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Strengthening Organizations, Strengthening Communities

Helpful Hints for a Successful First Meeting

1. Before your **first public meeting**, be sure the "core group" has had an opportunity to discuss and reach a consensus on what the general purpose, goals, and membership of the group might be -- so they may present those ideas at this meeting.
2. Create a friendly atmosphere from the beginning. Consider having a member of your core group to serve as a greeter to welcome and introduce newcomers when they arrive.
3. At the first meeting the group leader(s) should state the group's possible **purposes and goals** (as agreed upon by the core group) to the new members for their comments and feedback. Also, the group leader(s) can take the opportunity to share their experiences which led to their interest in the formation of the group. This can encourage others to share their own experiences.
4. Be sure new members are given an opportunity to introduce themselves and briefly tell their "personal story," if they wish. Do not pressure them to tell all at the first meeting. It may take several meetings before some people feel comfortable enough to participate and share openly.
5. Discussing a name for the group is an interesting agenda item. A name provides an identity and uniqueness for the group. Allowing the members to suggest a name for the group can be an interesting activity for this first meeting, e.g., an appropriate phrase, acronym, etc.
6. Dealing with organizational issues such as election/selection of leaders, sponsorship, incorporation, dues, etc., may be too burdensome for the first meeting and might be more easily taken up at subsequent meeting.
7. Start and finish your meeting on time. Have an agenda prepared that you intend to follow. Be flexible, however, and allow members to speak freely. The group leader(s) can always ask the group if they want to extend the time of the meeting.
8. **Refreshments** (coffee/cake, etc.) should be provided before and/or after the meeting. This serves to provide for an informal atmosphere and allows members to more easily socialize, discuss problems, and get to know one another.
9. Regarding group structure and leadership, there are different models used by groups ranging from highly organized groups with elected officers, to loosely structured groups using an informal shared leadership model. Whatever form of leadership your group chooses, remember, the purpose of leadership in self-help is to initiate and encourage the self-help mutual aid process that occurs when members share their own insights and skills in helping each other.
10. Before adjourning the meeting, decide on time and place for your next meeting.

Used with permission from the New Jersey Self-Help Clearinghouse.