



# CHALLENGE



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A Herff Jones IMPACT Resource for Students

## Making Meetings Active

With information to share, plans to make, and networking to do, meetings are often essential, but let's face it—they can also be dull! The challenge for student leaders is to get the essential work of the meeting done in a way that will engage the group members and have them wanting to come back. Try these tips for making meetings active.

**Be sure everyone knows members' names.** This sounds obvious, but if you want people to engage in active discussion, it's important that they be able to call on each other or refer to each other by name. Don't assume that all members of your organization know each other. Nametags at meetings help, but especially at the beginning of the year, do a few icebreaker type games to help make sure people learn names. A few good ones to use include:

- **Alphabetical lineup.** Ask members to line up in alphabetical order by the letter of their first name. They will have to ask one another their names to be able to complete the task.
- **Name tag mix-up.** Give everyone a nametag of

someone else in the group and ask everyone to find the person whose nametag they have. Once they do so, have them share something about themselves such as a favorite movie, favorite teacher, etc.

- **Name chain.** Get in a circle and select a person to begin by introducing him or herself: "Hi, I'm Susie." The next



person follows with, "Hi, I'm Jamal, and this is Susie." Each successive person introduces him or herself and all the preceding people until you have gone all the way around the circle. The people at the end will have a harder time of it, but by then the names will have been repeated so many times it shouldn't be too difficult. (Other members can help, too!)

- **Encourage participation.** Cultivate an atmosphere in which everyone is welcome to participate. The quickest way to

have group members drop out is to allow discussion to be dominated by a few members. People who feel that their ideas don't count will not be excited to attend future meetings. Some ways to ensure everyone gets a chance to participate include:

- **Go-arounds.** Quickly go around the group and have each member present a quick comment on the topic being discussed or pass if they wish.
- **Buzz groups.** Some topics generate a lot of discussion, which can present a problem in a meeting with limited time. To allow everyone to express their opinion, form small buzz groups of 3–5 members and have them discuss the issue in these groups. Each group can report out its major points at the end.
- **Talk tokens.** Give each member of the group a few small tokens—pennies, poker chips, pebbles, etc. Members are only allowed to have the floor for discussion as many times as they have tokens. After they have used all their tokens they must be quiet. This method has the dual purpose of making people really think before they talk to

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make sure what they have to say is worth giving up a token, and it also prevents a few people from monopolizing the discussion.

**Rotate roles.** For committee meetings and other informal meetings, let different people serve as facilitator and recorder. This gives everyone a chance to lead the group and doesn't put the burden of keeping minutes on any one person. Also, when it comes time to assign jobs to people, vary your method of determining who gets to go first. Instead of just asking for volunteers—don't the same people tend to be first to volunteer?—try assigning jobs by birthday order, or to people who have blue shirts on, or to those who have the most pets.

**Establish a “parking lot.”** Sometimes ideas come up in a discussion that are worth exploring, but now is not the time to talk about them. Create a separate list or chart paper on which these ideas or issues can be written for later discussion. This sends the signal to people that although their ideas might not be appropriate for discussion right now, their input is valued and will be considered later. Be sure to follow up on the parking lot items after the meeting or put them on the agenda for the next meeting.

**Vary the pace.** Plan the agenda so that the types of activities are varied. If participants have been sitting for a long time, get them up and moving or break

them into smaller discussion groups. One way to do this is to designate the four corners of the room as different aspects or positions on the topic being discussed—those opposed, those in favor, neutral, undecided. Ask people to move to the corner that represents their position. They could discuss why they feel that way and each group could report out to the whole. Allow people a chance to change their choice after hearing the other views.

One simple thing to get people out of their seats for a minute is to take a vote on an issue by having people stand to show their position: “All those in favor of the motion stand up.”

Another idea is to insert a quick icebreaker type activity like “Stand Up and Be Counted,” in which you explain that you'd like to conduct a quick survey to find out “who's here today.” Ask participants to stand up and be counted if a statement you read applies to them. Develop a list of statements like:

- Are there any freshmen?
- Are there any people who play sports?
- Are there any new members?
- Are there any people who play an instrument?

**Assign group roles.** To keep members alert during a presentation and to promote discussion afterward, divide the group into four small teams

and give each team one of the following assignments:

- **Questioners:** Responsible for coming up with two questions about the information presented.
- **Agreers:** Responsible for stating two or three points they agreed with or found helpful.
- **Disagreers:** Responsible for commenting on points they disagreed with or found unhelpful and explain why.
- **Appliers:** Responsible for giving specific examples to which the information could be applied for applications for its use.

After the information has been presented, ask each group to spend a few minutes completing its task, then call on each team to present its information or examples.

**Give rewards.** Consider the behaviors you would like to see more of in future meetings and start rewarding people for exhibiting those behaviors. Have a supply of small candies, stickers, school pencils, or other treats with which to reward participation. For example, stand outside the meeting room and give a reward to everyone who arrives on time or toss a treat to every person who volunteers a comment during discussion. You'll see a marked increase of people who participate in the discussion and who are on time to the next meeting!