

Introduction

Three years in a non-hierarchical organization gave me plenty of experience using a democratic meeting structure. In the beginning it was difficult for me to participate with confidence although I valued the opportunity for consent and inclusivity that the structure creates. With practice, patience, and support, I found this style of meeting to be the most productive in creating informed action and making safe space for personal growth and respectful relationships.

Other groups I've been involved with have sought out a way to conduct meetings and I wrote this document as a possibility, an aid, or a starting point to having healthy group communication.

May it be of use to you in your endeavors and shared freely.

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Why this style of meeting?

Using a democratic structure makes space for everyone's voice to be heard. This implies and honors that everyone's input is valuable. We're able to work with different communication styles, including ones that are frequently left out such as uncertain ideas & opinions, and folks who tend to talk less.

The structure helps us make the best use of our time. Co-creating and following an Agenda allows everyone to understand what topics are being covered and have their concerns addressed.

A democratic meeting structure emphasizes consent- we agree to how long we will listen and talk about a topic, and if more time is needed we all decide if we want that.

We need to be patient with each other. Learning how to use a democratic meeting structure is a process, and some people are more comfortable with it than others. Sometimes it can be frustrating, feel too rigid, seem overly formal, or restrain us in habits we typically enjoy. It can take months! even years, to feel at ease with a democratic meeting structure but we do it because it allows everyone to participate and reduces common problems of cronyism, domination, and silencing.

What is this style of meeting?

We're going to use a very modified version of Rusty's Rules. This is similar to another democratic meeting structure called Robert's Rules. We're going to focus on just a few aspects for now, and implement more components as needed and wanted.

How do we do this style of meeting?

We do it together!

We need a few roles to support the democratic structure: Facilitator and Note Taker/Secretary. Another important role to consider is Child Care Provider and every group needs to put their heads together to figure who can and how to. Meetings involve everyone, and taking turns in the functional roles of Facilitator and Secretary is important. Sometimes people take on one of these roles for three times in a row so they have a chance to develop their comfort and skills. Shadowing someone in their work helps teach and share skills as well.

Co-creation and use of an Agenda: Once a meeting day and time is announced, people will begin creating the agenda (usually this is done online.) We share topics and details that are necessary for the discussion.

Our meetings can use some components of Rusty's Rules, so that each meeting Agenda structure looks like this:

1. Approve the Agenda
2. Check Ins/Introductions
3. Announcements & Communications
4. Go Over last meeting notes/ or not
5. Reports and Old Business
6. New Business
7. Good & Welfare

1. Approve the Agenda.

This is when people can look at the Agenda written out before them and decide if something needs to be added or taken out or changed. It's likely that people will have been emailing before the meeting, but it's also okay to create the Agenda the day of AND DURING the meeting.

2. Check In/Introductions.

This is a short sharing of how & who we are the day of the meeting. We start with our name and our preferred gender pronoun. Then we share a little about where we are at. For example, "I'm XYZ and I use she and her pronouns. I'm really stressed out right now because I've been working all day. "

It's useful information because it helps us keep perspective during our meeting and discussion. If we know XYZ is stressed out we can put her participation in context. Identifying what gender pronouns we use is important for being inclusive and not making assumptions. Gender identity is different than gender expression. Pronoun options include They/them, She/her, He/him.

3. Announcements and Communications:

Where is the bathroom? Is this food vegan? Where are other types of seating? Is someone leaving early? This is when we can address the logistical needs of sitting through the meeting and share information that everyone needs.

4. Read over last meeting's notes, or not. To be decided by the group.

5. Reports and "Old Business"

This is when work group/committees and individuals that have taken on specific tasks check in about how things are coming along. For example, if a group was formed in March to look for a place to regularly do laundry, the laundry workgroup would write up a summary of what they had done in the last month during April's meeting. Even if the report says "too busy to meet this month. "

This keeps everyone in the know. This holds people accountable. This gives people a chance to respond to the work group/committee and offer advice, criticism, and gratitude.

This is also when long-standing decisions or topics from previous meetings are carried over to ensure continuity and follow-through. For example, in March's meeting the agenda topic of creating a dog-walking schedule was moved to next month's meeting because of a lack of time. In April, this topic would be discussed during Reports and Old Business.

6. New Business

This is when all new topics of the Agenda are discussed, anything that came up between the previous month and this month's meeting.

7. Good & Welfare

Slightly different than Announcements & Communications, this is about other stuff in our lives that we want to share with our meeting community. Maybe a party everyone is invited to? Maybe a talk someone is giving? A book reading we're going to? A great music show coming up?

It's also when we can share feedback about the meeting if we want to, like "thanks for such great facilitating XYZ!" or "XYZ, I noticed that you didn't see the hands go up on your left throughout the meeting and I felt like I ended up at the end of the discussions because of it."

We can use this structure to have safe, efficient, and transparent interactions with each other.

What else is important?

A few more important points help us to get started in using democratic meeting structure. First, the facilitator's job is to direct us through our agreed-upon agenda. There are several ways to approach this and all include being responsible to the group- the facilitator is not the head of the meeting. The facilitator is more like a mirror of the will of the group, and a timekeeper to keep everyone to the agreements they have made.

Time is important. When creating an Agenda we can consider how long each topic may take and assign the topic an amount of time. When we approve the agenda we are agreeing to follow that general outline and respect each other's time. We are agreeing to prioritize certain topics. And sometimes we are off on our estimates and need more or less time. This is one of the most common reasons that people make a change to the Agenda.

Another common reason to change the Agenda is to add an item. When Changes need to happen, we vote! We vote because consent is important. We're going to start out using majority voting, unless most people want consensus voting.

For example, during New Business, the topic of our favorite flavor of ice cream is coming to the end of it's 5 minutes. XYZ says she would like to extend the conversation for five more minutes. The group votes not to extend the discussion, and the next topic of the Agenda is started.

Rather than have 5 more minutes of uncertainty and/or disinterest, the group has moved the meeting in the direction that most people wanted.

Is this going to work?

We'll see! We can make changes so our meeting fits our style. We can make it more or less formal, more or less structured. We can do away with any of the components described above and we can add in our ideas.

This is a beginning, and it's not always comfortable! We may value and appreciate the process before we feel we are able to use it well. We can try out this structure and decide to use it or not. We can do whatever we want!