



## Setting aims for meetings

Effective meetings need well-formed aims.

### ***Why hold the meeting?***

Ask the sponsor / host / convenor, and the people who've been invited:

*“What do you want to have at the end of this meeting, that you don't have now?”*

The answers to this question - and there may be a number of distinct answers – help you to identify the meeting aims.

What people want might include things like...

- ◆ a shared and greater awareness or understanding of the issue,
- ◆ commitment to actions,
- ◆ improved relationships between the various participants and the people calling the meeting.

These are **intangible** outcomes.

Answers might also include things like...

- ◆ an action plan,
- ◆ a set of criteria,
- ◆ a prioritised list of options,
- ◆ a common statement,
- ◆ a document.

These outputs are likely to have some sort of **tangible manifestation**, like a workshop report or a document published on a website. (Of course, you won't know what the *content* of these outputs will be yet – that's for the group to develop. But you do know that you and they want there to be something specific.)

The meeting aims should be directly related to these desired outcomes and outputs.

Ideally, all the people who are coming to the meeting will be involved in deciding its aims. At the very least, the aims should be circulated well before hand, labelled as 'draft', giving people the opportunity to improve them. They should be checked again at the start of the meeting, and changed if needed.

To be well-formed, the meeting aims must

- have a verb,
- be related to some *subject* matter,
- be able to be met **during** the meeting.

### ***For example...***

This group is meeting to talk about breakfast, and is pretty focussed on the task in hand:

- To explore the different views people have about *breakfast*;
- To hear what we like and don't like about *current breakfast arrangements*;
- To provide an opportunity for people to ask questions about *breakfast*, and have them answered.
- To identify a range of options about *breakfast*, and agree a set of *criteria* for assessing the options;
- To assess *the options* for breakfast;
- To agree a single *recommended option*;
- To agree a *statement* that accurately reflects the group's conclusions.

This group is also interested in breakfast, and is more exploratory - this is a meeting focussing on learning:

- To hear each other's *stories about breakfast*, and through discussion to understand the *range of perspectives and experiences*;
- To identify the *similarities and differences* between our different breakfast experiences.
- To draw out the most *significant learning*, and produce a *group representation* of that learning.

This group falls somewhere between the two, because it is not yet clear whether action is needed:

- To hear from a range of participants about *breakfast*;
- To discuss whether any *action* needs to be taken, and if so what;
- To agree appropriate *action points*, including who will lead on them and when they will be completed.

## ***Process aims***

As well as these 'public' aims, the facilitator will also have some process aims, like these:

- To check that everyone is *happy with the aims and agenda*;
- To enable everyone to *introduce themselves*;
- To establish a *positive atmosphere*;
- To use creative approaches, in order to *broaden people's thinking*;
- To use a range of techniques for contributing to the conversation, in order to *suit as many participants as possible*;
- To evaluate the meeting, and draw out any *learning* about how to improve future meetings.

You may need to have two versions of the aims written down:

- a very precise and rather laborious version which you use for your own planning, and to check with the client or organising group that you really understand their needs, and
- a more user friendly version which is shared with all the invitees.