

Focus

STAY FOCUSED AS A PARTICIPANT BY BEING PREPARED AND THROUGH ACTIVE LISTENING AND INVOLVEMENT

We have emphasized the roles of initiator, timekeeper, recorder, and especially the facilitator in keeping a meeting focused on its purpose and agenda. What about participants? If participants stay involved in the meeting, the work of every other role is much easier. In many respects, the responsibilities of participants are the most important. Here are some ways for you to prepare as a participant of any meeting:

- ⇒ Read and absorb materials sent in advance to review.
- ⇒ Prepare a point of view on key issues—develop questions, ideas, and opinions for the group to consider.
- ⇒ Determine your goals for the meeting. What do you want to accomplish in the meeting? How will the information or decisions impact your area of responsibility?
- ⇒ Take the meeting seriously. Show up on time, and stay involved throughout the meeting. If you have other pressing priorities (and who doesn't?), set them aside for the time of the meeting. Be respectful of others by turning off your cell phone, PDA, computer, or other devices.
- ⇒ Practice active listening during the meeting by concentrating on speakers with your eyes, giving visual and verbal response, and fully responding to what is going on.
- ⇒ When you voice an opinion or concern, know where you are going before you start. Make sure your comments are relevant to the subject being discussed. Don't chime in just to hear yourself talk!
- ⇒ Learn and practice skills that help maintain group harmony or keep the group on track. (See Chapter 6 for more details.)

MAKE MEETINGS MATTER

ADDITIONAL IDEAS FOR KEEPING MEETINGS FOCUSED

Get in the habit of starting meetings on time. It sends a signal that you respect everyone's time, and sets the right tone for focused, effective meetings. You may have to start with several people not present when you decide to initiate this ground rule. After a few times, most people will make the effort to show up on time. Consider starting at an unusual time, such as 9:13 a.m. or 1:41 p.m. When you start precisely at the announced time, people will get the idea.

One board on which I served held its meetings in members' homes. Because of this, the members spent the first 15 minutes or so of each meeting socializing. Rather than discontinue the social time, we simply established that the social period began at 7 p.m. and started the meeting at 7:15. It worked.

Establish the ground rule of "only one meeting—no side conversations." This helps to keep everyone focused on the topic at hand.

Take a progress check midway through the meeting. Recap agenda items covered, and those remaining. Make any mid-course corrections to keep the meeting focused and accomplish the purpose. The facilitator should do this anytime he or she senses the group needs to get refocused on the purpose of the meeting.

If people arrive after the meeting has begun, refer them to the group notes to get up to date on what has transpired. If you stop the meeting to inform latecomers, it might reinforce their behavior. The simple act of starting every meeting on time will go a long way to discourage latecomers.

In training meetings, stop after a block of information has been covered, usually about 20 minutes or so. Go around the room and ask participants to recap one or two things they learned that will be most helpful to them. This "group summary" will reinforce the learning, and let the trainer know what is being retained. It will also provide a launching point to focus the next training segment.