

Getting What You Came For

Using Meetings to Advance an Agenda

Hosting a meeting can be a strategic tool for advocates. However, many times, advocates go into meetings and don't know what to ask, or don't make the request very well. Below are a few tips for using a meeting strategically. This guide focuses on meetings with key stakeholders. For a guide on general meeting facilitation, please see another resource guide we've created: **Fantastic Facilitation: A Guide to Leading Effective, Inclusive Meetings.**

Before we share tips, here is a scenario to think about:

Imagine that as a self advocate, you've been working for months to get a meeting with your local congressman. The congressman is finally in town and will meet with you. Everyone in your group wants to go to the meeting, but agrees that maybe sending all of the members would be distracting. The group decides to send five people.

There are so many things the group wants to accomplish in your meeting. All feel important, but the five of you settle on three things. The meeting starts off well, but one advocate ends up talking about something off-topic. Half of the meeting time is gone. The congressman says he has 15 minutes left that he can talk. The group starts going over the three topics. The congressman nods and says he agrees that all are important. He tells a personal story about how his family is impacted by the issue, too. He thanks you for your time and everyone takes a picture. The group leaves.

Was this a successful meeting? Why, or why not? How can you tell if a meeting is successful or not?

Oftentimes, the best way to measure if a meeting was successful is by asking if the people in it got closer to what they wanted. Here are a few tips to use meetings as a tool to advance an agenda:

Location: When possible, host the meeting where you feel comfortable. Pick a place where you feel like you are in charge or in your power. Sometimes you don't get a choice about where the meeting is going to be. If you can't host a meeting where you want, try to do what you can to be comfortable. For example, you may want to go to a meeting early to see what the seating arrangement will be like, find a quieter spot in the room, etc.

Deciding who will attend: Pick one to three people to go to the meeting. More than that can be overwhelming and distracting. Decide what role each person will play and, if you need to, practice beforehand. Pick people who are on the same page about what they want to get out of the meeting. If people disagree, meet beforehand to decide what direction they will take. If the people in your group argue with one another during the meeting, this will make a very bad impression.

Research before the meeting: Research the people you are meeting with as much as you can: try to learn about their background, what their daily life looks like, what is important to them, how they perceive the world, and how they communicate. Doing this makes it easier to develop a connection – you can reference things they have in common with your group's cause. You can do this research by looking the person up on, for example, Google, Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. You can also do this by talking to friends or acquaintances who know the person, and asking them for advice.

Target your time: Pick one (or two) things that you want to focus on in your meeting. Cut out everything that is not related to those few things. Good questions to ask yourself are: “What do I want? Does doing this get me what I want?” For example, if you want to educate someone about an issue, just focus on the issue. If you want to make a request, everything during your meeting should lead up to making the request. If you are building a relationship, everything you do should be about laying the ground for that relationship.

Example: An advocate wants to ask a potential group of donors for a \$2,000 donation. She has the opportunity to give a presentation. She starts the presentation by telling a story about herself, what the problem is that her community faces, what she plans to do about that problem, and how the donors can help. Everything she talks about leads up to her asking the donors for funding. She leaves out everything that is not related to that.

Balance Emotion and Reason: Often times, advocates will go into a meeting and explain how something makes them feel. Other times, advocates go into a meeting and just talk about data, but not how it impacts people. BOTH are important. Do what you can to make the person you are meeting with imagine what it would be like to be in your shoes. At the same time, present them with technical information so they have the information they need to understand why something is important.

Example: A group of neighbors want to put a stop sign on their street. The parents could tell a story about how their kid was almost hit by a car and how they felt when that happened. They could also give technical information, like how many stop signs a street should have, how much a stop sign costs, how much it could cost the city if someone gets hurt because there is no stop sign, etc.

Listen to the Other Person: If you only say what you came into the meeting planning to say and nothing else, the other person won't feel heard; they'll feel unhappy that you're reading to them from a script, and not engaging with them about the topic. At the end of each idea you present, pause for a few seconds to give them a chance to respond, and engage with any responses before continuing with the agenda. Depending on the level of engagement you see in the person you're meeting with, be willing to adjust your strategy accordingly. If they ask questions, that's usually a good sign.

Stay on Track: Derailing can be deadly for a meeting. Derailing is when someone goes off track. Often times the person you are meeting with, or a fellow advocate, will start telling a story that's unrelated to the focus of your meeting. If you have to, give them some time to make their point, but after a reasonably polite amount of time, try to jump in. Say a complimentary sentence that connects what they're saying to your main focus. Go back to your main focus. If you have fellow advocates that go off track often, it can be helpful to come up with a signal ahead of time so they know to stop. Sometimes, you can predict when someone is about to derail and you can stop it before it happens.

Next Steps: Before you end any meeting, figure out what the next steps are, who will accomplish them, and by what date. This way, the person you meet with is promising to do something after you leave. Even if there are no big next steps, it can be good to say "we'll communicate in two weeks" so that that person agrees that you can contact them directly. It is good to make next steps measurable and concrete, meaning that all parties know what the next step is and how to do it.

For questions about this resource guide, please contact the **Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN)** at info@autisticadvocacy.org

This Resource Guide was developed for ASAN's **Pacific Alliance on Disability Self-Advocacy** project. Pacific Alliance is an effort funded by the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities to support self advocacy groups with technical assistance. For more about the ASAN or the Pacific Alliance, visit us at www.autisticadvocacy.org.



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The Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) is a non-profit organization run by and for autistic people. ASAN provides support and services to individuals on the autism spectrum while working to change public perception and combat misinformation. Our activities include public policy advocacy, community engagement to encourage inclusion and respect for neurodiversity, quality of life oriented research and the development of autistic cultural activities.