub but Maria declined. She was pleased with what she’d achieved but felt burned out. She knew she’d have to step down at the next AGM. But could another member be persuaded to take over, or would the group fold?
When Ourtown Friends of the Earth co-ordinator Carla read about the Climate Day of Action, she knew it would interest the group. When they’d discussed their group priorities at the beginning of the year, climate and GM had been the things they’d agreed to focus on. Sure enough, Lloyd, who subscribed to the climate campaigner network on behalf of the group, sent an email to the group’s planning email list. He let people know about the training day and suggested that the Day of Action should be on the agenda for the next meeting.

At the meeting, Lloyd explained what the Day of Action would entail and how it related to the group’s aims. It was agreed that Lloyd and two newer members would go to the training day. Then the group brainstormed what needed to be done for the Day of Action, and shared out tasks. Ted, who couldn’t make it on the Day, agreed to contact the council for stall permission, and invite the local MP to attend. Jess, who had experience of working with the media, agreed to work with one of the newer members on a press release. Lloyd agreed to order the action pack, and to bring it along on the Day. Carla agreed to bring along the stall and some Friends of the Earth t-shirts.

In the week leading up to the Day of Action, Carla spent a couple of hours helping Ted to identify the correct person at the council to seek permission for the stall. She let Jess know which Friends of the Earth staff could advise her about writing the press release. Two days before the Day, she received a call from Lloyd, who was ringing round to remind everyone and agree arrival times.

On the Day, four people were there as agreed at midday to set up and start promptly. When the MP and the local paper arrived at 2pm, there were six members running the stall. Everyone worked hard and they organised a rota for tea breaks. By 4:30pm, it looked like it might rain so everyone decided to pack up and count the postcards in the pub. Everyone was pleased with the total of 130. Jess agreed to send out another press release. Carla said she would send the postcards to Underwood Street along with some other things she needed to mail.

Case study: practising what we preach

David Babs, capacity building team, Friends of the Earth:

“While working on this handbook, we decided to have a look at how we perform as a team. We used one of our team meetings to work through the Talking Point overleaf. We all scored everything fairly highly and felt we were doing pretty well. But we identified that we needed a clearer sense of our shared objectives and how we are all contributing to them. We agreed to change the structure of future team meetings, so that they are focused on our objectives. We also decided to try new ways of updating each other about our work.”
2.2.7 **Talking point: is your group a team?**

Does your group think of itself as a team? Does it perform as a team? Which team characteristics does your group exhibit? Which could be developed?

**Facilitators:** If your group has nominated you to facilitate this Talking point, you might find it useful to read the section on facilitation skills before getting the group together for the discussion.

Here are some prompts that facilitators could use to help stimulate and guide group discussion.

- **What makes a good team?** Have any members been involved with winning teams? What made those teams successful? Make a list of the characteristics and values that you feel are most important to your team.

- **Compare your list to the team characteristics and values set out earlier in this chapter.** Have you missed anything important? Make a final list.

- **Ask each member to ‘score’ your group against each of the characteristics and values.** (For example, 5 = we do this really well, 1= needs a lot of work.)

- **Add up each set of scores to give an idea of how the group rates itself on each aspect of teamwork.**

- **In pairs, look at the characteristics and values that are important to your group.** Consider what you do now, what you’d like to improve, and how the group might develop.

- **Getting back together as a group, work through the ideas discussed by each pair, discussing options for change and agreeing action points.**
2.3 Team aims

It takes work to develop and maintain focus, especially when there are so many environmental issues and campaigns with which you could potentially get involved. But if everyone is going off on tangents and following their own interests, your group could risk having little impact and lots of wasted effort. Having a clear and agreed understanding of your aims is the starting point for any successful team.

2.3.1 Case study: aim for focus

When South Cheshire Friends of the Earth decided they needed more focus in their activities, they organised a ‘campaign strategy day’ and advertised it to their members as “your opportunity to inspire our campaigns”. They booked a church hall, arranged plentiful supplies of tea and biscuits, and arranged for Mick, an external facilitator, to come and help them with the process.

This is how the day went:

- Tania, campaigns and education co-ordinator gave a 15 minute presentation, setting out the group’s current campaigning activities, and relating them to Friends of the Earth’s national strategic objectives.
- Everyone was given a list of campaign areas, and asked to rank them individually according to what they thought the group should focus on.
- While Mick added up people’s rankings, members considered questions such as “Local or national – what’s most important for you?”, which were written on large sheets of paper stuck on the walls. They wrote their responses on post-it notes, stuck them on the sheets, and read everyone else’s comments.
- Mick talked everyone through the rankings, and after a quick discussion the group agreed to focus on the Climate Change and Trade campaigns.
- Members then broke into two small groups to discuss how their group could approach each of the campaigns e.g. “What are our aims?” “Who are our audience(s)?” “How does this tie in with what we’re already doing?”
- The group shared lunch, which they’d all contributed to, and continued their discussions.

Tania recommends groups arrange some time to come up with their aims. She also recommends getting in a skilled external facilitator to help run the session: “We all had loads of ideas and opinions to contribute, it would have been really difficult for us to facilitate as well. Mick also took notes for us, which were really useful later.”
**2.3.2 Talking point: what are you aiming for?**

What is your group aim? Do all members agree? Your group may find it useful to devote some time to discussing your aims to ensure that everyone understands and shares them.

**Facilitators:** if your group has nominated you to facilitate this Talking point, you might find it useful to read the section on facilitation skills before getting the group together for the discussion.

Here are some prompts that facilitators could use to help stimulate and guide group discussion.

- **Is your group clear about its aims?** *(20 minutes)*
  - Discuss in pairs what you understand your group’s aims to be. *(5 minutes)*
  - Whole group feedback followed by quick discussion. *(15 minutes)*

Does everyone understand, share and agree to your group aim(s)? If not, here’s a suggested process to help you clarify and agree your aim(s).

- **Agree your aims** *(2 hours)*
  - Introduction. Facilitator describes the objectives of the meeting and states the group purpose, if you have one. *(5 minutes)*
  - Brainstorm: What do we want to achieve in the next six months / year? *(15 minutes)*
  - Discuss the brainstorm and make sure everyone is clear about what each idea means. *(5 minutes)*
  - Working in pairs, discuss the brainstorm ideas and shortlist your ‘top two priorities for the group’. *(15 minutes)*
  - As a group, write up the “top 2s” as a shortlist. *(15 minutes)*
  - Open discussion about the shortlist. What do people prefer? Are there concerns? How long would each option take? *(30 minutes)*
  - Each person sticks dots on their favourite two options on the shortlist. *(10 minutes)*
  - Choose up to three final options, depending on the size and capacity of your group. *(20 minutes)*
  - Write down your chosen option(s). This is your aim. *(5 minutes)*

Depending on how much time and energy you’ve got left, you could now break down your aim into activities and write your SMART objectives.
2.4 Team communication

Good communications, both within and between meetings, are key to your group’s development as a strong team. In a strong group, all members are able to state their points of view and share information. They are also able to engage with, and understand, the views and information offered by other team members. Here are three ways to help your team communicate effectively within and between meetings.

2.4.1 Face to face communication

Active listening is a structured form of listening and responding that focuses the attention on the speaker. First, the speaker makes their point while the other person listens with their full attention. Then the listener states, using their own words, what they think the speaker has said. This enables the speaker to find out whether the listener heard and understood.

2.4.2 Email systems

When used properly, email is a useful means of communicating between meetings, and with group members who can’t attend meetings. It’s quick, free, and accessible to a large majority of people through public libraries, home computers and cafes. However, used inappropriately email can be time-consuming and contentious. Here are some tips to make email work for you.

Just like meetings, email communication relies or shared expectations of how it will be used. Common groundrules:

- Reply to messages which request a response, if only to say you’ve read the message and have nothing to add.
- Writing in CAPITALS can seem aggressive and should be avoided.
- The ‘subject’ line of the email should tell people what the email is about.
- Effort should be taken to structure emails clearly and concisely.
- Personal criticism is best given face-to-face or by phone.
- Emails should be relevant to the purpose of the list.
- Strong language should be avoided.
Email lists

Rather than copying lots of people into emails, many groups find it helpful to set up email lists. You communicate with the group of people subscribed to the list by sending an email to just one address. The most important thing is that everyone is clear what the lists are for, respects their purpose and uses them appropriately. Email lists usually have the advantage of a range of optional settings, which customise the list to the groups needs, for example:

- Allowing people to subscribe themselves automatically online.
- Offering a web archive of past correspondence.
- Restricting who may post messages without the permission of a moderator.

The most common email list structure used by small to medium sized local campaigning groups is to have two lists: Planning and Announcements. The Planning list includes core group members and is a key method of communicating about group business between meetings. This list will generate a lot of emails.

The Announcement list includes anyone who wants to be kept up to date with the group’s activities but doesn’t want to receive lots of ‘business’ emails. This list might include members, supporters and representatives of other local organisations. Only specified people will be allowed to email unmoderated messages to the list. Specific types of message are permitted, such as the newsletter, meeting reminders, and news of forthcoming campaigning events. This list will probably only generate one or two emails a month.

Email list services

Several Internet providers offer free email list services. We know of two that are currently being used by local groups: http://groups.yahoo.com and http://lists.riseup.net (run by a not-for-profit organisation catering for activists and community groups).

2.4.3 Telephone systems

The advantage of the telephone over email is that you can feel more confident that someone has actually heard your message, and you can get an immediate response.

The ring-round

The ring-round is the simplest way of communicating to a group by phone. The person who has a message to communicate calls everyone who needs to receive it. This is simple and doesn’t require any preparation or complex systems. But if there are more than ten people to call, this places quite a burden on the person doing the ringing round.

The phone tree

The phone tree, which spreads the burden of making the calls, may be more practical when there are large groups of people to ring. A phone tree is a prearranged, pyramid-shaped system that enables a group of people to communicate a message by telephone in a systematic way. This system can spread a brief message quickly and efficiently to a large number of people. It can be used in conjunction with email to reinforce a message and encourage participation, for example to remind people to come to a meeting or action.

A simple phone tree will have three levels of roles. A phone tree co-ordinator initiates contact by calling each member of the key group. Co-ordinators need to make sure their message is relevant to the purpose of the tree, clear and precise. They will also probably have responsibility
for maintaining the phone tree, ensuring it is kept up to date. They will have details of all the people on the tree. If one of the key group members can’t be contacted, they will act to fill the gap.

The phone tree key group will each have list of the phone tree members they need to call. They will carefully pass on the message given to them by the co-ordinator, and report back to the co-ordinator once they’ve completed all their calls. They need to persevere in getting through to everyone, and be careful to get the message right. If a phone tree involves more than about forty people, it will probably need an extra level in the pyramid.

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<th>Key member B</th>
<th>Key member C</th>
<th>Key member D</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sue: 784 5289</td>
<td>James: 935 2262</td>
<td>Robin: 280 5536</td>
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<td>Alex: 784 5290</td>
<td>Pat: 296 3889</td>
<td>Peter: 357 9278</td>
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### 2.5 Team skills

This section considers some of the key skills that a team needs in order to be able to function effectively, successfully and happily. It offers practical ideas and tools for you to adapt to suit your group.

#### 2.5.1 Key skill: objective setting

Even if everyone is clear about the group’s overall aim(s), this probably won’t be enough to focus your group so that it can work effectively. Aspirations such as “We want to save the planet” or “We will help provide solutions to environmental problems and make life better for our community” are too broad and long-term to provide focus. So it makes sense to break down your group’s purpose into tangible, shared objectives.

Your group needs collective commitment in order to achieve its objectives. And if everyone has participated in the decision-making and feels that they ‘own’ the objectives, they are more likely to commit to achieving them. Allow time to develop a process that gives everyone a chance to discuss, develop and prioritise your group objectives.
You may well get your council to vote to go GM-free if this is the only thing your group is focusing on for the next six months. But this large objective seems less achievable if you’re setting yourselves two others to work on at the same time. Prioritising necessarily means postponing or discarding some activities in order to focus your team’s energy on achieving the required results. This is good for your team and good for the environment.

Once you agree your objectives as a team, make sure everyone refers to them on a regular basis. Write them down and have them present at every meeting. Explain them to newcomers.

Agreeing and focusing on objectives doesn’t mean sacrificing flexibility. Campaigning often demands responding to events, and seizing opportunities that come up. If external events demand a change of direction or focus, even temporarily, you can make a conscious team decision to re-focus. Having objectives will mean your group can seize and take advantage of opportunities, rather than being buffeted by external events.

To be workable and effective, objectives must be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time based).

**Specific**: is your objective an observable action, behaviour or achievement that is linked to a rate, number, percentage or frequency? A good way to check is to ask yourselves “will we know when we’ve achieved this?”

This is not specific: “Our objective is to promote cycling to work.”

This is specific: “Our objective is to persuade 20 per cent of our friends to try cycling to work at least once.”

**Measurable**: how you will monitor and record the specific behaviour, action or achievement?

**Achievable**: The objective must be realistic given your time and resources, and the context of your campaign.

**Realistic**: your objective must be realistic given people’s circumstances, skills and knowledge. It should be set and agreed by the people involved. It should be ‘owned’ by the people involved.

**Time based**: the objective must have a start date and a deadline for completion.

Working together as a team means members contributing in different ways towards common goals. Inevitably, people’s skills and aptitudes, availability, and level of commitment will vary. In a healthy team, members are offered varied opportunities to contribute to group objectives, and all contributions are recognised. There isn’t an ‘off-the-shelf’ formula for task-sharing and delegating but here are some ideas that usually work:

The more participatory the process by which you decide upon action points, jobs, and responsibilities, the more team members will feel they have a stake in decisions. So they are more likely to contribute to getting the job done.
Make sure everyone understands how a task will help the team achieve its goals. If people know its importance, they are more likely to feel personally committed to doing it. If you’re struggling to explain the task’s significance, consider whether it really needs to be done.

Don’t assume everyone understands what a task or a responsibility entails. Provide details of tasks and roles, what they involve, and how long they are likely to take.

It’s important to include everyone. Look for opportunities to split roles and responsibilities into specific tasks, which can then be shared out. For example, one member could take overall responsibility for co-ordinating a group stall, and other team members could take on specific tasks such as contacting the police for permission, distributing publicity leaflets, or inviting your MP to attend.

If a team member lacks confidence, suggest they help the project co-ordinator or take on joint responsibility for a task with a more experienced member. Providing mentoring or coaching will build team skills and help ensure that more people are available to take on tasks in the future. Make sure members are aware of the support that’s available to them and know of opportunities to develop new skills.

There is support available within your activist community. For example, Friends of the Earth’s support for group members includes:

- campaigner information networks
- training days in campaigning and organising skills
- training days in campaign issues
- ‘How to’ guides
- phone advice from the capacity building team

If members can’t cover all the tasks, your team needs to reconsider its objectives. Perhaps you don’t collectively have the time to do what you all think is necessary to achieve your objectives? Or the team isn’t sufficiently committed to the objectives? Either way, the objectives aren’t SMART because they aren’t achievable.

Meetings are key to your group’s development and success as a team. They are the main space in which team members are integrated, information shared, decisions made and tasks allocated. It will be of huge benefit to your group if members devote some time and effort to ensure your meetings work.

The facilitator, or chair, has overall responsibility for ensuring that a meeting works. The titles of ‘facilitator’ and ‘chair’ come from different ideological traditions and approaches but are often used interchangeably. This Handbook refers to the ‘facilitator’ but the advice also applies to groups who prefer to describe the role as a ‘chair’.
Team values

What are your aims?

Within a voluntary group attempting to work as team, it is vital to see facilitation as a position of responsibility rather than a position of power. The facilitator attempts to make the meeting work for the team as a whole. The aim is to assist members in keeping to agreed meeting processes and making sound decisions. An approach based on domination or manipulation will undermine the team, and is usually doomed to failure. There's simply no point trying to force volunteers to do things they don’t want to do; they probably won’t do it and next time they may not turn up at all.

Here are the main things a facilitator needs to think about before, during and after a meeting. Not all these tasks need necessarily actually be done by the facilitator (see delegation section) but it does make sense to have one person who's responsible for ensuring they all get done.

Successful meetings require preparation and planning. Here are the key things to think about:

Meeting space. The venue might need to be booked. It’s worth thinking about how you can make best use of the meeting space. Arranging chairs in a circle works well as everyone can see each other and there is no physical hierarchy. Make sure the venue is light, airy and quiet, and that there are enough refreshments to suit the meeting.

Date and timings need to be agreed and communicated so everyone knows in advance when the meeting will begin and end.

Publicise the meeting. This may include sending a reminder to the group email list, placing an item in the newsletter, ringing each member, or putting a notice in the local paper.

Prepare an agenda to suit the time available. Work with members to identify and prioritise agenda items, and then allocate time to them. It usually makes sense to develop a draft agenda, which is then finalised and agreed by the group at the start of the meeting.

Think about the facilitation tools and techniques you could employ to help the meeting work well. There are some examples later in this section.

The facilitator’s aim is to run the meeting so that it exhibits the characteristics set out at the beginning of this chapter: Commitment to the group’s process and goals, Trust between group members, Conflict managed properly, Mutual accountability, and Focus on results.

Establish and maintain norms of behaviour. It will often fall to the facilitator to remind people how the group wishes everyone to behave during a meeting.

Focus on the team’s aims and objectives. Any action group comes together because of a shared belief in the need to make change. This is your common ground.

Bring out and resolve conflict. It can be the role of the facilitator to attempt to bring conflict into the open, restating differing opinions to ensure they are recognised and understood, then encouraging the group to work through them. Managing conflict constructively is usually far easier if you’re also encouraging the group to remember its aims and objectives. This common ground should hold the group together in times of tension.
Encourage participation. A good meeting includes and involves all members. The facilitator's role is to notice who speaks and who doesn't. Quiet or shy people may need encouragement, and you may need to reign in a member who is dominating a meeting. The facilitator needs to be especially sensitive to any imbalances based on age, ethnicity, or gender, and work with the group to redress them.

Keep to the agenda. Once the group has agreed an agenda, it's important to stick to it. The facilitator may have to bring rambling discussion back to an agenda item, or stop members starting on the next item before the previous one is resolved.

Rework the agenda. Sometimes the group needs to alter the agenda. Urgent items may suddenly emerge, or an important item may demand more time to allow full discussion. The facilitator works with the group to rearrange the agenda, moving less immediate items to another meeting. It is bad practice to allow meetings to run over the allotted time as people may have fixed arrangements such as transport or childcare. If your group meetings regularly overrun, some people will stop attending.

Bring out ideas and proposals. Look for areas of agreement and clear proposals for action. Make sure they are given a proper hearing and the whole group understands them.

Test for agreement. Often it will fall to the facilitator to notice that the group is nearing agreement and can make a decision. Teams often waste time talking around ideas which they largely agree on. It's worth presenting the group with the ideas you're hearing and asking for a sign of agreement or disagreement. If you get a clear indication either way, ask a member to present a proposal for action to the group for adoption.

Record decisions and action points. It's easy for the group to move on and forget something has been agreed. Or to agree an action point but not discuss who is doing it. The facilitator makes sure all decisions and action points are recorded, and checks that each item is finalised before moving onto the next.

Evaluate the meeting. The facilitator can work with the rest of the group for a few minutes at the end of the meeting to reflect on how it went, find out what could have worked better, and what lessons need learning (for the facilitator and for the group) for next time.

Follow-up is an important part of facilitation. All members need to know what was discussed and agreed. The facilitator of the next meeting needs to follow-up any action points or outstanding items.

Circulate decisions and action points. Make sure everyone knows what's been decided, what they need to do, and when the next meeting is.

Ensure evaluation lessons from last time are acted upon. If the group agreed some learning points at the end of the meeting, make sure they are implemented. If the facilitation role rotates between members, liaise with the person who is facilitating the next meeting.
Here are some of the most common tools and techniques used by facilitators. The margin notes show how each tool is best used.

> **A written agenda** is key to structuring and focusing the meeting. Once agreed by the group, the agenda gives you a mandate to remind everyone to stay focused when they talk off subject. Ensure the agenda is visible during the meeting by distributing copies or writing it on a flipchart.

> **Ground rules.** A set of norms of behaviour, which are discussed and agreed by the whole group. For example, your group might have a ‘no interrupting’ rule. The facilitator can then say, “We agreed that we wouldn’t interrupt each other. Is everyone still happy that we try to abide by that rule?”. It’s more effective than barking “stop interrupting!”.

> **Active agreement** is a useful ground rule. Everyone agrees to take an active part in making decisions. When the group is asked a question or has to make a decision, the facilitator insists on active dis/agreement. This can be done through a hand signal.

> **Hand signals** can help meetings run smoothly, make it easier for everyone to contribute, and give the facilitator a chance to see emerging agreements and common ground. The most basic and essential hand signal is raising a hand or finger to show you want to speak. Some groups also use ‘two hands for a directly relevant point’, and showing a hand with fingers pointing up to indicate agreement or down to indicate disagreement.

> **Flip charts**, or big sheets of paper, can help a group to focus on a specific agenda item or problem. They are also good for gathering brainstorm ideas and for making sure the group has a shared understanding of something.

> **Throwing it back to the group.** Your key asset as a facilitator is the group you are working with. If you find yourself stuck for an idea on how to move things on, or what process to employ, ask the group. This isn’t a cop out – it’s the best tool you have.

> **Checking with the group.** Regularly ask how members are feeling, whether they need a break, or want to modify the agenda. You are there to serve the group and checking encourages a sense of ownership among members.

> **Sharing roles within the group.** As with any other area of responsibility within a team, it may make sense to break the tasks down and share them out among members. The facilitator has overall responsibility for supporting and co-ordinating members to ensure all the tasks get done in a given time. Tasks that could be shared include:

- **Co-facilitator** to step in if the facilitator is flagging or wants to take a position in a discussion.
- **Keeping notes** of key decisions, who’s doing what, and when.
- **Mood watching** to let facilitator know if there are rising tensions, a general lack of focus, flagging energy.
- **Meeter-and-greeter** to welcome members, especially newcomers, and check they know what the meeting is for, group processes.
- **Timekeeping** to make sure each agenda item gets its allotted time, and that the meeting finishes at the agreed time.
- **Jargon-bust** terms and acronyms to make the meeting accessible to all attendees.
- **Mingler** to make sure newcomers are integrated into social meetings.

- **Brainstorms.** This is an excellent way to get the creative juices flowing. Members shout out ideas without fear of comment or criticism. All thoughts are recorded on a large piece of paper visible to the group. Brainstorms often work best in combination with more analytical tools such as small groups, go-rounds or prioritising.

- **Prioritising** through giving people a certain number of dots to stick/draw by a list of ideas can help focus a group on the ideas/problems/campaigns they think are most important.

- **Go-rounds** are where everyone in turn is given the same time to speak uninterrupted and without comment or criticism.

- **Reframing a point** shows people that they have been listened to. It means listening carefully to what someone says, then stating it succinctly in your own words to check you have understood their point. It's a useful tool for clarifying and moving forward discussion. Personalise your statements by starting "it sounds to me like what you're saying is..." and check back with the person whose point you've re-frame to ensure they are happy with how you've presented it.

- **Breaking into small groups** can encourage shyer members to speak up. Their views can then be fed back to the rest of the group. Using small groups can also break up negative dynamics and encourage people to listen to different perspectives. They can also save time.

- **'Think and listens'**: Members get into pairs. One speaks and the other listens for between 30 seconds and a few minutes, depending on the issue. They then swap. Pairs then feedback their opinions to the whole group. This can be useful for developing ideas and boosting confidence.

- **Speakers list (stacking)**. The facilitator notes member’s names as they indicate they want to speak, then invites them to speak in that order. Groups quickly become impatient with any members who frequently ignore this protocol and interrupt.

- **Icebreakers & games** can lift energy levels and the general mood, helping make the meeting re-focus and be more productive. They can also encourage people to feel more comfortable and more willing to participate constructively. Beware of games that make people feel self-conscious or excluded.

- **Note-taking.** It is vital for someone to record what’s decided and what jobs need doing, so that your meeting leads to action.

- **Taking a break** can actually save you time as people have a chance to collect their thoughts and re-focus. A break can also allow the facilitator to plan a new approach.
New voices. If the same few members start to dominate the discussion, say that you’ll prioritise contributions from people who haven’t yet spoken. Avoid doing this in a way that puts shy, quiet members ‘on the spot’ and never pressure someone to speak up.

Key skill: decision-making

Because groups depend on shared objectives, it’s vital that you are able to make decisions as a team. There are many decision-making models, or processes, each of which has strengths and weaknesses. Your team needs to find one that works for you.

Using a decision-making process doesn’t mean you are always looking for compromises. It means making decisions that work for the whole group, which people can commit to even if they didn’t personally advocate them. Decision-making is sometimes hard work and contentious. But the worst thing a group can do is to fudge or avoid taking difficult decisions.

You need a process that brings out and clarifies different ideas, explores their strengths and weaknesses, and leaves people feeling that their differing opinions have been valued. In a facilitated meeting this can often happen informally. During the course of a well-structured discussion, decisions emerge that everyone is happy with.

Sometimes, especially with big or controversial decisions, it’s important that there is a formal process, which everyone understands and is committed to. It can cause problems if the process isn’t agreed in advance as people may start thinking tactically about which process is most likely to get them the decision they want.

Here are the three formal decision-making models that are most commonly used by local groups:

- **Majority voting:** vote taken on proposal. If majority vote in favour, proposal is adopted
  - **Strengths:** clear and familiar to most people
  - **Weaknesses:** adversarial, conflictual. Can upset the minority. Ultimately everyone needs to commit, yet just under half could be bitterly opposed. Can force tactical fudges, generate factions.
  - **Use:** depends a bit on the issue. Obvious advantages for practical decisions like when to hold a stall. Risky for big decisions about priorities.

- **Qualified majority voting:** similar to majority voting but requires a specific ratio of members to vote in favour than just a simple majority (e.g. two-thirds).
  - **Strengths:** similar to majority voting but with more emphasis on finding decisions which appeal to most group members. Some groups use this for bigger decisions e.g. for changes to long-term policy or amendments to their constitution.
  - **Weaknesses:** as with majority voting. In addition, the requirement for a larger majority can make it more difficult to take decisions because a minority could block the rest of the group.
Consensus decision-making: all members have the right to amend, stand aside from, or block decisions. In return, they are expected to place deciding what is best for the group before any personal preferences.

**Strengths:** Orientated towards generating whole team commitment and focus, and producing decisions which have been carefully considered and developed by the whole group. Avoids adversarial discussions and the marginalisation of minorities.

**Weaknesses:** Effective consensus decision making depends upon skilled facilitation and members being familiar with the process. Most people are not familiar with consensus decision-making, so can be confusing to newcomers if not properly explained.

**Use:** many groups using consensus restrict the circumstances when an individual may use their ‘block’, for example to cases where the safety, viability or unity of the group may be jeopardised.

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**2.5.5 Key skill: active listening**

Good communications, both within and between meetings, are key to your group’s development as a strong team. In a strong group, all members are able to state their points of view and share information. They are also able to engage with, and understand, the views and information offered by other team members. Active listening is one of the key skills of a healthy team.

**Why listen?**

Good communication relies on everyone working together to try to understand each other. This may sound obvious in theory, but it’s common for people within groups not to listen properly to what each other is saying. There may many different reasons for this, including:

- You’re distracted, half listening, half thinking about something else.
- You’re in a disagreement, and are busy formulating a response to what you think is being said.
- You’ve got preconceptions about this person’s point of view or background, and assume you know what they’re going to say.

**What is active listening?**

Active listening is a structured form of listening and responding that focuses the attention on the speaker. First, the speaker makes their point while the other person listens with their full attention. Then the listener states, using their own words, what they think the speaker has said. (The listener simply aims to state what they heard, and does not have to agree.)

This enables the speaker to find out whether the listener heard and understood. The active listener should aim to be sensitive the speaker's feelings as well as their words. For example, their effort at re-stating might include “I gather that you felt angry or frustrated or confused when…”

Active listening can be used in a whole discussion or an individual contribution. It can assist in bringing out areas of agreement and conflict. It can help to ensure all participants have a shared understanding of proceedings and enabling a group to focus.
What are the benefits of active listening?

- It encourages people to listen attentively to others, which can help promote shared learning and understanding.
- It prevents misunderstandings, as people have to confirm that they do really understand what another person has said.
- It tends to open people up, and get them to say more. If each person feels that the other wants to listen, they are likely to explain in detail what they feel and why. If parties in a conflict or disagreement do this, there is a greater chance of being able to develop a solution to their mutual problem.

Tips for active listening

- Focus on what’s being said, not on preparing your response.
- Think about the speaker’s underlying meaning – what are they getting at?
- Be attuned to the speaker’s emotions and body language, and be ready to acknowledge what they are feeling.
- Look at the person who’s speaking – make sure they know you’re listening.
- When you say what you think you heard, give the speaker a chance to correct or comment. Don’t assume you’ve got it right first time.