

Meeting facilitation tips

During meetings

When using a CD approach, no matter what the meeting is about, the aim is to involve community members as fully as possible in all aspects of the meeting. Involving community members as active participants in planning and running the meeting means it is more likely to be done in an appropriate and effective way. This will also create more opportunities for community members to gain skills and experience.

The following tips should assist staff, particularly those who are new to the CLC, in preparing for and running meetings. These suggestions have been developed by CLC staff based on their experiences of what makes for a good meeting where CLC constituents are actively involved. All staff are encouraged to forward any other tips to the CD Unit so they can be included in this document.

This document covers some of the basic aspects of meeting facilitation. For those wanting more information the CLC publication "Planning for Country: Cross-cultural approaches to decision-making on Aboriginal lands" (Walsh and Mitchell, 2002) is a valuable resource that provides further detail on working effectively in Central Australia, including running meetings.

Pre meeting preparation

In addition to the usual logistical tasks involved in organising a meeting time should be spent preparing to facilitate the meeting itself. This includes:

- considering what information meeting participants need;
- developing a proposed meeting agenda and a clear presentation using appropriate communication tools (for example, poster, power point presentation, video or audio recording, maps ;
- deciding whether an interpreter is needed;
- developing strategies that will give all meeting participants a chance to have their say; and,
- thinking about how meeting participants may respond in the meeting and any likely sticking points.

If more than one staff member is going to be involved in the meeting it is also important to make sure staff agree on the purpose of the meeting and what their role in it will be. Some staff can work well together co-facilitating a meeting and a male/female team is a good way of making sure men and women can participate comfortably in the meeting. But it can definitely be the case that too many staff trying to facilitate at the same time can "spoil the meeting" or at least leave everyone confused.

Appropriate meeting space

It is important to hold the meeting in a place where the participants are going to feel the most comfortable, which will then mean they are more likely to participate. There should be enough space that people can organize themselves comfortably whether that be along family lines, based on gender etc.

Using interpreters

The use of an appropriate interpreter is a key element in the success of most meetings. While it is not always feasible, including when a meeting involves numerous different language groups, very few participants, participants with high levels of English or if resources do not permit it, using an interpreter should always be considered.

Ideally interpreters should be formally trained but where this not possible staff should take advice from meeting participants as to who would be an appropriate person to interpret.

Staff must spend adequate time prior to the meeting briefing the interpreter on the meeting content and ensuring that they understand both this content and their role in the meeting. It is important to also make sure meeting participants understand the role of the interpreter as a neutral person who is simply relaying what meeting participants or staff are saying.

Agreeing on the meeting agenda and how the meeting will run

Staff should present a proposed meeting agenda at the start of the meeting for endorsement by the group. It is unlikely that participants will want to remove items from the agenda but they may want to add other issues for discussion. Where this happens staff should get the group to consider whether these items are relevant to the meeting. If not then they should help the group work out an appropriate forum for discussing these other issues who and how these issues and if necessary/appropriate they should be referred on to relevant CLC staff members or other agencies.

The way in which staff plan to run the meeting should also be explained at the outset and participants given a chance to respond. For example, “a short poster presentation will be used to share some information and then participants will be asked to break into small groups for discussion”. If it is not possible to respond to all requests by the group at that particular meeting (for example participants would like a video or power point presentation but a poster has been prepared), participants’ preferences as to how meetings are run should be incorporated into future meetings resources permitting.

Maximise local involvement in running the meeting

One technique that can help increase the involvement of participants in a meeting is for the group to select someone to act as the meeting chair. Having a local person in this role can be a simple way to create more local ownership of the meeting and its agenda than if the meeting is wholly run by CLC staff. A local chair may also be more effective at managing conflict if it arises.

It is worth suggesting that this person be selected to chair only this particular meeting and in the event of future meetings they can choose again on the day. A brief outline of the role of the meeting chair may need to be provided prior to their selection, including keeping the meeting to the agenda, making sure those that wish to have a chance to speak and that people don't speak over each other, and deciding when to have meeting breaks.

Another strategy is to get meeting participants or Aboriginal people from elsewhere with relevant experience involved in presenting information at the meeting. Community members and other Aboriginal people with a good understanding of the meeting issues can communicate effectively and often groups are very keen to hear how other Aboriginal groups have done things.

Ensuring all participants have the chance to participate

Most meetings are likely to involve people from different groups whether they be men/women, young/old and different family or language groups therefore efforts must be made to ensure that all those who want to have a say in the meeting have the chance to, even if they don't take this chance.

This is particularly important where meetings involve a lot of people, as is the case with many CLC meetings. The facilitator should keep a close eye on who is doing the talking and be aware if a few people are dominating the discussion. If this is happening facilitators should try different strategies to ensure that the quieter voices are heard. One strategy is to have other staff moving between participants and quietly finding out their views. They can then encourage people to speak up or they can feedback these views to the wider meeting. Another strategy is to break into smaller groups, however the group thinks is most appropriate, but often according to gender or family relationships. Once small groups have had time to consider the issues they can then feedback to the full meeting.

Dealing with conflict

Getting community members to see that many of their aspirations and issues are shared and therefore best addressed collectively is one of the objectives of CD. However, CD processes in any setting will almost always involve some level of conflict as different community members have different aspirations, issues and priorities. This is the case in Aboriginal communities too.

One strategy is to discuss at the outset of the meeting how conflict will be dealt with if it arises. Participants may be willing to develop and agree to a set of meeting rules so that the discussion runs smoothly and everyone gets a chance to be heard.

When a conflict arises the facilitator needs to assess whether they are able to respond to the conflict or if it is too serious to be addressed within the meeting and therefore should be referred elsewhere. Staff members should take advice from the meeting chair and other meeting participants on how to respond to a conflict.

Dealing with conflict can be very stressful for staff and they should discuss coping strategies or at least debrief afterwards with their manager or other CLC staff members.

Adequate time

Enough time needs to be allowed at meetings so that participants have time to think through the information and issues before they make decisions. For some meetings it may be appropriate to spend a day exploring the issues and a second day for decision-making, which gives people time to consider things and talk about them with others who may not have attended the meeting. This of course must be balanced with the other demands on community members' time and the resources available.

Meeting close

Make sure before the meeting closes that everyone is clear about the decisions that have been made and what the next steps are. Ensure that people have realistic expectations of what will come of the decisions made at the meeting and make sure as much as is possible that you follow through on any actions you commit to.

Food

Make sure there is enough food and if possible get someone else to organise it so as the facilitator you can focus on running the meeting. One option is to pay some community members to do the cooking.

Source: Central Land Council Community Development Framework 2009

http://www.clc.org.au/files/pdf/The_CLCs_Community_Development_framework.pdf