6. EFFECTIVE MEETING SKILLS

One of the fundamental ways of leading groups, activities, projects and organizations within Girl Guiding/Girl Scouting is meeting in smaller groups. Meetings can be time consuming, and as most meeting participants are spending leisure time voluntarily, we should expect the meetings to be just as or even more efficient than meetings at work or in our educational environment.

6.1 What is a meeting?

A meeting may be defined as a gathering of (usually) more than two people who come together to consider some specific issues and to take some kind of decision(s) that are elevant to those issues.

> An effective meeting is one, that achieves its objectives within an agreed timeframe and to the satisfaction of all the participants.
>
> In other words, an effective meeting will make a difference and lead to follow-on action of some kind.

6.2 Why call a meeting?

There are many reasons for calling a meeting including:

- to reach a decision or decide on a plan of action as a group
- to help someone make a decision
- to provide and exchange information
- to obtain or pool information
- to solve a challenge or a problem
- to air a grievance
- to discuss new ideas, or to create them

Before deciding to hold a meeting, it is a good idea to ask the following questions:

- Is the meeting really necessary?
- What do we want the meeting to achieve?
- What would happen if we did not hold it?
- When the meeting is over, how will we know if it was successful?
- How many resources (people, time, money, transportation) should be invested in having a meeting?

Meetings that make a difference, do not just happen. To be successful, a meeting must:

- Have clear objectives which are realistic, focused and measurable
- Use positive dynamic language that is accepted by the participants of the meeting. That means it is focused on specific tasks, such as 'decide', 'develop', 'recommend', etc., rather than vague non-specific alternatives like 'discuss','explore, etc.
- Have an effective facilitator (usually it is the chair)
- Take place in a suitable environment – if it is a physical meeting.
- Start and end on time
- Follow an agreed agenda, and stay on track
- Involve an appropriate level of participation by everyone present
- Make appropriate use of the skills, experience and knowledge of all present
- Maintain a balance between task (getting through the agenda) and process ('orchestrating' a positive climate in which people feel happy to participate)
- Decide the actions which need to be taken; agree and allocate follow-up with a time frame for implementation

6.3 What kind of meeting?

Nowadays more and more meetings are not held physically at the same place. Instead, with the use of electronic equipment such as telephone, computers, and television, there are many other ways of 'meeting' people to make decisions.

WAGGGS, being a global organization uses opportunities for virtual meetings to communicate rather than physical meetings that are time consuming and expensive due to travelling. It is recommended that the first meeting of a committee or working group is held face to face with the aim of forming the relationship between participants.

There are different types of meetings. Meetings can be formal or informal, structured or unstructured; this depends on the type of meeting it is, and the purpose for which it has been called.

An informal meeting is usually designed to elicit information, promote discussion or generate ideas. It can be called at any time and is usually less structured than a formal meeting.

Informal meetings:

- Are designed to facilitate the flow of information
- Are often impromptu and may be 'ad hoc' (addressing one issue only)
- Often have no formal agenda
- Are held in a convenient location, often over lunch or dinner
- May have no official chairperson
- Allow participants to speak informally
- May have no formal record of proceedings kept; participants making personal notes as the meeting proceeds.
- Support the networking and relationship between participants

For a formal meeting:

- Participants are given prior notice
- Agenda items are circulated for prior preparation by participants
- A predetermined venue is used
- The chairperson directs discussion
- Participants speak 'though the chair' (i.e. they seek permission to speak before doing so)
- Rules of debate are applied
- Motions are proposed and spoken for and against
- A formal vote is taken
- A true record (minutes) is made of proceedings and circulated to individuals on an agreed list (this often includes people not directly involved in the meeting)

In Girl Guiding/Girl Scouting the weekly activities with girls are the most common way of meeting. This will not be covered in this section, as it is covered in the Leading Teams module. As a leader at any level you have to lead or participate in different kind of leaders' meetings though, which include:

- Planning meetings, long term or short term – planning a future activity or a season's programme
- Annual General Meetings (AGMs) - formal, statutory meetings
- Inaugural meetings - the first meeting, held only once
- Executive Board meetings - meetings with nominated individuals to make decisions, discuss common issues, exchange information, etc. There may be:

    - Executive committee - usually a board of directors or top executives
    - Sub-committee meetings - appointed by a 'parent' committee to research a specific issue and report back with recommendations. Not a decision-making body.
    - Ad hoc committee meetings - appointed for a special purpose and disbanded once the objectives are achieved
    - Advisory committee meetings - set up to research and co-ordinate findings and report and recommend to a "higher" committee
    - Standing committee meetings - established to deal with on-going specific areas
    - Working Party meetings - consisting of individuals with diverse expertise to plan an event, investigate a problem, or find the answers to questions

- Conferences - To consult, pool ideas, solve problems, change attitudes or extend the level of expertise of participants
- Seminar - A conference of specialists for the purpose of discussion, research or study
- Panel - Experts to discuss specific problems or issues, from a range of different perspectives
- Symposium - A meeting at which each person present delivers a prepared speech on an issue
- Forum - More interactive than a symposium, since the audience may ask questions of the speakers
- Colloquy - A formal conversation between a small group of experts and lay people
- Brainstorm - An informal gathering to bounce ideas back and forth, regardless of their validity, for later evaluation
- Think-tank - Undertaking intensive study and research into a specific area

6.4 The terminology of meetings

You will be able to participate more effectively in meetings if you know and understand the special language associated with them. Here are some of the more commonly used terms:

Abstention:	Refraining from voting for or against a motion
Ad hoc:	Something set up for a specific purpose
Adjournment:	Deferring a meeting or discussion on a specific item
Agenda:	A list of business to be discussed at a meeting
Amendment:	An addition or alteration to a motion
Apologies:	Notice from invited participants of their inability to attend a meeting
Casting vote:	If rules permit, a vote cast by the chairperson, if the votes for and against a motion are equal
Constitution:	A written document stating the basic rules by which an organization is set up and run
En bloc:	As a body, altogether
Ex officio:	By virtue of office. An office bearer may automatically be a member of a sub-committee
Honorary:	Performing duties without being paid
Minutes:	A factual account of what transpires at a meeting
Motion:	A formal proposal to be discussed and voted on at a meeting
Nem con:	No votes against a motion
Order:	Ensuring all speakers have a fair and reasonable hearing
Out of order:	When a chairperson rules a speaker is not keeping to the point under discussion or is speaking unacceptably
Point of order:	When members raise a query regarding improper meeting procedure, or possible infringement of the constitution of the meeting
Proxy:	Authorising someone to vote on behalf of another
Quorum:	The number of members, laid down by the rules, required to be present before a meeting can be held
Resolution:	A motion, which has been passed
Rider:	An additional clause added to a resolution after being proposed, seconded and voted upon
Terms of reference:	Guidelines and constraints on work to be carried out by a committee
Unanimous:	When all present vote in favour of a motion
Verbatim:	Recording what is said, word for word
Vote:	Saying Yes or No to a motion or an amendment

6.5 Preparing for Meetings

Preparation is an essential component to ensure an effective meeting.   Here is a checklist to enable you to cover all the key points of your preparations:

1. **Purpose** of the meeting. What key results do you want to achieve?

2. **Timing**. How long should the meeting last? When is the best time to hold it?

3. **Participants**. Who should attend? Be sure to include those with the authority to decide, those whose commitment is needed, and those who need to know.

   Also include who should be informed about the meeting without directly taking part in it.

4. **Agenda**. What items should be dealt with? Who is responsible for preparing and distributing the agenda? How will participants help in developing the agenda?

5. **Physical arrangements**. What facilities and equipment are needed? Refreshments?

6. **How should** the meeting room be arranged?

7. **Role assignments**. What role assignments need to be agreed? For example, Chairperson, Minute-taker, Secretary, Timekeeper?

In preparing for a meeting, the agenda is a key tool to:

- plan the meeting
- motivate participants to reflect on and prepare their contributions to the different issues mentioned
- maintain an objective control of the meeting's progress
- measuring the successful results of the meeting

Here is an optional plan to help you to create your agenda:

- Always write agenda items as tangible objectives e.g.:

    - to decide, to agree, to solve, to check, to inform, to review, to plan, to set, to identify, to change, to develop, to celebrate, to evaluate ….etc.

- Never begin an agenda item with: To discuss.
- Indicate the 'owner' of the agenda item (who requested the item's inclusion at the meeting)
- Allocate appropriate time to discuss each agenda item
- Schedule the most urgent and important items (in terms of the results needed) early in the meeting
- Always include an item to review the effectiveness of the meeting's process at the end of the meeting (i.e. Group Exercise 6A)

- The contents of an agenda should include:
    - Title of the meeting
    - Main purpose of the meeting
    - Date, time and venue
    - Review of key actions resulting from the previous meeting

6. EFFECTIVE MEETING SKILLS (Contd)

There are different models for agendas:

- **Open agenda**: Only outlines the framework for the meeting and the key subject. This can leave the reflection and expectations open and all participants on the same level of knowledge when the meeting takes place. This kind of meeting gives the participants an opportunity to shape a mutual picture of the key subject, based on social constructions during the meeting.

- **Detailed agenda**: Agenda issues with comments, perhaps including annexed proposals, reporting and questions for discussion.

  Detailed agendas indicate expectations of preparation from the participants, so that many issues can be dealt with in a relatively short time.

  Detailed agendas also delegates the responsibility for the success of the meeting.

When planning an agenda, make sure you allocate sufficient time for each subject. You may supply the Agenda with estimated times which also allows people to participate in parts of the meeting.

It is recommended to have the 'heavy' subjects in the middle of the meeting, when participants are comfortable, confident and still have energy.

Some agendas are also made ready for participants' comments and preparations:

Agenda issue	Subject	Responsible	Notes before meeting	Notes during meeting
1 (2pm)	Minutes last meeting – to be approved	Chair		
2 (2.15)	Budget – to be confirmed	Treasurer		
3 (2.40)	New actions – proposal for debate	NN		
4 (3.15)	Feedback on existing projects – written orientation from a. Project 1 b. Project 2 c. Project 3	Xx Yy zz		
5 (3.55)	Next meeting	Chair		
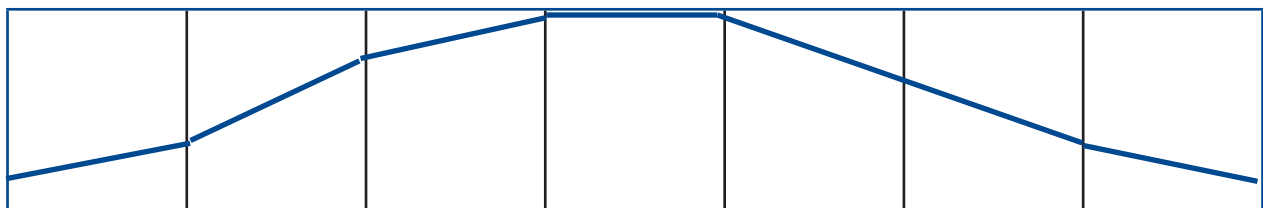
The graph above shows the flow of a meeting's different issues according to importance and involvement.

Management skills

6.6 Effective participation in a meeting

Meetings rely almost entirely on the spoken word to achieve their objectives. Even so, in a WAGGGS setting we very often start a meeting and even a new Agenda Issue with an activity, an icebreaker or at least a related game or song. This refreshes not only the relations, but also the brains, as laughing and singing make us breathe more.

> *God respects me when I work*
> *And loves me when I sing*
>
> (English Guide Magazine, 1980's)

Vigorous discussion is an essential component in the process of an effective meeting.

A key communication skill is to be able to stimulate and guide discussion on a topic in ways, which encourage wide participation, remains relevant to the issue, and leads towards confident decision-making as the desired outcome.

In this process, there are three stages:

- Skilful discussion
- Skilful questions
- Active listening

6.6.1 Skilful discussion

Skilful discussion lies on the communication continuum between raw debate or argument and exploratory dialogue (re the Communication module).

Skilful discussion is all about the group's intention to come to a conclusion - to make a decision, to reach agreement, to plan some specific action, or to identify priorities.

In a meeting, the technique of skilful discussion is focused on the task (as identified in the agenda) to be productive, it uses processes which enable thoughts to surface, assumptions to be challenged and areas of disagreement to be examined. These processes enhance the quality of the group's collective thinking and interacting.

6.6.1.1 Guidelines for using skilful discussion in meetings

1. Pay attention to your intentions
   - What do I want/need from this discussion?
   - How am I willing to be influenced?

2. Balance advocacy with inquiry
   - What leads you to suggest this option?
   - What do you mean by ……?

3. Build shared meaning
   - When we say …., what are we really saying?

4. Use self-awareness as a resource

- What am I thinking?
- What am I feeling?
- What do I want/need at this moment?

5. Explore impasses or 'stale-mate' situations

- What do we agree on and what do we disagree on?

6.6.2 Skilful questions

Skilful questions will enable you to become an active participant in the process of skilful discussion. Here are some examples of the kinds of questions, which may be used to ensure the most productive kind of discussion during a meeting.

a.   Ask for **feelings and opinions**

Use questions, which will help people to express their ideas, and draw people out.   For example:

- What is your reaction to …?
- How do you feel about …?
- What are some of the other ways to get at …?
- What prompted your decision to …?
- How did you happen to learn that …?
- How did you feel when you found out that …?

b.   **Paraphrase**

This is a way to help people to reach mutual understanding. For example:

- Are you asking me to …?
- Let me see if I understand your position. Are you saying that …?
- I am not sure I understand you.   Are you saying that …?
- Before we go on, let me paraphrase what I think you are proposing.
- What I am hearing is … Is that right?

c.   **Encourage participation**

Sometimes people feel inhibited about participating in meetings, even though they have useful opinions to express. The following types of questions will help them to participate:

- Anna, how do you feel about this?
- Bella, how would you answer Clara's questions?
- Before we go on, I'd like to hear from Donna on this.
- We have heard from everyone, except Ella. What are your feelings on this?

d.   Ask for a **summary**

- Lots of good suggestions have been presented. Will someone please summarise the main points before we go on?
- It is clear that Franca does not agree. Could you summarise your main objections?

e.   Ask for **clarification**
- I did not understand that last comment. What would you do if …?
- It is still not clear to me. What do I do when …?

f.   Ask for **examples**
- Can you expand on that?   I am not sure I understand.
- Will you give some examples of what you mean?

g.   **Initiate action**
- How do you think we should …?
- I'd like some suggestions on possible ways we could get started

h.   Do a **quick survey**
- Let us see a show of hands. How many are in favour of this proposal?
- How does everybody feel about this? Let us start with Greta.

i.   **Reflect** what you think someone is **feeling**
- Irina, I get the impression that you are not happy with this. Is that right?

j.   Be **supportive**
- Let's give Jemma a chance to tell us how she sees the problem

k.   **Check targets or orientation**
- Are we asking the right question?
- Are these the most important priorities?
- Is this the only way to get it done?

l.   **Look into the future**
- If we did it this way, what is the worst thing that could happen?
- If it does not work, what have we lost?

In summary, skilful questions depend on knowing when to ask OPEN or CLOSED questions, questions that give a sentence answer (Open) or a yes/no answer (Closed). (re: Communications module).

6.6.3 Active listening

Active listening is the natural partner of skilful questioning.

There is no point in framing skilful questions if we do not have the skills to listen actively to the replies. Although we have already covered the vital communication skill of active listening earlier in the module, here is a checklist to review some of the essential points for active listening.

This might also be an appropriate opportunity for you to review your action plan for active listening, which you made earlier.

> *You cannot listen with your mouth full of words!*

Management skills

6. EFFECTIVE MEETING SKILLS (Contd)

a.   **Stop talking**. You cannot listen if you are talking.

b.   Imagine the **other person's viewpoint**. Picture yourself in their position, using their language, bringing their "baggage", having their values.

c.   Look, act and **BE interested**.

d.   **Observe non verbal behaviour** (tone of voice and body language) to gain deeper insight into what is said - for the meaning beyond the words.

e.   **Do not interrupt**. Sit still, even beyond your tolerance level.

f.   **Listen 'between the lines'** for implicit meanings as well as explicit ones. Look for omissions, things left unsaid or unexplained, which should logically be present. Use the skilful questions guidelines to ask about these.

g.   **Speak affirmatively**; resist the temptation to jump in with a critical or disparaging comment at the moment a view contrary to your own is expressed.

h.   To ensure understanding, **rephrase** what the other person has told you (see skilful questions above).

An effective meeting depends on its participants. A productive participant:

- prepares for the meeting
- contributes to the discussion
- listens to others' views and opinions
- considers the issue objectively, and on merit
- takes brief notes of key points
- contributes to the orderly conduct of the meeting
- provides feedback to the meeting's chairperson
- carries out agreed action

An effective participant will arrive on time, will not carry on 'side' conversations, will ask relevant questions, will listen and stay involved.

6.7 Making decisions in meetings

In most meetings, there are five recognised routes to making a decision. They are:

- A simple show of hands (majority vote)
- A secret ballot (often used when the issue to be voted on is particularly sensitive or involves specific individuals present at the meeting)
- Allowing the Chairperson to 'gauge' the mood of those present
- Allowing the Chairperson to take silence from the member as signifying agreement with what is being proposed
- By a generally expressed 'consensus' of views

The method of reaching decisions by genuine consensus has distinct advantages over the other methods, in that it:

- Encourages everyone to contribute to the process
- Allows all points of view to be represented
- Ensures that members are more likely to support the decision when it comes to putting it into action

In working to achieve consensus, there are four clear steps:

1. Ensure a thorough discussion of the issue
2. Enable everyone who wishes to contribute an opinion to do so, and that they are **actively** listened to
3. Check that everyone agrees that in the circumstances a decision needs to be made then make it
4. Everyone involved in the total process then behaves, outside the meeting, as if the decision had been their own preferred option.

6.7.1 Decision-making skills

Here is a summary of best practice skills for making decisions in meetings:

- Agenda is circulated in advance
- No-one is allowed to dominate discussion
- Everyone participates
- The meeting keeps to time
- Skilful discussion techniques are used
- The Chairperson is in control of the meeting
- People use open questions and active listening skills
- Everyone has prepared well for the meeting
- The discussion stays on track
- Decisions are taken and recorded
- Everyone knows what their next steps should be
- Minutes or notes of the meeting are circulated swiftly after the meeting

Management skills

6. EFFECTIVE MEETING SKILLS (Contd)

All the factors mentioned are important for successful meetings. However, the single most important factor to ensure an effective meeting is:

> **The Chairperson is in control of the meeting.**

You can practice your consensus skills whenever you need to reach a decision that everyone needs to "buy into" to achieve the objectives of the meeting. In this way, people will support the implementation of the decision and produce positive results.

Here is a checklist to help you to develop your consensus decision-making skills for meetings.

Consensus decision-making advice

D   Ask each individual how they feel about the issue, and why.

D   Ask for facts, definitions or explanations and try to uncover what different thoughts or words mean to other group members

D   Clarify differences of opinion with facts (if they are known)

D   Modify your own views when faced with compelling facts and opinions

D   Identify similarities and differences among the points of view in the group

D   Reinforce open-mindedness, the willingness to actively listen to other views - and the need for co-operation

D   Resist being defensive when challenged and avoid emotional encounters

D   List the positive and negative aspects or consequences of each point of view

D   Encourage participation from everyone in the meeting. Create and contribute to a climate of collaboration and the group's convergent thinking

D   Discuss and define the level of 'risk' associated with a decision, and develop actions that will enable everyone to appropriately manage the risk.

6.8 Effective Presentation Skills

During a meeting you often have to present the status, new ideas or the outcome of a project to the meeting participants.

These presentations will challenge your skills as a leader, and they can make good use of your experiences as a Girl Guides/Girl Scout leader. Presentations supplied with visual aids and activities are welcome change of pace to meetings.

6.8.1 Elements of efficient presentations

- Attract and concentrate the attention of the audience
    - Present some interesting paradoxical facts that will be taken into consideration during your presentation
    - Tell a personal story to illustrate the concept of the presentation
    - Start with an interesting and easy-to-remember quotation

- Underline the goals and objectives of the presentation
    - Through the issues included
    - Through an overview of the presentation, perhaps with handouts for the audience

- Concentrate on important elements
    - Limit this if possible to seven key points (or groups) of information
    - Vary your voice and visuals
    - Use keywords rather than long sentences

- Increase active participation
    - Use a common and/or well-known related situation as a starting point (an icebreaker or illustrative game)
    - Questioning
    - Give time for reflection
    - Ask audience to give solution suggestions
    - Let the audience test the facts given
    - Give handouts with missing words or facts that the audience should put in during the presentation (see example next page)

- Summarise the presentation
    - Give time for additional questions

To be effective when you present your intended message you should focus both on the content of the message and the method to involve your audience and invite them to feel ownership of the message. This involvement also helps the impact and your delivery. Therefore, think of:

- the order of the content
- questioning as a way of communicating the message and getting an idea of the perception as well as the ownership
- effective presentation
- creating connection between subjects
- visual support
- adjoining the delivery to the needs of the audience

6.9 Follow-up after meetings

We noted at the beginning of this section that the prime purpose of meetings is to make decisions, which will involve action by various individuals, or groups present at the meeting.

The minute-taker should be advised of his/her role before the meeting. The minute-taker may wish to have prepared the process, maybe even typed the formal part of the minutes ahead of the meeting.

A modern way of minutes-taking is having a computer connected to a projector so, at least all the decisions can be watched on a screen by all participants and agreed upon immediately.

6.9.1 Minutes, action points and showcasing decisions

All decisions taken at meetings are contained in the Minutes (the official record of the meeting). Depending on the kind of meeting, and the way it is run (formal or informal; structured or unstructured), the minutes can be:

- full of details, reporting who said or meant what (nice for people who did not attend the meeting, to be informed of what was going on).
- less detailed, summarising the process of the meeting (to memorize and have a documentation of the process)
- a decision report, following up on the decisions. This needs the prepared documents to be readable for later use)
- an action checklist, marking who should do what, how and when.

However they are presented, the minutes must be accepted as accurate by all members before they can be verified by the chairperson.

All minutes must show clearly:

- date and venue of the meeting
- names of those present, and those who sent apologies for absence
- what decisions were made
- who proposed and seconded items for decision
- when there was a vote (as opposed to consensus decision making), how they were cast (numbers in favour, numbers against and numbers who abstained)
- what future action is agreed
- who will carry it out and by when
- subjects for future meeting agendas

It is also useful to include (as briefly as possible) a summary of the main opinions expressed during discussion and a summary of the reasons why the meeting took a particular decision.

To summarise, good minutes should be accurate, brief and clear. Before the meeting you should co-ordinate with important stakeholders, and people who are connected to the meeting subjects but not attending, how they need the decision information to reach them after the meeting.

Make sure minutes are readable for all those who get them. Initials and abbreviations used must be explained.

They should follow the same order as the agenda, and be set out in such a way that those who need to take some specific action are prompted to do so. (Some minutes carry a separate action column with individuals' names against specific items, and some summarise questions and tasks for specific other groups at the end of the document).

You can use the minutes of one meeting as a starting point for the agenda for the following meeting.

6.11 Other relevant issues about meetings

There are several other practical and psychological issues when planning an efficient meeting.

6.11.1 Time setting

As mentioned earlier, time is both a helper and a challenge when arranging meetings.

When setting the date and venue, make sure to allow travelling time for all participants, . If appropriate, also allow opportunities for the participants to arrange other meetings to maximise the efficiency of them all being in one place at the same time.

When setting the agenda (as mentioned in section 6.5), try to allocate the time needed for each issue, and start with short and easy issues to motivate participants for the more time and energy consuming issues in the middle of the meeting, ending up with the shorter issues at the end of the meeting.

If time is a pressure to your meeting results, consider which issues can be postponed and which are urgent, and place the urgent ones before the main issue.

If possible, set dates for as many of the following meetings as possible when you have the majority of participants together.

6.11.2 Arranging the meeting room(s)

There are several ways of setting up a meeting room. Make sure most participants are seated to see naturally in the direction of the chair person or the place where displays are shown.

You can sit

- Around a round or oval table with the chair person visible to everyone
- A rectangular table, wide enough for everyone to see everyone
- Classroom-style with tables arranged in a U shape pointing towards the screen and chair person
- More rows of tables for 2-3 persons, shaped like half circles behind each other, everybody facing towards the 'centre of the circle'
- Like an auditorium in half circles and different levels, facing towards the circle centre
- Like fish bones – tables partly facing each other.
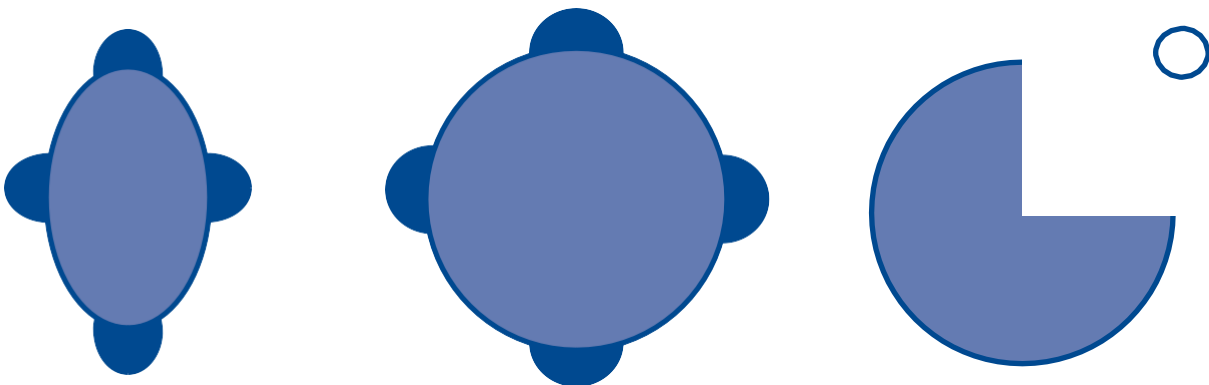
The person taking the minutes should be placed so she is able to hear everyone, and able to watch the chair person to make sure the minutes are summarised correctly.

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