



PALM BEACH COUNTY
OFFICE OF COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION

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Palm Beach County
Board of County Commissioners

RESIDENT EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM



MODULE 2 PRODUCTIVE COMMUNICATION AND MEETINGS



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Introduction

The basis of all human interaction is communication, but almost all disagreements or conflicts arise from miscommunication. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where what you said was misconstrued by the listener? Your first reaction might have been surprise. Most people think they are good communicators. However, given the number of misunderstandings among people, it can be safely said that most of us can stand to improve our communication skills. Weak communication skills can hinder the progress of your community efforts and/or your organization.

As community leaders, you will be communicating with a wide variety of people. The more you are able to listen and effectively communicate with others, the more successful you will be as a leader. This module will provide you with concrete methods to improve your communication skills, which should prove to be very useful in your community work and in your personal life to both reduce conflict and promote harmony.

This module will also provide you with tools to help you conduct effective meetings that lead to positive actions and outcomes. Examples of meeting agendas are included to help you get started with your meetings. Also included are examples of meeting minutes so you can create your own template for your own minutes.

What is Communication?

We communicate to inform, persuade, raise awareness, understand, generate interest and motivate people to act. We communicate through various ways: in print, verbally and through our body language.

The Written Word

When we think of communication, we often just think of talking. However, there are many ways to communicate in writing, such as social media, text, e-mails, newsletters, fliers, etc. In today's world, we often find ourselves communicating in short bursts on our phones. Because tone and pitch of the writers' voice is absent and so is body language, these messages can easily be misunderstood

Take a minute to consider your audience and how your message could be received before sending out e-mails, fliers, etc. Consider editing your communication as needed to remove anything that could be misconstrued. Make sure that your message is clear and understandable. Remember that while it may be clear to you, it may not be to others. If unsure, ask someone to read your message before you send it out.

Face-to-Face Interaction

Many things come into play when we interact with people directly. These interactions can take the form of one-on-one meetings, group meetings, presentations and informal meetings. What happens during these interactions determines what we get out of these meetings.

First, there are the words spoken during the exchange. Many people feel that words are the only aspect of communication. In fact, studies show that up to 80% of communication among individuals is non-verbal. This means a person's body language, the tone and pitch of their voice, and their facial expression. All of these elements contribute to our understanding of what a person is saying. Have you ever asked someone how are they are doing? Their verbal response may be "fine" but the tone, pitch and body language may convey an entirely different message. It is important as a listener that your body language express that you are open to the speakers' message. To do this, keep your body relaxed and your facial expression neutral.

Active Listening

Most people think that they are good listeners and do not need to improve their skills. In reality, not many people are good listeners and that leads to increased conflict from miscommunication. Listening is a gift of yourself to the speaker. It also conveys respect for the speaker.

In today's rapid paced communication, much information and understanding are lost along with opportunities to come together in mutual respect and compassion. Listening is the key to getting along with people you both agree and disagree with.

How are your listening skills? Rate yourself honestly in this quiz.

ARE YOU LISTENING?

How would you rate your listening skills?	Above Average	Average	Below Average
Compared to other people, my listening skills are:			

How well do you listen? Be Honest!	Always or Nearly Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never or Hardly Ever
I am often thinking of something witty to say in response while listening.					
When communicating with others, I pay attention to non-verbal signals- body language, facial expressions and gestures.					
I decide whether or not to listen based on the speaker's appearance and how they talk.					
I nod my head and use other gestures and facial expressions to show that I am interested in what is begin said.					
I offer verbal signals while listening, like, 'Go on....' or 'Uh huh' to encourage the speaker to continue.					
I finish other people's sentences when they pause.					
When I have something to contribute to a conversation, I will interrupt to make my point.					
I often feel that I want to have the last word on a subject.					
I get easily bored with most conversations.					
I sit with my legs and arms crossed when listening.					
I interrupt to speak if I disagree with what they are saying.					
I make eye contact with the speaker while I'm listening.					
TOTAL OF EACH COLUMN					

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Tips to Help You Become a Better Listener

So how do we become active listeners? First, we have to remember that hearing alone is not enough. We also must understand the emotions of the speaker. Your tone of voice, pitch and

body language convey your emotions. To make sure you are receiving the speakers' message, correctly practice the following skills:

- **Fully focus on the speaker** – Avoid thinking of how you will respond. Maintain eye contact.
- **Use your right ear** - To help you “hear” better favor your right ear. The left side of the brain is the primary processing center for speech, comprehension and emotions. Your right ear is your listening ear. The left side of the brain is connected to the right side of the body therefore; your right ear is your listening ear.
- **Acknowledge your interest** - Occasionally nod or provide a small comment like “yes” or “uh huh”.
- **Make sure your posture is open** – Do not cross your arms or legs.
- **Let the speaker finish** – Do not interrupt or change your body language.
- **Reserve judgement** – We often have to communicate with people we do not necessarily like or agree with. In order to fully understand them, you need to set aside judgement. Do not shake your head or make dismissive sounds. The most difficult communication, when successfully executed, can lead to a positive connection.
- **Clarify** – If you are having difficulty in getting the gist of what the speaker is saying, paraphrase – “What I’m hearing is...” for example. Ask questions to further clarify what they are saying.
- **Sensitivity** – People of different gender, ages and cultural backgrounds communicate differently. Also, be aware of the speakers’ potential situation. Could they be under financial or family stress? Could there be something else? If so, understand they may not be able to communicate as they normally would.
- **Stay Calm** – This is especially important during a disagreement. Staying calm also helps to calm the other person. Generally, it only takes one person to bring down the level of stress during a difficult discussion.

Utilizing these skills will help to make all of your communication exchanges more satisfying and productive. Listening is the gift you give others.

“When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen, you may learn something new.”

Dalai Lama

Communicating in a Multi-Cultural Community

Many neighborhoods in Palm Beach County have residents from all over the world. These residents bring their unique values, customs, language, foods and approach to communication; in other words, their culture. Culture is often at the root of communication challenges. Our culture influences how we approach problems and how we participate in groups and in communities. When we participate in groups, we are often surprised at how differently people approach things.

Culture refers to a group or community with which we share common experiences that shape the way we understand the world. It includes groups that we are born into, such as gender, race, or national origin. We can also acquire a new culture by moving to a new country, changing our economic status, or by becoming disabled.¹

Anthropologists Avruch and Black have noted that, "when faced by an interaction that we do not understand, people tend to interpret the others involved as 'abnormal, weird, or wrong'." It is important that we learn to control the human tendency to translate "different from me" into "less than me." We can learn to collaborate across cultural lines as individuals and as a society. Becoming more aware of our cultural differences and exploring our similarities, can help us communicate with each other more effectively. In addition, talking with people different from ourselves gives us hope and energizes us to take on the challenge of improving our communities.²

Guidelines for Multicultural Communication and Collaboration

As you work on multicultural collaboration in your community, keep these guidelines in mind:

- Learn from generalizations about other cultures, but do not use those generalizations to stereotype, write off, or oversimplify your ideas about another person. Practice, practice, practice.
- Do not assume that your way is the right way to communicate. Keep questioning your assumptions about the "right way" to communicate. For example, think about your body language, postures that indicate receptivity in one culture, might indicate aggressiveness in another.
- Do not assume that breakdowns in communication occur because other people are not communicating "correctly". Search for ways to make the communication work, rather than looking for who should receive the blame for the breakdown.
- Listen actively and empathetically. Try to put yourself in the other person's shoes, especially when another person's perceptions or ideas are different from your own.

¹ DuPraw, Marcelle and and Marya Axner, **Working on Common Cross-cultural Communication Challenges**, A More Perfect Union, PBS Online

² Avruch, Kevin and Peter Black, "Conflict Resolution in Intercultural Settings: Problems and Prospects," in **Conflict Resolution Theory and Practice: Integration and Application**, edited by Dennis Sandole and Hugo van der Merwe. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.

- Respect others' choices about whether to engage in communication with you. Honor their opinions about what is going on. Use this as an opportunity to develop an understanding from "the other's" point of view, rather than getting defensive or impatient.
- Remember that cultural norms may not apply to the behavior of any particular individual. Humans are shaped by many factors - our values, ethnic or cultural background, our family, our education and our personalities and this informs our communication styles.

Meetings

Types of Meetings

Neighborhood groups or organizations hold various types of meetings. Using the right meeting for the right reason is important. Understanding the purpose of each type of meeting will help you delegate duties and have efficient and effective meetings.

- **Board meetings** - Board meetings are held by the elected officers of the organization to make decisions about issues affecting the organizations mission. They are generally held once a month if there are decisions to be made, and include the board of the organization. Board meetings should have a clear agenda and action minutes to summarize the outcome of the meetings and any follow up needed. Minutes provide a record of Board actions and a great resource for future reference. Minutes are often required when applying for grants with local government and foundations.
- **Resident Meetings** – All residents are invited to these meetings. These meetings are typically held to provide information on issues and projects, discuss items of concerns and/or reach consensus on community issues or actions to address them. One of the important reasons for a resident meeting is to vote on the slate of nominees for the Board.
- **Ad Hoc Committees** – Ad Hoc committees are set up to deal with a one-time issue or project. An example of this would be to determine if streetlights are needed in all or portions of the neighborhood. Members of this type of ad hoc committee would note on a map where additional lighting is needed and make a recommendation to the Board on the desired pole locations. Once they have completed their work, the committee disbands.
- **Subcommittees** – In neighborhood organizations, it is useful to have subcommittees to divide and distribute the workload. Some examples of subcommittees are event planning, grant, outreach and Crime Watch.

Planning Effective Meetings

Have you ever been to a meeting and said to yourself, “Why did I take my valuable time to attend this meeting?” Having a meeting simply to have a meeting is a waste of everyone’s time. The problem is that decisions are rarely made in meetings. Instead, there is a lot of talk and then when the meeting ends everyone rushes out the door. Often, there is no time to clarify

outcomes or commitment to next steps. As a result, most meetings feel like a complete waste of time and a drain on our energy. Make sure you have a reason for your meetings.

There are generally three reasons to hold a meeting.

1. **To gather and share information** – This is the most common and compelling reason to hold a meeting. An example is to give an update on a project or program. Make sure you have gathered as much information on the project as you can or have someone with detailed knowledge of the project to make a presentation. Be prepared for questions from attendees and make sure the discussion is pertinent to the topic. Residents, members of subcommittees and Board members may be a great source to provide input about a project.
2. **To make decisions** – An active neighborhood organization will have many decisions to make. Developing a slate of board positions and voting on them is just one example. Residents voting for Board members gives the Board and the neighborhood organization legitimacy. Other decisions might involve what projects to advocate for and how to fund them, among many others.
3. **To Find Solutions** – Sometimes you have to involve other people to find creative solutions to complex issues. Brainstorming for solutions is best done in a small meeting such as an ad hoc or subcommittee meeting. The subcommittee should present a few options for consideration by the Board and ultimately to the general population. A general residents meeting that involve a lot more people is not usually the right place to find solutions, unless you have a structured process to seek input and reach consensus. There are just too many distractions and people tend to lose focus in large meetings.

Meeting Agendas

Remember that a meeting should have a purpose. People want to feel like they are part of a group that is making progress. Just talking in a meeting and not moving projects or programs forward discourages attendance at meetings.

The agenda serves as the roadmap for the meeting. It also sets the tone for the meeting. Therefore, it is important to put some thought into what the meeting is supposed to accomplish, what should be discussed, which is the best place to have it, and when would be the most convenient date and time to have it. All of this information should appear on the agenda.

Some things to consider when preparing an agenda include:

- **Topics** - Be specific. Otherwise, you will be wasting time during the meeting to define them. Limit the number of topics so that they can be covered. If possible, allocate responsibility for each item on the agenda to an individual.
- **Sequence** – Put the easy topics at the beginning of the agenda, and then move onto the more difficult ones. Ensure that large topics are structured logically and flow from giving information to discussion and finally a decision. Arrange topics logically in order to avoid duplication.

- **Time** - Set a start and finish time for the meeting. Set a time for each item on the agenda according to its importance. Consider allowing a break if the meeting will last longer than an hour.
- **Circulation** - Send the agenda out a few days (or as long as time will allow) before the meeting. Avoid sending it out too far in advance, as things may change in the interim causing the agenda to change.³

“You have a meeting to make a decision, not to decide on the question.”

Bill Gates

³ <https://www.meetings.org/meeting13.htm>

Sample Agenda

<p style="text-align: center;">AGENDA XYZ Neighborhood Association General Membership Meeting Name of Neighborhood Organization Date and Time of Meeting Address Where Meeting will be Held</p> <p>I. Call to Order II. Approval of Minutes III. Reports from Subcommittees (if any) IV. Old Business (items from prior meetings that need finalizing) V. New Business VI. Comments and Announcements VII. Adjournment</p> <p>Next Meeting Date</p>

The agenda is typically prepared by the secretary of the neighborhood organization with input from the president and other board members regarding new business items.

Running an Effective and Positive Meeting

Good meetings can make people feel part of a team that is making progress but if not properly planned and run, can be frustrating, making people feel like they wasted their time. To make your meetings productive and positive try these tips:

- Provide some snacks. Food has a way of breaking down barriers between people.
- Have someone greet attendees as they come into the meeting and hand them an agenda.
- Start the meeting on time. Most neighborhood meetings are held in the evening, which means that people are taking time from the responsibilities they have at home or work to attend it. A meeting that starts late will likely end late.
- Establish some ground rules for the meeting, such as everyone is encouraged to participate, one person speaks at a time, listen to and respect other points of view, etc.
- Ask attendees to save their comments for items not on the agenda until the Comments and Announcements portion of the meeting. This will allow you to cover all the items on the agenda and then give meeting participants the opportunity to provide comments or ask questions.
- The chair should take control of the meeting when it gets off track. Intentionally or not, some people will disrupt your meeting. Remind them that the meeting has to end on time and that they need to wrap up their comments in one minute. Taking control like this may discourage this type of behavior. Remember, you are doing this for the people who are abiding by the meeting etiquette.

- Finish the meeting on an upbeat note. Summarize the outcomes of the meeting and the next steps to be undertaken so attendees leave feeling that things are happening. Don't forget to thank people for coming to the meeting.

Do I Really Have to Do Meeting Minutes?

If you have an informal neighborhood organization, there is no need for minutes to be taken at a meeting. However, if your organization is planning on growing it is good practice to take minutes because they are a record of actions the board took at the meeting. Minutes are also a way of documenting the history of the group for incoming new leaders.

When seeking funding from grants or foundations, minutes are typically required to provide proof that the Board has approved applying for funding and/or accepting the terms of the grant. If your organization is a non-profit – 501c3 or seeking to become one, then the IRS may request official minutes to prove that the organization is carrying out its mission.

There is no official template for minutes. You can use the meeting agenda and simply note the motion (action item), who made the motion and who seconded the motion. Minutes are not a transcript of the meeting. They only need to reflect actions/votes taken and who supported the action item.

Sample Minutes

Board of Directors Meeting Minutes for April 16, 2020

Board members in attendance and constituting a quorum were:

Liz Jones
Harry Smith
John Doe
Mary Lamb
Steve Arne

Board members absent:

Barbara Costner

Guests: Deputy Don, PBSO

The meeting was called to order at 6:00 pm by President Jones.

Prior Meeting Minutes Approval: Board member Doe moved to approve the minutes of the March 19, 2018, meeting, Board Member Arne seconded. All approved, none opposed. Motion carried.

Board Development: Secretary Lamb gave a short presentation for Board Development on the differences in the roles of board members and the Executive Director.

Guest Speaker Presentation: Deputy Don of PBSO made a presentation on PBSO's Neighborhood Partnership Grant.

Income/Expense Report: The board reviewed the Income/Expense report. Board member Arne moved to accept the report, Board Member Smith seconded the motion. All approved, none opposed. Motion carried.

Fundraising Committee: Under Unfinished Business, the board discussed a couple of potential fundraising ideas. The Fundraising Committee will meet and discuss.

Miscellaneous New Business Item: Under New Business, the board accepted the resignation of June Gorman and wished her well in her future endeavors.

Upcoming Events: Next meeting: May 21, 2020, at 5:00 pm and elections to be held at that time. No June Meeting to be scheduled.

Adjournment: President Jones moved to adjourn the meeting, board member Smith seconded the motion. All approved. Time adjourned: 6:25 pm

It is good practice to post your organization's minutes on your social media pages and website, if you have one. In this way, you can still keep those who cannot attend the meeting in the loop.

Robert's Rules Cheat Sheet

To:	Say:	Interrupt Speaker	Second Needed	Debatable	Amendable	Decided by:
Adjourn	"I move to adjourn."	No	Yes	No	No	Majority vote
Recess	"I move to recess for/until..."	No	Yes	No	Yes	Majority vote
Complain about hearing, comfort, etc.	"Point of privilege..."	Yes	No	No	No	Chair
End debate and vote on question	"I move the previous question."	No	Yes	No	No	Majority vote
Suspend further consideration of something	"I move to table this matter."	No	Yes	No	No	2/3 vote
Postpone deciding the question	"I move to postpone this matter until..."	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority vote
Amend a motion	"I move to amend this motion by..."	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority vote
Introduce business (a main motion)	"I move that..."	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority vote

The motions and points listed above are in order of preference. When a motion or point of inquiry is pending, only those listed above the pending point may be raised.

To:	Say:	Interrupt Speaker	Second Needed	Debatable	Amendable	Decided by:
Redress any violation of the body's Rules	"Point of order..."	Yes	No	No	No	Chair
Request information	"Point of inquiry..."	Yes	No	No	No	N/A
Verify a recent voice vote by actual count (before next motion only)	"I call for division."	Yes	No	No	No	Majority vote
Prevent body from considering a matter	"I object to considering this question."	Yes	No	No	No	2/3
Consider a suspended matter	"I move to take from the table..."	Yes	Yes	No	No	Majority
Reconsider a previous motion	"I move to reconsider..."	Yes	Yes	No	No	2/3
Consider something out of schedule	"I move to suspend the rules to consider..."	No	Yes	No	No	2/3
Vote on the Chair's decision	"I appeal the Chair's decision."	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Majority

The motions and points above have no precedence. Any of them may be raised in response to any motion or question, with the exception of the three items in gray (motion to adjourn, motion to recess, and point of privilege).