

## Chapter 4

# The Interactive Meeting Format

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**T**he six-part format described here is a time-tested approach to conducting meetings for both one-time groups and ongoing groups. In our work, we use this format in every possible setting where six or more people are coming together to accomplish a goal, including group meetings with youth and adults, staff meetings, meetings of our board of directors, and professional development sessions for police, teachers, and others.

This chapter includes:

- The steps to follow in preparing for a meeting
- An overview of the meeting format
- Detailed information about each of the six sections of the format.

Chapter 5 gives further information about how to work with the format, and chapter 6 has examples of agendas that use the format to reach specific goals.

### **A Note about Processing**

Much of the power of the Interactive Meeting Format comes from the facilitator's skilled processing of the exercises. By "processing" we mean leading a discussion and/or making observations about a completed exercise in order to draw understanding from it. This chapter describes in general how to process particular sections of the meeting, and chapter 5, especially pp. 65-70, provides further guidance about how to use processing to help your group meet its goals.

### **Preparation**

In addition to setting up the meeting space (see p. 53), here's what you need to do to prepare for an interactive meeting:

1. Define your goals for the meeting.
2. Construct an agenda based on those goals, following the Interactive Meeting Format. See chapter 5 for detailed information about how to choose the appropriate exercises.
3. Write a summary of the goals and an outline of the day's agenda on the flip chart.
4. Gather any materials you will need during the meeting.
5. Follow the preparation instructions for each interactive exercise that is on the agenda.
6. If you are working with an action-oriented group, prepare or update one or more timelines for the group's work.

You can draw a timeline as a grid, like a calendar, or you can simply draw horizontal lines to represent weeks, with each day marked by a vertical crosshatch. Fill in noteworthy deadlines, events, holidays,

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and so on. If the group is involved in a complex project or multiple projects, you may want to have separate timelines that display tasks and deadlines the group is working with.

### Format Overview

The six-part meeting format is a cohesive system, with each section designed to lead in to the one that follows. Table 1 outlines the six parts of the format.

Section	Purposes	Procedures
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clarify goals.</li> <li>Foreshadow the meeting.</li> <li>Calm and focus the group.</li> <li>For ongoing groups:</li> <li>Acknowledge those present and absent.</li> <li>Establish the meeting in time.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Goals</li> <li>Who's here, who's not</li> <li>Date and Timeline</li> </ul>
Names/ Warm-up Section	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learn names and the importance of knowing names.</li> <li>Hear every voice.</li> <li>Help people feel comfortable.</li> <li>Create fun and energy.</li> <li>Assess how people are feeling.</li> <li>Establish "buy-in."</li> <li>Focus attention on the day's work.</li> <li>Connect to the group's mission.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One or more Name Exercises (see chapter 9)</li> <li>Warm-up Question, with names in some circumstances (see chapter 10)</li> </ul>
Springboard Section	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish a creative bridge to the Work Section.</li> <li>Surface group dynamics.</li> <li>Generate energy.</li> <li>Reflect group issues.</li> <li>(See chapter 8 for the many specific goals these exercises can help address.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>See chapters 11 through 16 for exercises.</li> </ul>
Work Section	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fulfill the concrete purpose of the group.</li> <li>Focus on the group's "product."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perform specific tasks. See chapter 17 for Work Exercises.</li> </ul>
Summation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summarize accomplishments.</li> <li>Make announcements.</li> <li>For ongoing groups:</li> <li>Connect one day with the next.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review timeline and next steps.</li> <li>Address outstanding issues.</li> </ul>
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gather evaluative information.</li> <li>"Package" the experience.</li> <li>Disperse negativity.</li> <li>Communicate group responsibility.</li> <li>Empower the group.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>See chapter 18 for exercises.</li> </ul>

Table 1. The Six-part Interactive Meeting Format

Groups come together for a purpose, and part 4 of the format, the Work Section, gives structure to that purpose. The three earlier sections—the Introduction, Names/Warm-up Section, and Springboard Section—are designed to bring the group to the Work Section emotionally and intellectually prepared to make that part of the meeting as productive as possible. When these early sections are designed with care and executed well, the group’s level of productivity during the Work Section increases dramatically. Following the Work Section, a brief Summation and an Evaluation Exercise bring the meeting to a satisfactory conclusion in which everyone’s input is included and valued.

## The Sections in Detail

### 1. The Introduction

#### How to Do It

The Introduction is the short opening piece of the agenda (five minutes or less), during which you do the following:

- Welcome the group.
- Provide them with a brief overview of the meeting’s goals.
- Briefly preview the agenda.
- State what time the meeting will conclude.

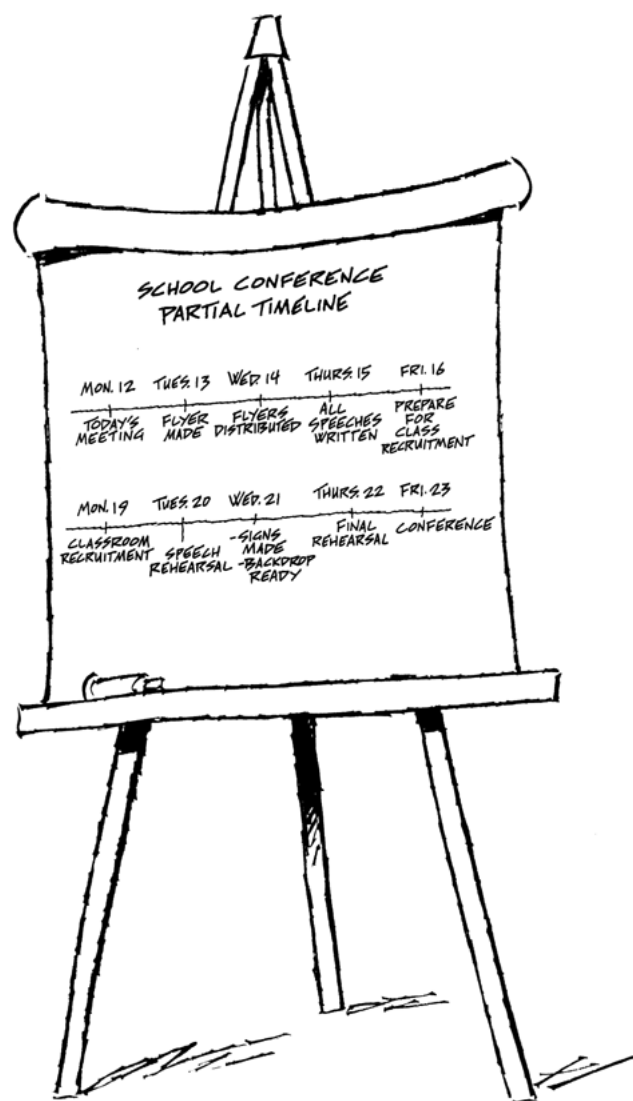
For ongoing groups, you should also:

- Acknowledge visitors or new people in the group.
- Acknowledge those who are missing and where they are (to the extent that you know).
- Review timelines as needed (for action-oriented groups).

#### Why Do It

In just a few moments, the Introduction serves many purposes. As you are welcoming people, taking note of who is present and absent, and going over the goals and the agenda, you are also setting the tone of the meeting. In addition, this part of the meeting is designed to:

1. Give group members a few minutes to get settled. For this brief time, people don’t have to do anything; they just need to sit quietly and listen.
2. Set the context for the day’s work and activities by taking note of the meeting’s setting in time. This is helpful and important for everyone, but it is especially useful for developing awareness in adolescents and children of the flow of time.
3. Gradually focus the group’s attention on three important questions: What are we doing? Why are we doing it? How will we go about it?
4. Foreshadow and thus prepare the group for the kind of experience they will be having at this meeting. This is par-



ticularly helpful when the group will be facing some difficult issues. On such a day you might say something like, “Today we’ll be doing some hard work and dealing with tough issues, but if we work together we’ll get through them and set the stage for real progress.” This will prepare people emotionally and give them a better chance of successfully navigating a potentially stressful meeting.

### 2. The Names/Warm-up Section

After the Introduction, the next section of the agenda uses Name Exercises and Warm-up Questions, either singly or in combination. A few minutes invested in these exercises can give a meeting a tremendous head start toward a productive working atmosphere.

#### How to Do It

**Designing the Section.** The group’s purpose, its size, its stage of development, how often it meets, and the time you have available for the meeting will all determine how you design this section.

For most meetings, this section will take about ten minutes. However, it can take as little as two minutes (for example, in a large one-time group that does only the exercise NAME SHOUT) or as long as 30 minutes (for example, in the first meeting of an ongoing group in which learning names and getting to know each other are the primary goals of the meeting).

Table 2 gives general guidelines, but you are the best judge of how much emphasis to place on this part of the meeting. In some meetings you will do only a Name Exercise, in some only a Warm-up Question, in some a combination, and in some you will skip this component altogether. Here are examples of how facilitators might design this section:

- In a one-time, two-hour workshop of 35 people: Do NAME SHOUT (p. 142) or NAME RACE (p. 140).
- In a one-time, all-day workshop of 35 people: Begin with an exercise such as NAME CHANT AND MOTION (p. 135). When the workshop breaks up into small groups, include a Warm-up Question with names in the small-group agenda.
- In a bi-weekly staff meeting of 15-20 people: Begin with a Warm-up Question.
- In a class of 25 students meeting four times per week, in a large school where the students may not all know each other: Do a Name Exercise every day for the first week. In subsequent classes, you might then use a Warm-up Question from time to time. Also, if a new student joins the class, do Name Exercises for a few classes.
- In a class of 15 students meeting three times per week: Begin each class with a Warm-up Question that relates to and leads into the subject matter for the day.
- In a support group or therapy group with 20 participants: Begin each session with a Warm-up Question that focuses everyone’s attention on the purpose of the group. Do Name Exercises in addition to Warm-up Questions until names have been learned.

For most Name Exercises and for all Warm-up Questions, the amount of time spent is directly related to the size of the group and the complexity of the question. In groups larger than 20 or so, Warm-up Questions are generally too time-consuming, though a question that asks for short responses may sometimes be appropriate.

Here are the general guidelines for designing this part of the agenda:

Type of Group	Group Size	Designing the Names/Warm-up Section
One-time group	20 or fewer	Name Exercise Warm-up Question with names
One-time group	Between 20 and 50	Name Exercise
One-time group	More than 50	Name Exercise for a large group (NAME SHOUT, NAME WHISPER, NAME RACE, NAME WAVE)
Ongoing group: first several meetings	20 or fewer	One or more Name Exercises Warm-up Question with names
Ongoing group: next few meetings	20 or fewer	Name Exercise to measure if everyone has learned names Warm-up Question
Ongoing group: subsequent meetings	20 or fewer	Warm-up Question
Ongoing group with a visitor or new person	20 or fewer	Warm-up Question with names Might also start with a Name Exercise
Ongoing group: first several meetings	20-35	Name Exercise

*Table 2. Guidelines for Designing the Names/Warm-up Section*

**Name Exercises.** Chapter 9 contains a variety of Name Exercises that suit different group situations.

In a small to mid-size group, there are several exercises you can do that will advance the primary goal of the Name Exercise, which is, of course, learning each other's names and how to pronounce them. Some exercises are geared toward helping the group members learn everyone's name by means of repetition, and some will assess how successful the group has been at learning names.

In a large group, Name Exercises acknowledge the importance of people naming themselves, while not expecting that everyone can learn all the other names. With a group of 40-50, you can give people a few seconds each to speak their names with the NAME RACE (p. 140). You can use NAME CHANT (p. 135) or NAME WAVE (p. 145) in a group of up to 80 people, and even in such a large group people will learn some names. In a group that is too large for each person to speak individually, you can nevertheless let people speak their names with the NAME SHOUT (p. 142) or NAME WHISPER exercise.

For a one-time group that will be working together for an hour or more, a Name Exercise combined with nametags will be extremely helpful in facilitating communication.

**Warm-up Questions.** Warm-up Questions simply involve each group member in turn answering a question that you pose. In some circumstances, people will also say their names as they answer the

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question. Chapter 10 has more than 180 questions and information about how to choose questions for particular situations.

**Running the Exercise.** Before you begin the exercise or question, state these guidelines (which apply to all except exercises for a large group, such as NAME SHOUT):

- Pay attention to the person whose turn it is.
- The group needs everyone's participation; however, a person can pass if they feel they must. When someone passes, they can ask to take their turn at the end.
- Even if someone passes, they need to give their name if that is being asked for.

Then follow this procedure:

- Ask for a volunteer to begin. This approach allows those who feel ready to go or have an answer in mind to set the tone, and it avoids putting someone in the spotlight who may not be ready for it.
- After the first person's turn, have the group proceed in order around the circle from the starting point, going in the direction that you indicate.
- All facilitators should participate in the exercise, and do so in a way that models the engagement, depth, humor, or thoughtfulness that they want group members to emulate.
- Be attentive during the exercise, both to absorb information about the group and to model positive behavior. It is helpful to jot down some notes about how people's responses and participation relate to the group's dynamics, the work for the day, or other important points that can be used for processing.

Follow these additional procedures for Warm-up Questions:

- Do not let others interrupt the person who is speaking, especially to ask questions or begin a discussion about what the person is saying.
- If someone raises a point that should be on the agenda, make a note of it, and after you've finished processing the Warm-up Question, add it to the written agenda for all to see.
- Do not let anyone speak for too long. Find a gentle or humorous way to suggest that the next person is waiting their turn.
- Allow people to interpret the question as they wish. For example, if the question is, "How do you feel about flying," people might talk about being in an airplane, flying in dreams or in day-dreams, being on a roller coaster, or many other possible interpretations of "flying." Whatever people say can be used in your processing.

**Processing.** Processing of this section should be brief. Don't ask questions; simply make some comments based on what people said and did. Summarize the ideas that people expressed and any nonverbal cues they gave in a way that moves the group toward achieving its goals, taking note of the negative as well as the positive. Refer to your notes, if you have them, for dynamics in the group that might be useful to point out.

You can process each exercise and question separately, or you can process all the elements of the Names/Warm-up Section together.

If you have done a Name Exercise, mention how important it is to learn names if the group is going to work together productively. Also, some of the Name Exercises lend themselves to processing about the

purpose of the group. For example, if a group's focus is on dealing with peer pressure, the exercise **NAME CHANT AND MOTION** (p.135) provides an illustration of people following a leader and doing what everyone else is doing.

For a Warm-up Question, it can be helpful to repeat back some of the answers you heard. However, don't focus too directly on any individual answer; people need to feel free to express themselves, and to be singled out might be inhibiting.

### Scenario 5: Processing a Warm-up Question

Molly's group was organizing a community barbecue. At a meeting a week before the event, she used the Warm-up Question "Say a word that describes how you feel about the barbecue." Responses included words like "worried," "tired," "excited," "overwhelmed," and "fearful." Molly processed the question by saying, "People seem tired today and some of us seem to be scared of what might happen at the barbecue. To me, that points out how important it is for us to be prepared for what could be a really exciting event. We have a week to keep working, to keep doing publicity and outreach, making sure we're organized. Even though people are tired, I also hear a lot of motivation. We all want our project to be successful after all we've put into it. So let's move through what we have to do today, and let's be nice to each other along the way."

### Why Do It

It is commonplace at meetings to go around and have everyone introduce themselves and perhaps say where they are from or why they came to the meeting. Some people may not like doing this, but most of us are glad to introduce ourselves and to place some aspect of who we are into the group context. We like getting to know something about the others in the meeting and we hope that these introductions will enhance communication and cooperation. What most of us do not realize is that this part of a meeting can yield so much more benefit.

The Names/Warm-up Section serves many purposes. These vary according to the size and duration of the group, but even with groups as large as 80 people these exercises will help your group to achieve its goals.

**Learning Names.** The first and most obvious purpose (for a small to mid-size group) is for people to learn each other's names. This is an indispensable first step in the formation of a functional working group. In an ongoing group, it is essential for everyone to know all the other participants' names and how to pronounce them properly. Even in a one-time group, people work together more effectively if they have had a chance to identify themselves and to learn the names of others.

Unless you are thoroughly familiar with everyone in a group, you should never assume that people know each other's names. Communication will be inhibited if even one person doesn't know how to directly address one other person. If your goal is to facilitate a group where everyone can communicate freely, you should plan on doing a Name Exercise.

Many facilitators handle names with the simple question, "Does everyone know each other?" Almost invariably, everyone will nod, and the facilitator will move to the next item on the agenda. These facilitators need to realize that no one wants to risk being the only person in the group to admit they don't know everyone else. If the facilitator makes the assumption that everyone knows everyone else, people tend to go along with the assumption, even if they know that it's untrue.

Here are two good reasons for focusing on learning names:

- People relate more easily to those whose names they are comfortable with. Conversely, people tend not to relate to those whose names they don't know or are unsure of. Particularly in a group with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, mastering the pronunciation of names can be challenging, and people may avoid speaking directly to someone with an unfamiliar name for fear of getting it wrong. A situation like this can lead to the development of serious tensions that reinforce the distance and suspicion that often exist among people from different cultures.
- It is difficult to ask a person for help or to initiate contact with someone if you don't know their name. For instance, there is a huge difference between, "Hey, can you give me a hand with this box?" and "Hey, Zuleika, can you help me out with this box?"

It takes time and repetition for everyone in a group to learn all the others' names. Some people pick up names and pronunciations quickly but others find it more difficult, and it's best to structure your agendas with awareness of those who have difficulty. Also, tell the group that if they cannot remember someone's name or how to pronounce it, even if they've heard it several times, it's better to ask politely for a name refresher than to avoid speaking to the person altogether.

In an ongoing group, you can use **NAME, FOOD, AND REMEMBER** (p. 138) or **NAME CONTEST** (p. 137) to check whether people are ready to stop using Name Exercises.

**Establishing the Importance of Knowing Names.** Even in a group that is too large for people to learn names, it is often a good idea to do a Name Exercise appropriate for the group's size. This allows you to make the point that knowing others' names is important to good working relationships, and it emphasizes the significance to the group of each individual's identity and investment in the work.

**Hearing Every Voice.** Even when the exercise gives each person only a few seconds to speak or act, those few seconds provide an opportunity for people to establish their identities, use their voices, and be heard by the group. This is particularly important for those who tend to be introverted. For someone who is generally quiet in meetings and goes along with whatever is happening, consistent participation in the Names/Warm-up Section can be the first step toward transformation into someone who speaks their mind and contributes their creative energies to this group and others. In an ongoing group, the Warm-up Question provides each person with regular practice in speaking in front of a group and helps people learn to be articulate and concise.

**Helping People Feel Comfortable in the Group.** Meetings usually begin with a certain amount of tension, as each person brings into the room their own concerns and a degree of self-consciousness. Hearing one another speak in an orderly way helps to put people at ease.

**Creating Fun and Energy.** Many of these exercises and questions give the group a chance to move around and to laugh together. This helps to wake people up, break down inhibitions, and generate energy that can be directed toward reaching the group's goals, and it can open up opportunities for creating positive relationships. (Some Warm-up Questions that make people laugh are: "If this group were a food, what would it be?" "What was a time that you felt foolish?" "If you could have any power, natural or supernatural, what power would you have and why would you choose to have it?")

**Assessing How People Are Feeling.** As people take turns doing Name Exercises and answering the Warm-up Question, each individual is providing you and other group members with information, by means of their body language and general way of responding, about how they are feeling and what kind of energy they are bringing to the group that day. The content of people’s answers to the Warm-up Question can help everyone in the group understand each other’s behavior on a deeper level (for example, see scenario 10, “Subtle Processing of a Warm-up Question,” in chapter 5). You can also learn a lot about how the group as a whole is doing from the way people interact and pay attention to each other.

**Establishing “Buy-in.”** The Warm-up Question gives each person a way to tell the group how much or how little they are invested in its success. Even if the question is not about the substance of the work, the degree to which each person is willing to participate signals their willingness at this time to contribute to the group—information that is extremely helpful to the facilitator.

**Focusing on the Work of the Day.** The Warm-up Question can be used to focus the group’s attention on the work to be done that day and to begin generating ideas that can help to meet the group’s goals. For example, on a day when the group has a lot to get done, you can ask, “What’s the most important thing we need to accomplish today?” Not only will this focus everyone on the work, but it will also provide insight into different people’s priorities and areas of interest.

**Connecting the Group to Its Mission.** An effective Warm-up Question can reinforce the vital link between the mission that underlies the group’s existence and the work the group is currently engaged in, thereby increasing the group’s investment in its work and in the ultimate success of its efforts. Here are some examples:

- For a drug rehabilitation group: “Who is someone you admire who’s overcome drug abuse?”
- For a group of teachers meeting to discuss issues among their students: “Talk about a student who’s doing well and one who’s having difficulty.”
- For a meeting to plan a publicity campaign: “Tell us about an ad you’ve seen recently that caught your attention.”

### 3. The Springboard Section

The Springboard Section involves an activity that engages the group and gets people ready to do the work of the day. Generally this section consists of one exercise, but depending on time and your goals for the meeting, you might choose to do more than one.

The Springboard Exercises are contained in chapters 11 through 16. They vary widely in time (from one minute to more than 20 minutes) and in level of physical activity (from people talking in pairs to people hoisting each other over a barrier). Many work well in classrooms or conference rooms, while others require open floor space.

These exercises are designed to meet a wide spectrum of goals, and you can match your goals to various exercises in chapter 8. However, for an exercise to be effective in meeting the goals, you need to have:

- A solid understanding of why you chose that exercise. For information about how to choose an exercise read “Designing the Agenda” beginning on p. 55.
- A belief in its value to the group. Remember the lessons about resistance in chapter 3, to reinforce your belief that what you are doing will help your group to achieve its goals

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- The ability to process the exercise effectively. Read “Processing the Exercises” beginning on p. 65.

If you are working with adults, it’s likely that this part of the meeting format will stir up the most resistance, both in the group and in yourself. Often people have had experiences with Warm-up Questions, they can see the logic behind Name Exercises, they enjoy doing the work of the meeting in an interactive way, and they welcome the opportunity to evaluate. The Springboard Exercise, however, may appear to be nothing but the facilitator’s time-wasting whim. Without effective processing to tie the activity to the day’s work, the exercise may not, in the eyes of participants, serve any obvious purpose. It’s important, therefore, to choose this exercise carefully. Be sure the risk level is appropriate to the group, remembering that adult groups inexperienced with the Interactive Meeting Format will regard almost any form of interaction as high-risk.

### How to Do It

The general procedure for a Springboard Exercise consists of carefully giving the instructions for the chosen activity, conducting the activity, and then processing the information and dynamics that emerge.

### Why Do It

Springboard Exercises serve one or more of the following purposes:

- Give the group an experience (frequently a creative or a body-centered experience) related to the tasks or issues they will be addressing in the Work Section, thus building a bridge to the work of the meeting.
- Surface group dynamics for discussion and provide group members with insights into how they work together.
- Provide the group with a chance to have fun, laugh together, and be energized to do the work of the day.
- Generate enthusiasm for being in the group and working together, or reflect the difficulties the group is having and help people understand what needs to be changed.

You might select a Springboard Exercise either to address group issues or to help the group understand their work for the day, but often it will end up serving both purposes. Whatever dynamics are present in the group will be present in the Springboard Exercise. A skilled facilitator will know which dynamics the group needs to address at this moment, and will struggle to balance the work the group needs to accomplish with the emotional health and well-being of the group.

### Scenario 6: Balancing Tasks and Group Issues

Brian’s group was preparing to host a teen gathering for the young people in their neighborhood, and they had many loose ends to take care of before the event the next evening. In preparing the meeting agenda, Brian planned for a quick Springboard Exercise that would allow him to make the point that the group needed to be focused and work hard to finish all their tasks so they would be ready for the gathering. He planned to dedicate most of the meeting to getting the tasks completed.

The exercise Brian chose was HANDS TOGETHER (p. 164), which involves everyone clapping at the same time. He planned to process the exercise by saying that they could create a powerful, unified sound when they all focused and clapped together, and that they could also create a powerful event for the community if they brought the same focus to their work on the teen gathering.

However, to Brian's surprise the group had a hard time getting through the exercise. Two people, Sam and Alison, persistently clapped out of time with the rest. Others got annoyed but insisted that everyone continue trying to do it right. Instead of moving on quickly to the Work Section, the group spent five minutes doing HANDS TOGETHER.

Mindful of the tasks that needed doing, Brian nevertheless recognized that his group needed to deal with some issues if they were going to work well together and be role models for appropriate behavior at their event. He knew that the group's state of mind was even more critical to their success than the completion of tasks; the group needed to spend some time processing the experience of HANDS TOGETHER and the feelings it brought up, rather than rushing on to the Work Section. In the processing discussion, it became clear that Sam had not been able to concentrate on the exercise due to an illness in his family. Once this came out, anger toward him dissipated and people offered him support instead. Also, the discussion brought out that Alison had been deliberately sabotaging the exercise because she knew it would annoy Taylor, with whom she had been arguing recently.

In light of all this, Brian was able to say, "There are some problems that are affecting the group, and it's important for us to know what's going on and to work things out, and not to be too hard on each other in the process. But for now, let's remember that all of us have said we want this event to go well. A lot of people are counting on us to create a safe space tomorrow night, and we all know that if we don't do a good job, people could get hurt. We'll need to spend some time soon dealing with the issues in the group, but right now we need to come together and support each other so that we have a safe and successful event. We only have a little time left, so let's work in a focused way to get done what needs to be done."

Some tasks had not been finished by the end of the meeting time, but the group left knowing that they would be able to count on each other at the gathering the next evening. If the group had skipped the Springboard Exercise and attempted to get straight to work, the dysfunction that came out in the exercise may well have come out instead in their work preparing for the event, and even during the event itself.

## 4. The Work Section

### Why Do It

The Work Section fulfills the main purpose for which the group has come together, and its content is specific to the group. In a one-time group, the purpose might be to explore a specific issue or to gain some particular knowledge. An ongoing group might be working on exploring issues more extensively or planning and implementing an agenda for action. The work of the day in either of these cases might involve one or more of the following kinds of activities:

- Creating a vision for action.
- Hearing updates from subcommittees and determining next steps in several areas.
- Doing specific tasks (such as writing articles, making phone calls, creating posters, or gathering materials) to prepare for an activity the group is organizing.
- Learning about or reviewing a body of material (such as a period of history or a math concept).
- Discussing experiences or concepts.

- Working on dynamics within the group (so that the group can pursue its purpose more effectively).

Any of this work can be done in a variety of ways, some more productive than others. For example, uninterrupted lecturing or top-down distribution of tasks may seem to be efficient approaches to a group's work. In the long run, however, these approaches are often ineffective because they fail to engage the group and make use of everyone's talents. Conversely, an interactive approach can help to bring the group's work alive and to ensure that everyone's input is welcome and that everyone is fully invested in the group's success.

### How to Do It

The structure of the Work Section will vary depending on the purpose of the group and its stage of development. When planning the section, start with the goals for the meeting and think about how you can meet those goals with a lively approach that helps assure maximum engagement by group members. The specific methods you choose should be tailored to the goals and the tasks that the group needs to accomplish.

Chapter 17 contains several exercises for this part of the meeting. If you are familiar with these exercises, using them to work toward the group's goals will soon come naturally to you. A few of the exercises, such as BRAINSTORMING (p. 385) and WORDSTORMS (p. 413), are excellent techniques for almost any setting and can help groups to reach a variety of goals. In an ongoing group, you may want to use these exercises frequently. BRAINSTORMING, in particular, is a technique that helps all kinds of groups at any stage of their work to use the creative capacities of all their members. For example, you can use BRAINSTORMING to set goals, decide on actions to reach the goals, list the tasks needed for the actions, and anticipate problems that might come up.

Two of the Work Exercises—BRAINSTORMING and WORDSTORMS—are “Super Exercises,” profiled and used in the agendas in chapter 6. Other Work Exercises, such as LIFE LINES (p. 401) or DIVERSITY IN MOTION (p. 391), are suitable for particular types of groups to reach specific goals; you would probably do them no more than once in the life of a group.

In an ongoing group, the Work Section must be structured coherently with clear connections from one meeting to the next over the life of the group. Maintaining this awareness of connection enables group members to see the logical progression in their work and to understand the work within the context of their long-term goals.

The Work Section can take place entirely in the whole group or it can be structured in a variety of other ways. It might contain large- and small-group activities as well as time for people to work on individual tasks, or it might consist entirely of people working on tasks individually or in pairs. Some work is better executed in the large group with everyone present. This is especially true if the work involves making decisions that the whole group needs to support, such as setting goals for an event or disseminating information that everyone needs. Work that is more task-oriented and discussions that require more personal disclosure are sometimes better in smaller groups where people can share tasks efficiently and more inclusive discussions can take place.

**Structuring Small Groups.** Most of the Work Exercises in chapter 17 are designed for groups of 20 or fewer. If you have a larger number, break into small groups. Be sure that each small group has the supplies it needs, such as flip chart paper and markers.

In some situations, division into small groups comes naturally—for example, if people have signed up for certain tasks or subcommittees based on their skills and interests. In other circumstances (for example, if you need to create small groups to do BRAINSTORMING), try to connect people with others who are not in their usual friendship circles. In an ongoing group, you can prepare the groupings ahead of time. If you want to create small groups according to where people are sitting (“The six people in this corner are one group,” etc.), you can precede that with a Springboard Exercise such as THE WIND BLOWS (p. 377) that mixes people up around the room. There are also two exercises, PSYCHIC SHAKE (p. 175) and GROUP THE GROUP (p. 289), that are helpful in creating small groups.

Your preparation for the meeting should include specific agendas for the small groups to follow, with the level of detail necessary for them to complete the tasks they are given. In situations where those in the small groups may not know each other, you should start the small group agenda with a brief Warm-up Question that includes saying names; if people are to work together productively in their groups, it is essential that they be able to speak directly to each other. The groups could then go on to use BRAINSTORMING, WORDSTORMS, ROLE-PLAYS, or other Work Exercises or tasks.

Ideally, each small group would have a facilitator who knows how to work with the agenda. If there are not enough facilitators, you should keep the agendas simple. At a later stage in the group’s development, when group members have worked with interactive techniques as participants, they can gain valuable experience as facilitators by leading Brainstorms and other exercises in small groups.

**Report-backs.** When the meeting includes small groups or individual tasks, set aside time at the end of the Work Section for reporting back to the whole group on what has been accomplished, decided, or discussed. Allow time also for others to ask questions and give input. Pay careful attention to the information that emerges during report-backs, because often it contains important issues that require the group’s attention or approval, or that can be used to spark deeper exploration of issues. In addition, this process keeps the entire group informed and invested in the group’s mission.

Note that the exercise FREEZE-FRAME REPORT-BACKS (p. 393) can be an interesting way for groups to report back from time to time.

## 5. The Summation

The last two sections of the meeting format are parallel to the first two. Like the Introduction, the Summation allows the group to relax for a few minutes; all people need to do is listen. The Evaluation then allows each person the opportunity to speak, as in the Names/Warm-up Section.

### Why Do It

The Summation allows you to give people information, address concerns that you have observed, and preview the work or issues that the group will be focusing on in the future.

### How to Do It

Ask everyone to settle down, then speak briefly about what has been accomplished and what is coming up for the group. Use this time for announcements or logistical concerns: assignments, reminder of the next meeting date, handouts to be picked up, etc.

The Summation is not always necessary. If there are no announcements or logistical issues, you may decide to move directly into the Evaluation.

## 6. The Evaluation

This last section of the Interactive Meeting Format is tremendously important for all kinds of groups.

### How to Do It

Every meeting should conclude with an Evaluation. For a group of 20 or fewer, the most common form of Evaluation is simply to go around the group, with each person evaluating the meeting on a scale from 1 (worst) to 10 (best), and commenting on their rating. Chapter 18 describes this and some similar exercises. These Evaluations should take about five minutes. Evaluations are also important and useful for larger groups, and chapter 18 includes several evaluation techniques that you can use with groups of any size.

When introducing the Evaluation, give people the following information:

- The emphasis should be on evaluating the whole experience of the meeting, especially in terms of how well the meeting achieved its goals. You are not asking people to rate your performance or their own participation.
- Evaluations are extremely helpful to the group, but people can pass if they wish on all or part of their evaluation (for example, someone could pass entirely or they could give a number with no comment or a comment with no number). Make clear, however, that if someone does not feel comfortable sharing their opinions with the group, they will not be required to do so.

Ask for a volunteer to begin.

During the Evaluation, your role is to participate as a member of the group, to provide your own evaluation, and to listen respectfully. If an evaluation is negative, do not argue, become defensive, ask questions, or allow other group members to question or criticize the person who gave the evaluation.

You should never skip the Evaluation. If you see that time is running short, do not sacrifice the Evaluation as a way to end on time. For all the reasons stated below, the Evaluation is a critical component of the Interactive Meeting Format.

**Processing.** Observe the evaluations given for the meeting and then make some brief summary comments about what you heard. This is your opportunity to disperse any anxiety the group is experiencing and to acknowledge what went well and why, and what didn't go well and why. It is important for you to end the meeting in a way that reassures group members and sets a positive tone for the next meeting. Here are some examples:

- "Today was a really hard day and a lot of people are frustrated. But I think it helped that we got those issues out on the table. Let's everyone come in with an open attitude next time and we'll get through this as a group."
- "This was a good day. It seems like everyone got a lot done and enjoyed it. I'll see you next time."

**Written Evaluations.** Written evaluations are sometimes a valuable supplement to verbal evaluations because they allow you to gather detailed information in a permanent form. They are especially important in large groups, where individual verbal evaluations are not possible, and in one-time groups, where people may be reluctant to speak frankly in an unfamiliar setting. The evaluations

should be anonymous, and you should encourage people to be candid.

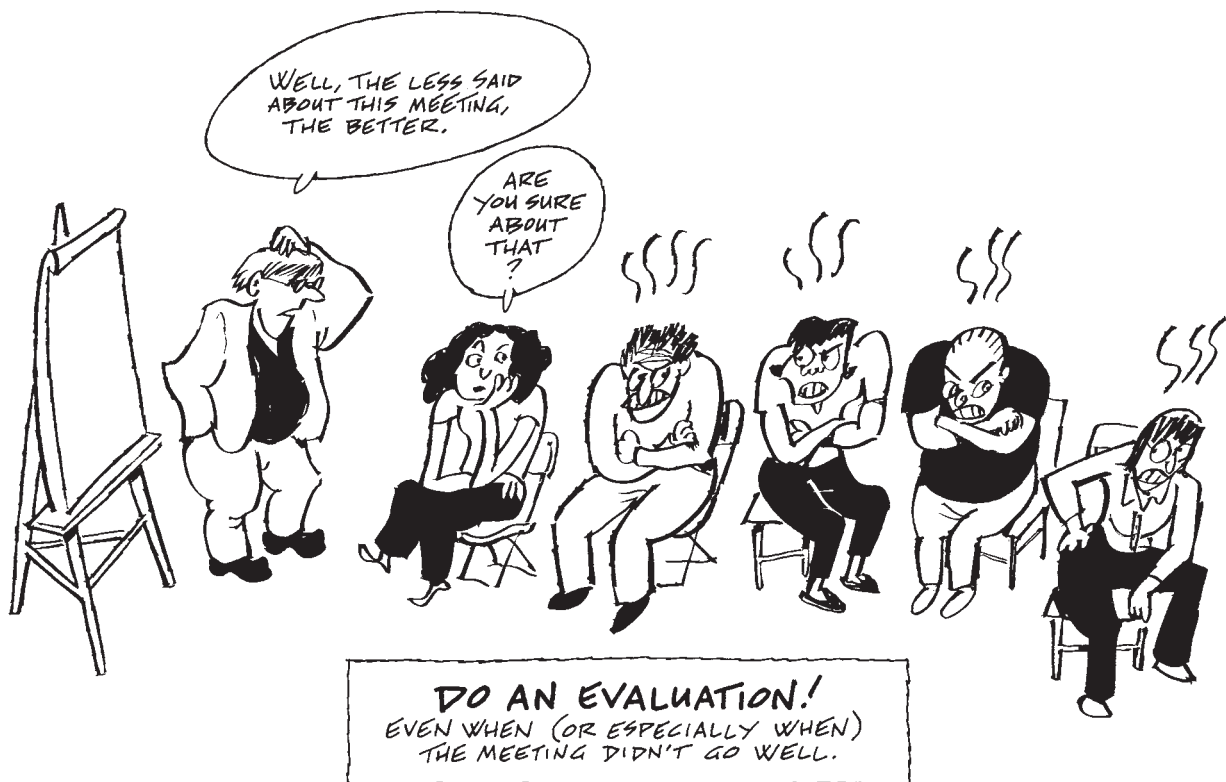
See Appendix A for a sample evaluation form.

If you plan to ask for written evaluations, be sure to allow time in your agenda and to have enough pens or pencils available.

### Why Do It

The Evaluation Section serves numerous purposes:

- It provides information on what went well, what didn't go well, what issues exist as a consequence of the day's work, and what changes need to be made in the group's operation. It gives you a fuller perspective on which to base future actions in the group and a much greater ability to prepare for a successful meeting next time.
- By allowing everyone an opportunity to express their opinion about the meeting, the Evaluation communicates that everyone's voice is important and that all participants share responsibility for what takes place in the group. Through this process, the Evaluation further empowers the individuals and helps to increase their investment in the success of the group.
- The fact that the Evaluation is done in the group means that everyone is aware of what the other members think of what took place during the meeting. This tends to bring a group together and to reduce the chance that misunderstandings will take root.



## THE INTERACTIVE MEETING FORMAT

- The Evaluation creates a flow of information that may shed new light on group issues or dynamics. At times you may be surprised to learn that group members have a more positive view than you expect of a meeting or some aspect of a meeting.
- If the meeting did not go well, group members have the opportunity to voice their concerns and you are able gain insight into what the problems were. While it may be difficult to hear people's negative thoughts and feelings, it is important to realize that expressing them tends to disperse and release them, and thus allows the group to start fresh at the next session. When a facilitator avoids the Evaluation Section of a meeting that did not go well, the negativity remains present in a vague, unnamed, and diffuse form that can have a corrosive impact on the future functioning of the group.
- If the meeting went well, the Evaluation gives each participant the opportunity to testify to the value of the group and its positive qualities. This testimony creates a positive group identity that can help empower the group to accomplish challenging goals or help bring them through rough times that may lie ahead. Furthermore, the expression of the positive nature of the group tends to "package" the experience in a way that will last in people's memories, whereas without this expression the experience might soon be forgotten.
- The Evaluation brings the meeting full circle by once again allowing each member to have the attention of the entire group. Even in a large group that does an exercise such as GROUP SHOUT EVALUATION (p. 423), everyone has the chance to express their opinion, although not everyone can receive individual attention.