



Agendas, Discussion Guidelines and Parking Lots

There are three important ways to keep a meeting on track and avoid unnecessary delays, interruptions and disagreements.

First, **develop an agenda** that is either printed for each person to have a copy or that is displayed on a large sheet of paper in front of the room. Following welcome and introductions, refer to the agenda and ask the group if this agenda is okay with everyone. No additions or changes? A vote is not needed, just general consent. With this agreement, the facilitator now has the ability to refer back to this approval to keep the meeting on track.

Second, **develop discussion guidelines** that are prominently displayed for all to see. Groups should develop their own guidelines. Let members brainstorm the guidelines they want, so that everyone has “ownership” in them. You may wish to review your guidelines periodically. They could include agreements such as:

1. We actively listen to others.
2. We have no side conversations.
3. We respect one another’s viewpoints.
4. We encourage every voice and opinion.
5. We turn our cell phones off or on vibrate.

Remind everyone about the guidelines at the start of each meeting; you could even ask someone to read them off. This is usually enough to ensure good behavior. But the facilitator can refer back to these guidelines if s/he has to do so. “I just want to remind everyone that our group guidelines call for no side conversations. Let’s stay focused and listen to one another so we can a) get home to our families, b) get to the cookies, etc. Keep it light-hearted if possible, but you will get the point across.

Third, **create a parking lot** --- a large sheet of paper at the front of the room. If someone brings up a topic, suggestion, or complaint that you do not have time to discuss at this particular meeting, you can honor the ideas by writing it down in the parking lot. “Gerald, this is certainly worthy of discussion, but it is not on our agenda tonight, and we have promised to get everyone out on time. So I am going to put this in the parking lot to remind us to put it on the agenda for our next meeting.” If you use this technique, it is critical to follow through, in part by asking the person to develop the idea, research the subject, etc.