

Guide to Inclusive Meetings

Inclusion involves creating structures and processes where all participants have equal opportunity to engage and meaningfully contribute to decision-making process. Departmental, school and college-wide meetings should be spaces where colleagues have an opportunity to speak, engage, deliberate, debate and contribute to the decision-making process. Facilitating inclusive meetings is a skill that improves with practice. This “Guide to Inclusive Meetings” provides principles and tactics for leading and facilitating inclusive meetings, with a focus on (i) leadership mindset; (ii) establishing viable relational and tactical foundations; (iii) executing the meeting and (iv) post-meeting follow up.

Leadership Mindset:

Our thoughts about our own leadership as well as our feelings about the people that we lead shape how we show up and how we facilitate meetings. Therefore, the first step in facilitating is self-awareness. How are you feeling about your own leadership abilities? What are the opportunities and challenges for your unit and the people you serve? How are you reaching out to others for support in your leadership and service? Are you remembering to engage the whole person, including mind, body, soul and spirit in the work that you are leading?

Establishing the Foundation for Effective Meetings:

Relational Foundations:

- Good relationships are the key to inclusive meetings. Getting to know your colleagues helps you better facilitate dialogue and engagement. Learn their pronouns and how to pronounce their names. As a starting point, work to understand their strengths, weaknesses, perspectives, hopes, aspirations and ways of engaging (ambivert, extrovert, introverts).
- Create structures and systems in your unit that encourage your colleagues to get to know others in your department.
- Create collective ownership for the culture and climate for your unit, including meetings and working groups. For example, some units rotate facilitation for meetings, so that everyone has an opportunity to lead or contribute to the meeting in healthy ways.
- Establish ground rules that clearly lay out the tensions between free speech and healthy dialogue, with the understanding that just because something can be said does not mean that it should be said.
- Make professional development around inclusivity, equity, fairness, respect and belonging an expectation. Continuous learning on these fronts is an active way of undermining explicit bias, implicit bias, sexist, racist and homophobic language.
- Set clear expectations about acceptable and unacceptable behavior and a clear plan for interrupting inappropriate behavior when it happens. Hold offending parties responsible for redress in ways that build respect and trust in the community over time.

Tactical Foundations:

- Set meeting times during business hours that are sensitive to the schedules of all employee types and family types, also being sure to avoid cultural and religious holidays. Ensure physical, digital and cognitive accessibility for all participants, including space for wheelchair riders, interpreters, service animals and other necessities. For meetings with food provided, offer accommodations (e.g., halal, kosher, vegetarian, allergies, etc.).
- Review the list of invitees against the purpose of the meeting, and make sure you aren't missing anyone who should be included. As well, be considerate of others' time and do not invite those for whom the meeting would not be useful or productive.
- Send meeting agendas and accompanying materials ahead of time. Be clear about the meeting's purpose, time and length, and whether advance preparation is expected.

- Specify whether or not decisions are to be made during the meeting, and if so, be clear about roles. Will the decision be made by those in attendance or are they serving as advisors in the process (or simply being advised of the process).
- For virtual meetings, remember to leverage polling options, include opportunities for closed captioning, and invite contributions via chat, hand, and emojis functions.
- For face-to-face meetings, be sure to allow for COVID-19 era precautions for mask wearing and physical distancing.

Meeting Execution:

- Begin meetings with a brief welcoming or centering process. Some groups begin with a Land Acknowledgement, a reminder about values and expectations, an invitation to share around a particular prompt, a poem, a meditation, breathing exercise, stretching or something else. At a minimum, each participant should be given an opportunity to greet or be greeted in ways that help our colleagues feel seen and welcomed.
- Remind everyone of the agenda, meeting time, agreements about how members of the unit will treat one another and what happens when those agreements are broken. Include a “parking lot” to make note of important items that fall outside of the agenda.
- Provide a short break for reflection and processing.
- Be an active listener. Don’t allow yourself to disengage from the discussion or be distracted by email or your phone.
- Assume the role of a conductor in an orchestra who wants to bring about harmony, even if you must journey through discord to get there. Ensure that no one person dominates the discussion, interrupts, or plagiarizes ideas – underrepresented and marginalized colleagues sometimes offer good ideas that are not heard or valued until they are rearticulated by majority faculty and staff. Remember the introverts who are processing information internally as well as those with less power in the room – all of whom may need an invitation to share their good ideas aloud with colleagues.
- Use an equity lens as you make decisions, allocate resources, recognize contributions, make service requests, etc.
- As you conclude the meeting, clarify next steps, who is responsible for each action item and the timeline or completion date(s). End with a summary of the important issues, action items, outcomes, etc.

Post Meeting Follow Up:

- Send a thank you note to all attendees along with a summary of the meeting, important decisions, next steps and timelines for future action.
- Take time to reflect on what happened at the meeting, opportunities for improvement, and the need to follow up or check in with colleagues.

References:

Inclusive Meeting Guide. Harvard Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging; *The Art of Hosting*; *Art of Gathering*. *LACE: What It Is and How it Works*. *Advancing Belonging in Organizations: An Equity Fluent Leadership Playbook*, Berkeley Haas.