

A photograph of several senior citizens sitting in a circle, engaged in conversation. The focus is on the back of a woman's head with short, wavy grey hair in the foreground. Other people are visible in the background, slightly out of focus.

# Senior Serving Organizations

A Guide to Planning Inclusive Meetings & Events

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**Senior Serving Organizations:  
A Guide to Planning Inclusive Meetings & Events (2016)**

Developed for the City of Edmonton

by

Centre for Race and Culture

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**CENTRE  
FOR RACE  
AND CULTURE**



and Associates



## Introduction

The City of Edmonton is pleased to present Senior Serving Organizations: A Guide to Planning Inclusive Meetings & Events.

The guide is a practical and easy to use resource that staff and volunteers at senior serving organizations can use to ensure that meetings and events are planned and implemented to maximize the inclusion and participation of all seniors and community members.

Whether you are responsible for organizing events or planning meetings, this guide provides you with tips, tools and ideas that will help you work in a participatory and inclusive manner within your organization.



# Who is a Senior?

The number of seniors in Edmonton is growing, but as we know, seniors are not a homogeneous group. There are immense differences within the senior population and these affect when and how seniors participate in programs and activities, and the degree to which they feel welcomed in seniors serving organizations.

What are some of the differences in the senior population that service providers need to think about when planning and delivering programs?

## **Age**

The traditional view of seniors as being 65 and over is now broadening to include older adults over 55, and some senior serving organizations are beginning to offer programs for these younger “seniors”. Life expectancy continues to increase, resulting in a wide range of ages in the senior population. The needs and interests of younger seniors in their sixties may be different from that of older seniors in their eighties, making it necessary for senior serving organizations to offer a range of programs.

## **Gender**

Men and women have different experiences as they age, and these experiences are shaped by factors such as life expectancy, income and health status. Women live longer than men and may become isolated, especially if their health deteriorates and they lack support networks. Women have lower levels of income, and experience more poverty than men. They are at greater risk of some illnesses such as depression and dementia, and more likely to experience elder abuse. All of these gender-related factors affect the degree to which seniors can access and participate in programs.

## **Income**

We know that most seniors have fixed incomes after the age of 65, and for many seniors, income decreases as they age. Low incomes profoundly affect the lives of seniors and can increase their isolation and their ability to access and participate in programs. Membership and program fees, even if they seem minimal, can prove a barrier to low-income seniors. Transportation costs may make it difficult for seniors to get to a facility where programs are offered.

## **Health Status**

Anyone's health status can change over time, but seniors are more likely to have challenges with their physical and mental health as they age. Some of these may affect and restrict their ability to participate in programs. Many senior serving organizations try to offer programs that can accommodate health issues such as lack of mobility. Other health issues are more difficult to accommodate.

## **Sexual Orientation**

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans/transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) seniors may face special challenges when trying to access programs and services. They may face homophobia and other forms of discrimination or marginalization, currently or in the past. LGBTQ seniors may be wary of how they might be treated in certain spaces, especially when these spaces do not feel particularly welcoming or inclusive to them.

## **Aboriginal Identity**

The aging experiences of aboriginal seniors may be quite different from those of other seniors. Historically, aboriginal communities have experienced significant levels of discrimination and their lives have been disrupted by colonization and particularly the traumatic impacts of residential schools. These experiences have had a profound impact on their health and quality of life. Aboriginal seniors could still be experiencing marginalization, and may require specific programs and services to meet their needs.

## **Immigrant Status/First Language**

Many seniors in Edmonton were born outside of Canada, and some of them have a first language other than English. Immigrant seniors may have different levels of fluency in speaking or reading English, and this will affect their ability to participate in programs. A recent study in Edmonton showed a need for more English language programs specifically designed for seniors.

# What is inclusion?

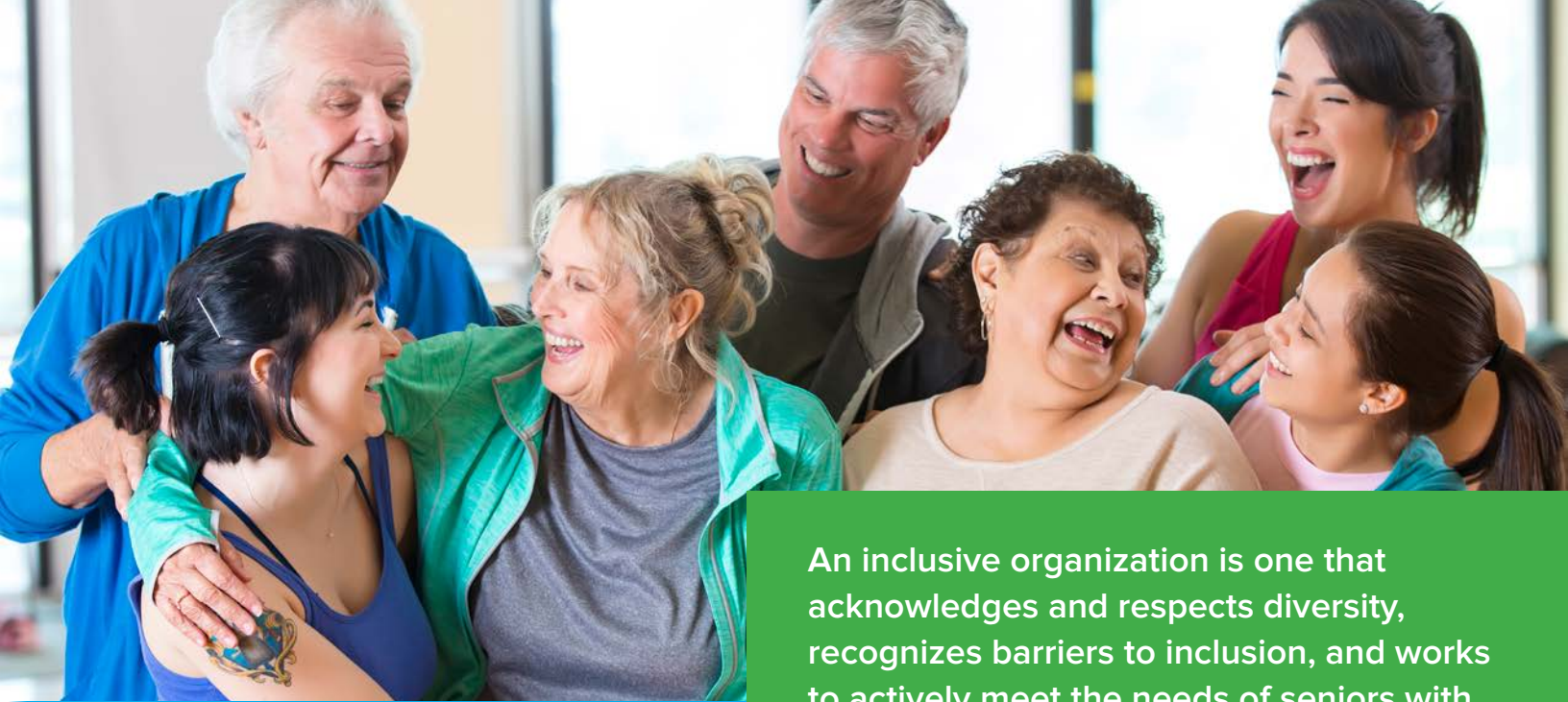
When we talk about diversity in senior serving organizations, it refers to more than different skin colours or speaking in languages other than English, and includes the entire range of human differences. The community you are working with may visibly look very similar but all communities are diverse in relation to factors such as sexual orientation, religious beliefs, ability/disability, socioeconomic status, etc.

Inclusion means valuing the differences in the community and actively seeking out different perspectives. It means looking at how we might do things differently to benefit all members of our community. Inclusive practices are not just to benefit 'other' people but are usually good for everyone. For example, using plain language helps everyone to understand what is being said and is not just beneficial for English language learners. Having a more accessible facility benefits all seniors, and not just those with mobility issues.

## Example values of inclusion

For example, a senior serving organization uses the 4 Rs to capture its values around inclusion:

- **Recognize**  
We will recognize differences between individuals
- **Respect**  
We will ensure each individual is respected and included
- **Respond**  
We will respond to the diverse needs of our membership
- **Reach Out**  
We will actively reach out to the community around us



An inclusive organization is one that acknowledges and respects diversity, recognizes barriers to inclusion, and works to actively meet the needs of seniors with varied and diverse backgrounds

### **Diversity and Inclusion**

Diversity refers to the many differences between people. In addition to the differences mentioned in the previous section, seniors may have different educational and professional backgrounds, work experiences, family and marital statuses, interests, skills and abilities.

Diversity and inclusion are linked. An inclusive organization is one that acknowledges and respects diversity, recognizes barriers to inclusion, and works to actively meet the needs of seniors with varied and diverse backgrounds.

### **Access and Barriers**

Access can be defined as the opportunity or ability to participate in a program or use a service. Barriers can prevent, restrict or limit access, and may be based on a person's identity or on individual circumstances.

For example, a senior with mobility issues may not be able to access a building that has stairs and no elevator. A senior who is not fluent in English may not be able to participate in a program that requires seniors to speak fluent English. Seniors living on a low income may find membership and program fees too expensive, and an immigrant or Aboriginal senior may face discriminatory attitudes from other seniors. Some of these barriers are unintentional, and seniors who are, for example, able bodied or whose first language is English, may not think about or be aware of barriers that other seniors experience. Barriers can only be removed if we are aware of them. Organizations that are working towards inclusion have to intentionally set out to discover these barriers and address them in order to increase access.

# What is a participatory approach?

A participatory approach to working together is one in which everyone involved has the opportunity to participate equally and to be included. When using a participatory approach, each person's ideas and perspectives are valued and respected, and their contributions welcomed.

Any group of people working together to accomplish a goal or a task will have diverse experiences, knowledge, skills and perspectives. Each person will have a different lens through which they see a situation, envision a solution, and recommend actions. Incorporating everyone's wisdom and experience into the planning and implementation process can increase your chances of success, and ensure that a broad set of needs are being met. This may seem like common sense, but groups of people who have been working together for a while often fall into established ways of working together, where a few people's perspectives tend to prevail. A participatory approach requires a concerted effort to change the usual way of doing things, and to ensure that everyone at the table has a voice.

A participatory approach means that you are committed to creating spaces where people feel able to share their wisdom, where everyone will genuinely listen to and consider each other's perspectives, and be willing to share decision-making power. It requires and involves "inviting difference, not fearing it."

## **Why plan inclusive meetings and events?**

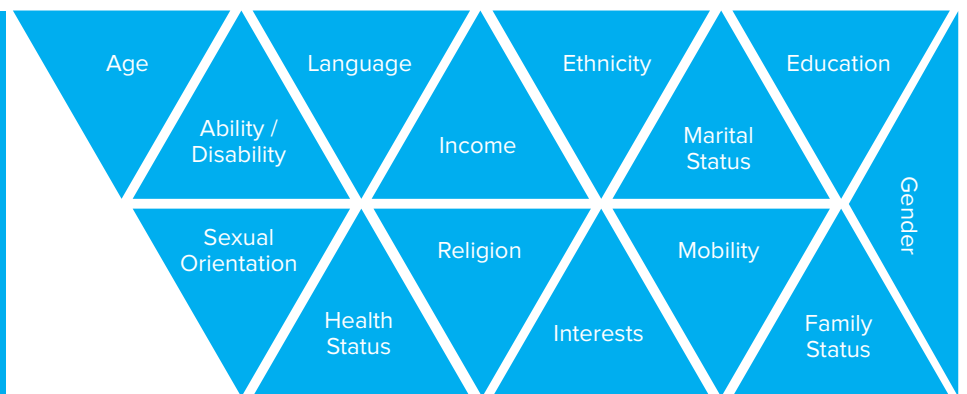
Meetings and events in senior serving organizations have a number of different goals. Meetings can be used to bring people together to share information, identify common needs and interests and develop appropriate programs and activities. Senior serving organizations regularly hold events to allow people to meet and participate in educational, social and cultural activities.

The success of both meetings and events depends on the active participation of everyone involved. A participatory approach to planning meetings and events can help to ensure that a variety of needs and perspectives are being considered, build trust and relationships between people and contribute to a climate of respect and inclusion within the organization. When people feel involved in the planning process, they will also be more likely to attend and participate in future meetings and events.

The success of both meetings and events depends on the active participation of everyone involved



# Organizing inclusive meetings



Meetings at senior serving organizations can have a number of different purposes and will involve different groups of people. They provide a way for people to come together to ensure that the organization is running smoothly, and that activities and programs are being organized in a way that maximizes participation and meets the needs of seniors. Board members, board committees, staff and volunteers usually meet regularly to review ongoing work at the organization and to make decisions. Other meetings may be organized as needed to plan a specific program or event, or to discuss a new issue.

## Planning is everything

If you are responsible for planning a meeting, what do you need to consider? Here are some things to think about:

- What is the purpose of the meeting?
- What tasks need to be accomplished and should be included on the agenda?
- What location will work best, and how should the room be set up?
- Does anyone attending the meeting have any special needs?
- Who will run the meeting? Will you require a facilitator for the meeting?
- How will decisions be made?
- How can you ensure people are engaged and participating in the meeting process?
- How can the meeting contribute to building a sense of community at your organization?

The following sections will help you to think about and plan your meeting using a participatory and inclusive approach.

**Ad hoc meetings planned at the last minute can work well if there is a small task to accomplish, but most of the time the success of a meeting will depend on how well the meetings has been planned**



### How to write a clear email

- Stick to one topic, if possible. If you're covering many topics, number them 1, 2, etc.
- Use short paragraphs and bulleted lists where appropriate
- If you're asking for responses, clearly state what kind of feedback you are looking for and when you need to hear back from people
- Have someone else read the email before you send it. Can they easily understand what you have written?
- Provide a link for on-line translation (e.g. Google Translator: [translate.google.ca](https://translate.google.ca))
- Provide a text-to-speech link for seniors who may have difficulty reading/seeing/viewing text (e.g. [www.ispeech.org/text.to.speech](http://www.ispeech.org/text.to.speech))

### Purpose of your meeting

Before you begin to plan your meeting, the very first question to ask is whether you need to have a meeting, or can your task be accomplished in another way? Think about the purpose of your meeting. Do you need to get information out to people, or does the task also require getting feedback on an issue, considering alternatives for action and making decisions?

Instead of holding a meeting, you could:

- Meet with a few key people individually and ask for their ideas or feedback instead of meeting with a large group
- Call a sample of people and ask their opinions on a topic
- Send an email with information that people require and ask for feedback
- Put up posters with the information you need to disseminate
- Hand out flyers or other materials

These strategies may save you the time and effort required to plan a meeting. Meetings can be reserved for those tasks that require people to come together, share information and jointly make a decision.

## e.g. | What is your meeting's purpose?

Once you have decided that you need to have a meeting, it's important to:

- Clearly define the purpose of the meeting
- Determine the importance of the discussion to the senior serving organization and/or seniors community
- Identify the planning required to make it successful

### Example: Meeting 1

Meeting purpose	Regularly scheduled Board meeting
Importance	<b>High.</b> The policy review committee has completed its work and important decisions will be made on several by-law changes.
Planning required	All Board members need to read the revised by-laws ahead of the meeting and understand how motions will be carried to change the bylaws.

### Example: Meeting 2

Meeting purpose	The programming committee needs to conduct a review of the seniors centre floor curling club.
Importance	<b>Medium.</b> There needs to be a discussion around a proposed change to the fees for the curling club and the times the club can access the gym.
Planning required	Meeting materials need to be prepared that clearly show the changes to the fees and the gym times. Someone will have to lead the discussion around the fee changes and someone else will have to record the discussion.



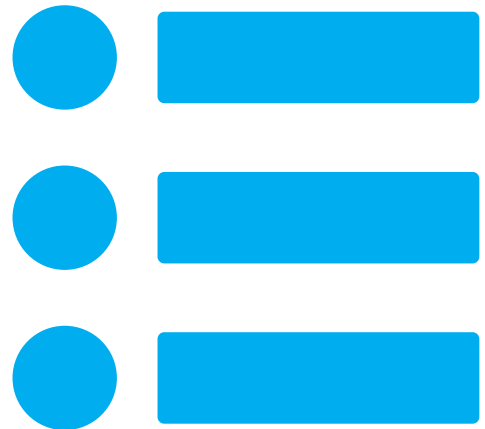


## Setting your agenda

Once you have identified the purpose of your meeting, it's time to prepare the agenda.

The agenda should include:

- The purpose of the meeting
- The topics to be covered and the rationale for discussing them
- The decision-making process if any decisions are to be made
- Adequate time for questions, discussion and any other business
- A brief meeting evaluation



## e.g. | Example of a meeting agenda

Below is an example of an agenda for a mock Seniors Centre Diversity and Inclusion Committee

### Meeting purpose

Regular quarterly meeting to:

- Review the Diversity and Inclusion work that has been completed since our last meeting
- Ensure all projects are on track
- Make a decision about recruiting new members for the committee

### Check-in

We will begin with sharing our answers to the following questions:

- Why am I excited about attending this meeting today?
- What is one thing that makes it difficult for me to participate today?

### Agenda items

**Topic 1:** All members review the work they have done since the last meeting

**Purpose of the discussion:** To review our diversity and inclusion work and to reflect on whether the work is progressing as we intended.

**Decisions to be made:** Are there initiatives, activities, or programs that we need to cancel, move forward with, or reconsider?

**Decision rule:** Majority vote will be used if consensus cannot be reached on how to deal with issues under discussion.

**Topic 2:** Inclusive communication at the Centre

**Purpose of the discussion:** To find a way to translate materials and website information into other languages.

**Decisions to be made:** Are we going to translate materials? Which languages will we translate into? How will we communicate the need to the rest of the board and to the Centre staff?

**Decision rule:** Discussion and then Committee Chair makes the final decision on what moves forward.

### Break

10 minutes social and bio-break

### Agenda items

**Topic 3:** Diversity and Inclusion Posters

**Purpose of the discussion:** To decide which of the two poster designs we would like to print for the Centre. Please review each poster before the meeting and bring your questions, thoughts and ideas.

**Decisions to be made:** Which poster will be printed?

**Decision rule:** Consensus decision-making. All committee members will vote and come to an agreement on which poster is printed.

**General questions/comments**

**Any other business?**

**Evaluation:** Members share one word to express how they are feeling.

**Next meeting is scheduled for:** \_\_\_\_\_

### Wrap up

## Meeting location, times, and room set-up

The best place to hold your meeting will depend on the purpose of your meeting, the number of people who will be attending and the meeting activities.

Here are some factors to consider when choosing a location:

- Is the space you have chosen accessible to people of all abilities?
- Does it have facilities to accommodate people's personal needs (i.e. accessible washrooms)?
- Is there space to move around comfortably in the room, and if needed, is there wall space to post flip charts and other materials?
- Have you checked with the people who you invited to the meeting for a time that works best for them? Grandparents who babysit during the day and working seniors often have barriers to attending day-time meetings but seniors who require alternative transportation may have less options in the evening. If it's really important for as many people as possible to attend, can you hold two meetings at different times, for example, one in the evening and one during the day?



In some cases, a meeting room at your senior serving organization will be the best location for the meeting. If your meeting is more informal, where a small group is getting together for a short period of time, you could meet at a coffee shop, another organization's meeting room, a public library or another space that is accessible to everyone attending.

The room set up is very important and can determine how people will participate. If people are sitting in rows, they cannot see each other and it is difficult to engage in small group work. It is best to have tables and chairs if people need to look at documents during the meeting. If the goal of the meeting is open discussion, it may be better to have participants sit in a circle without any tables. Think about how the room set up will help or hinder your meeting goals.



## Tips for a productive and engaging meeting

We've all endured meetings that couldn't end fast enough.

Below are some tips to help keep your meeting relevant and engaging.

- 1** | Don't overload your agenda!
- 2** | Silence is golden. One of the biggest mistakes in meeting planning is including too many topics without enough time for participants to reflect and respond in a meaningful way.
- 3** | Take breaks between topics. Give people 5-10 minutes to discuss what they heard, to process the information before switching to the next topic.
- 4** | For longer meetings, check in with people periodically to see if everyone is getting what they want from the meeting.
- 5** | Agree/Disagree/Neutral. Rather than asking participants to respond verbally, ask them to "vote with their feet." Write Agree and Disagree on large sheets of paper and place them on opposite sides of the room. If seniors are able, ask them to respond to the question by standing at the Agree or Disagree side of the room (or they can stand in the middle if they are Neutral). Ask for a few volunteers from each group to explain why they agree, disagree or are neutral on the topic. Seniors can switch where they stand during the activity if they hear something that makes them change their opinion on the topic.
- 6** | Talk first, ask questions later. After a presentation, take a 5-10 minute break and then provide an opportunity for questions and answers on the topic. This gives people a chance to reflect and think about their questions on the topic before being pressured into asking them. During the break, allow seniors to write their questions on a piece of paper or to verbally tell the facilitator/organizers so they don't have to put their hand up and ask.



### Tips for speakers when interpreters are present

- Speak clearly and face the audience
- Look at/address the person you are speaking to, not the interpreter
- Use lots of pauses. This not only helps interpreters to catch up but allows the rest of the audience to absorb the information
- Periodically verify with the audience if the message and presentation material is being understood and rephrase to clarify as needed
- Keep visual/written materials (PowerPoint presentations, handouts) short and to the point

*For more tips see the Identifying People's Needs checklist in Appendix A*

### Identifying people's needs

When you are planning a meeting, make sure you are aware of what people might need. The best way to determine these needs is to connect with people ahead of time, and ask them what would enable them to participate in the meeting.

Here are some ideas for ensuring full participation from everyone who will be attending the meeting:

- Be aware of how people like to receive their communication. Do they have access to email, or do they prefer to pick up a hard copy of the agenda and accompanying information from the organization?
- Send out the agenda and other information well in advance of each meeting, ideally at least a week ahead so that people have adequate time to read and reflect on the materials provided. Meeting attendees may also need time to arrange for transportation to get to the meeting.
- Make sure that the location for the meeting is convenient for everyone. If anyone has mobility issues, make sure that the meeting room can be easily accessed.
- Use plain language, easy to read fonts and clear outlines.
- Check if meeting participants have any special needs such as interpreters, sign language interpreters, or assistive hearing devices. Make a plan to ensure these are in place.

**A good facilitator will know how to design activities that will enable everyone to participate in the discussion and decision-making process**

**Do you need a meeting facilitator?**

Although meetings are often organized and facilitated by the person-in-charge (e.g. board chair, committee chair, executive director) this may not always be the best option. In some situations, it may be useful to have a facilitator who is not part of the group.

If you decide to use a facilitator who is not part of your committee or group or is from outside the senior serving organization, the person-in-charge still has an important role to play. They must work closely with the facilitator closely to identify which topics need to be covered, the meeting goal for each topic and the importance of the discussion to the work of the senior serving organization. The person-in-charge should present the agenda at the meeting and explain the importance of the topics being discussed. The facilitator will suggest how the group might best achieve their meeting goals, provide time estimates for each topic and lead the group through the process.

A good facilitator will know how to design activities that will enable everyone to participate in the discussion and decision-making process.

Here are the benefits of having someone external to the group facilitate the meeting:

- If the person leading the group is facilitating, it may be difficult for them to fully participate in the meeting.
- People may be more frank and honest about their opinions if the facilitator is a neutral person who is not part of the group, than they might be with a group leader such as a board chair or an executive director.
- Good meeting facilitation involves creating a safe environment and leading a process where everyone can participate and contribute, and is a specialized skill. Someone might be a good manager or leader but may not have skills to be a good facilitator.

“Before diving into the agenda, [people] need to be connected to one another, whenever we enter a room, it is with doubt and a vague feeling of isolation.”

-Peter Block rule of thumb

### **Building a sense of community**

Before you start a meeting, even regular board meetings, take some time to get to know each other. Find a way to acknowledge the presence and commitment of each person who is in the room.

Start by checking in with each other. Go around and give each person a chance to share how they are feeling. People are not to interrupt or to comment on what other people say. At the end, the meeting facilitator should acknowledge what people have said. For example, “it sounds like the cold weather has made it difficult for people to get here today. Let’s take a minute to recharge and de-stress before we start the meeting.”

Some examples of connection questions that you can use for check-ins:

- What led you to accept the invitation to attend this meeting?
- What would it take for you to be fully present in this room?
- If you could invite someone you respect to sit beside you and support you in making this meeting successful, who would that be?



## What does it mean to be in charge of the meeting?

New models of business and community leadership are less about “command and control” and more about collaboration, listening to others and shared decision-making. However, it is a natural tendency for groups to defer to the person-in-charge. This can work against our attempts to create an inclusive and participatory space.

Below are some ideas about how to create a meeting space where people feel their opinions and ideas are equally important as the Board Chair or other leader.

## Overcoming a group’s natural tendency to defer to the person-in-charge

- Have people write their individual thoughts on a topic first, then share them aloud
- Break into small groups for part of the discussion
- Have the person-in-charge speak first
- Have the person-in-charge leave the room for part of the discussion
- Allow people to submit comments anonymously
- Use “unanimity” as the decision rule for reaching agreements
- Use a ‘go-around’ and have the person-in-charge speak last
- Give this page to the person-in-charge





## Making decisions

Many groups are not clear on how they make decisions. People often come to a meeting expecting to have an equal vote on an issue, and discover that the person-in-charge (i.e. Board Chair or Executive Director) will be making the final decision. The person-in-charge might want to hear other thoughts and opinions, but will not be sharing the decision-making power.

You can clarify everyone's roles and increase participation by identifying and communicating decision rules ahead of time. Some common decision rules are included.

## Getting more information

Sometimes you realize that you need more information before you can make a decision at a meeting. If you are trying to be inclusive, it is very important to consider whose ideas and voices might not be represented and to find a way to hear from those people before making an important decision.

You can get more information through methods such as:

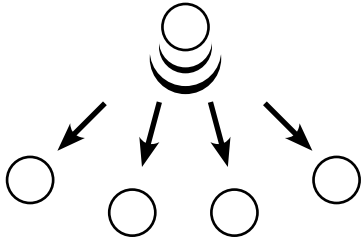
- Membership surveys (email or in-person)
- One-on-one meetings with individuals, including home visits for people who might have difficulty getting to meeting locations
- Setting up a focus group and using a translator, sign language interpreter or other support, if required

### Common decision rules

- Unanimous agreement
- Majority vote
- Person-in-charge decides without discussion
- "Flip a coin"
- Delegation
- Person-in-charge decides after discussion

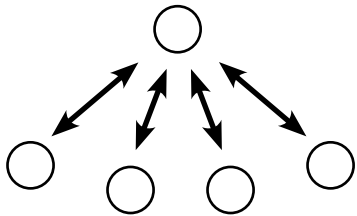


Not all decision rules will help you be inclusive and participatory in the way you work together. The effects of different decision rules on participation are outlined below:



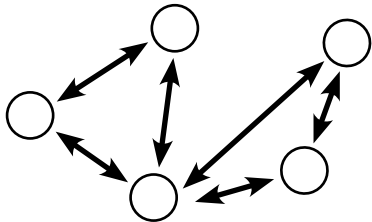
**Person-in-charge decides *without* group discussion**

This decision rule gets group members in the habit of “doing what they are told.” At meetings, they listen passively to the person-in-charge, who talks and talks without being challenged.



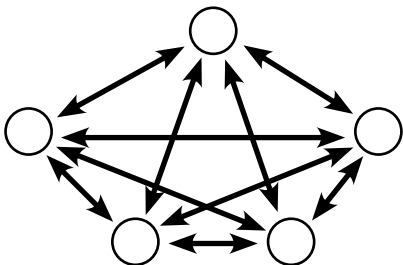
**Person-in-charge decides *after* group discussion**

When the person-in-charge is the final decision-maker, s/he is the main person who needs to be convinced. Everyone tends to direct their comments to the person-in-charge.



**Majority Vote**

Since the goal is to obtain 51% agreement, the influence process is a battle for the undecided center. Once a majority is established, the opinions of the minority can be disregarded.



**Unanimous Agreement**

When everyone has the power to block a decision, each participant has the right to expect his or her perspective to be taken into account. This puts pressure on members to work toward mutual understanding.

If you are voting on a topic, take a short break before the vote and check in with people to make sure everyone understands what the vote is about.

**If you do decide to set up a committee, you may want to consider the following:**

- Try to include people who are not already on other committees to include a more diverse range of members
- Rather than set up an ongoing committee, establish an ad hoc committee with a time frame such as six months or a year to accomplish a task (e.g. enhance the board recruitment process to increase the diversity of the board).
- To ensure ongoing participation and commitment, create a balance by giving the committee enough direction about the task, but don't "micro-manage" its work.

## **Committee work**

Boards of non-profit organizations often establish committees to work on specific tasks. Committees can be set up to study a specific issue and make recommendations, or plan and organize events and other activities. In addition to getting the work done, committees can also be a helpful way to promote member participation and include more people in decision-making.

Here are some questions to guide a board in deciding which committees to establish. If the answers are "yes," a committee will likely be a positive element to the governance process. If the answers are mostly "no," the board should not establish a committee.

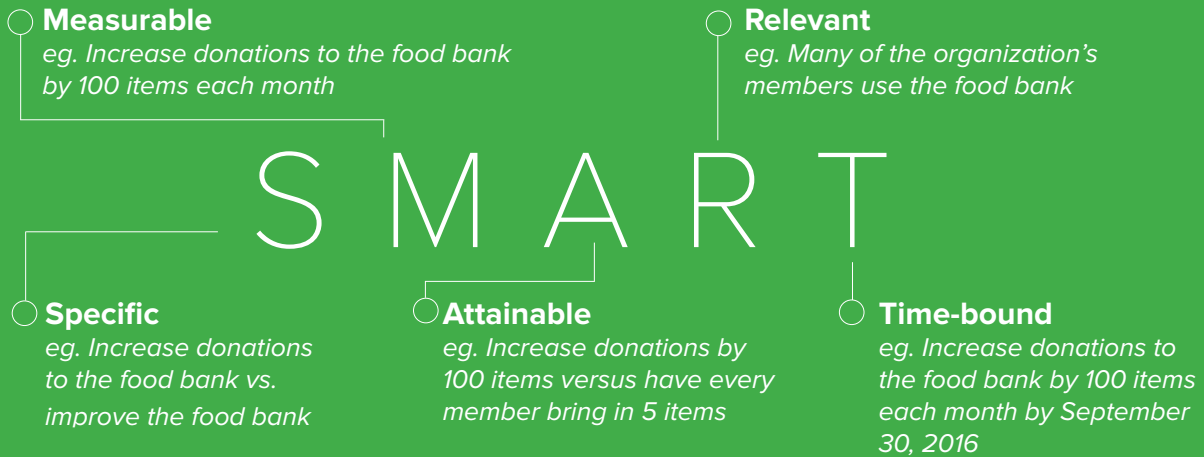
- Does the committee add value by performing a specific task related to board governance that the board does not have the capacity to undertake?
- Will the committee add value by researching specific issues and providing the board with options and rationale, rather than just recommendations? Can the committee avoid managing, shadow-managing, or pressuring the board to accept certain recommendations or "advice?"
- Will the committee add value to the governance process without disempowering non-committee board members or distancing them from the issues?

**A board committee may not always be the best way to get the work done, and there may be other ways that you can accomplish your task. Sometimes a few committed people who have the time and capacity for volunteer work may end up being on several committees, and too many meetings and responsibilities can contribute to volunteer burn out.**



## Setting goals for action

At the end of the meeting, identify one or two goals for further action. Using the SMART goals framework can help you with creating a goal that is clear to everyone.



## e.g | Examples of SMART meeting goals

- All board members to send in two names of potential board members with their contact information to the board chair by Tuesday, December 3.
- The Diversity and Inclusion Committee will consult 10 seniors about building accessibility and send in a summary of their responses to the board chair by Wednesday, April 11.

When you write out a meeting goal using the SMART method, it gives people a chance to reflect on what they have committed to and whether it is a realistic and useful activity.

**The most important factor for effective consultation is trust**

## Reporting on progress

When your purpose for holding a meeting involves consulting with seniors, it is important to follow up and tell them what you did with the information you gathered during the meeting. Many organizations, including government and corporations, ask people for information and ideas and then never report back to say how they used the ideas or why they couldn't follow up on an important question that was raised. If you want seniors to continue to have a conversation with you, you will need to remember to share information and not just take it from them. The most important factor for effective consultation is trust!

You can report back through:

- an email to members
- a poster or notice that is posted at the organization
- a verbal update at another event where members are present
- an item in the organization newsletter
- an update on the organization website

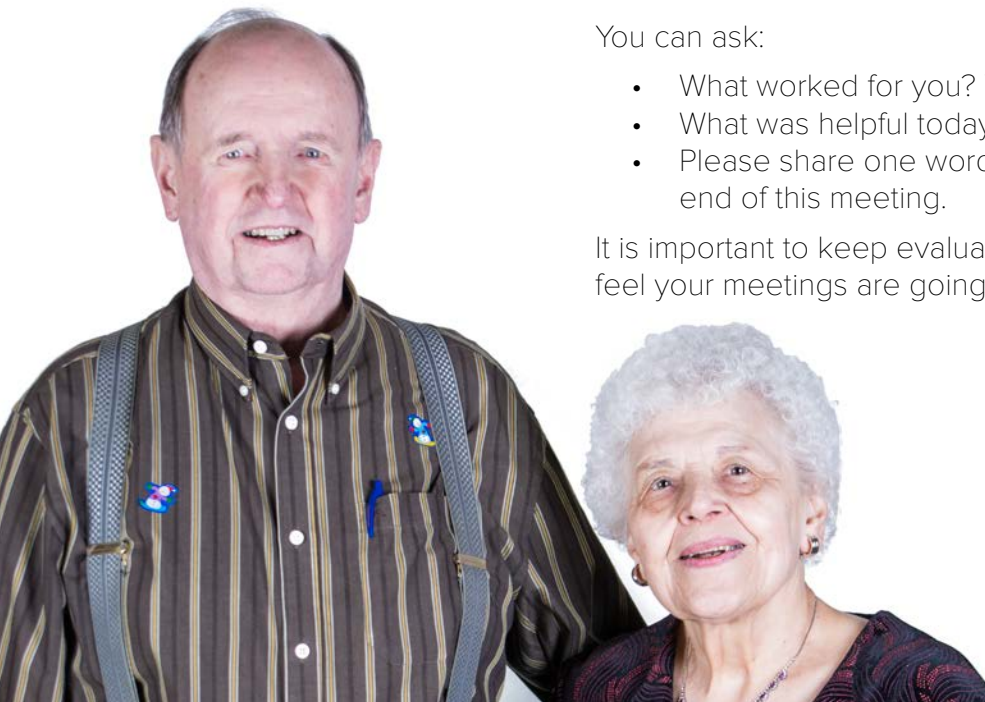
## Evaluating meetings

Every meeting (including board meetings) should end with a meeting evaluation. This can be as simple as going around and asking people about one thing they liked about the meeting and one thing they would like to improve about the meeting.

You can ask:

- What worked for you? What didn't work for you?
- What was helpful today? What was not helpful today?
- Please share one word that reflects how you feel at the end of this meeting.

It is important to keep evaluating each meeting, even if you feel your meetings are going well.







## Organizing inclusive events

In addition to ongoing programs and activities, most senior serving organizations organize events to meet the social, educational and recreational needs of seniors. Events such as celebrations, open houses, workshops, and community events bring seniors together and provide opportunities for connection and community building. Organizing events that are welcoming and inclusive of seniors of all ages and backgrounds requires thoughtful planning and a consideration of the needs of seniors who might attend the events.

This section provides tips and guidelines for planning inclusive events at senior serving organizations. It can be used by anyone involved in planning or coordinating events at senior serving organizations including board members, staff and volunteers. The guidelines will help you make appropriate decisions about event location, timing, and logistics, and to plan an event that allows all seniors to participate fully.

## **Don't forget to celebrate success!**

Being inclusive and participatory is a journey. It can take more time to use participatory methods but they have the potential to uncover new solutions, new ways of approaching problems, and new insights rather than doing things the same old way and allowing the same people to keep speaking on behalf of everyone.

Being inclusive also builds strong, respectful relationships and promotes social and emotional well-being for everyone. As your organization takes steps toward inclusion, celebrate how far you've come. Changing the way we work takes time and commitment.

## **Planning is everything**

If you are responsible for planning an event, what do you need to consider? Here are some initial questions to get you thinking about inclusive events. As you proceed with planning your event, your organizing group will have additional questions and ideas that are appropriate and relevant to your organization, and to the specific event you are planning.

- What is the purpose of the event and who is your target audience?
- Who will be involved in planning the event?
- Where will you hold the event?
- What resources will you need to carry out the event (people, money, materials)?
- Do you anticipate that any seniors who might attend the event will have special needs?
- How will you promote the event widely?
- How can you ensure that the event will feel welcoming to diverse groups of seniors?
- How will you evaluate the success of the event?

The following sections will help you to think about and plan your event using a participatory and inclusive approach.

## **Purpose of your event**

Before you begin, take some time to think about the purpose of your event. Is it an educational event where you will be providing information and responding to questions? Is it more of a social event where you want people to meet and spend time meeting each other and interacting? Is it a celebration of some kind? The purpose of your event will determine the kind of space you will need, and the materials and resources you will require.

## **Organizing groups**

Seniors are a diverse group. To maximize participation at an event, you want to ensure that the event will attract, be accessible to and inclusive of a broad group of seniors. If you have organized many similar events at your organization, you may already have a sense of what these needs are. However, as the demographics of a community change, there is always the potential to expand access to different groups of seniors by learning a little more about what would draw them to an event.

One of the best ways to ensure that different kinds of needs are being identified is by including a diverse group of seniors in the planning process, and by using a participatory approach during planning meetings. The information in the first part of the guide on how to plan inclusive meetings can be used when planning an inclusive event. You can also send out surveys, do an informal telephone poll or ask seniors at your organization about other groups of seniors that might be interested in attending events, and what might bring them out to an event.

## **Religious celebrations**

**Merry Christmas? Happy Holidays? Eid Mubarak? Happy Hannukah?**

Many cultural, religious and spiritual celebrations take place year-round and especially towards the end of the year. It is a time of joy, gatherings and passing goodwill wishes. In an environment of cultural and religious diversity, the spirit of such celebrations has suffered due to misconceptions and a lack of understanding. Take time to learn about the celebrations that senior serving organization members and seniors in the community take part in, and the dynamics of such celebrations at the senior serving organization. Checking important celebrations on multi-faith calendars is a great place to start. Avoid simple mistakes such as holding BBQs during Ramadan (Islam's holy month of prayer and fasting), which occurs at a different time each year, or unilaterally changing the name of the "Christmas party" where all your Christian employees might feel alienated and no concerns have ever been raised from non-Christian employees. When in doubt, dialogue, flexibility and trust will get you to the right answer for your situation.



**For the safety of people who might have visual or hearing impairments, use spaces that have both visual and auditory alarm systems**

## **Location and accessibility**

A suitable location can be a key factor in the success of your event. It is a good practice to book locations that are accessible to people with mobility issues, including seniors who may use aids such as wheelchairs, canes, or walkers. Consider the availability of public transit and parking, and whether the front entrance of the location is close to a car or transit drop off point.

Be mindful of the implications of the event venue. A senior serving organization is often an ideal location for events. However, if you choose to hold an event outside of the senior serving organization, think about how different groups might feel about the location. People may have different levels of comfort with locations such as a hotel, a church or a temple. Some seniors may only attend events at a location they are familiar with and know how to get to. However, if there are some seniors that have a particular connection to a space (such as a space within an ethnocultural organization, church or a mosque), you could consider these as a venue for an event provided the venue is accessible. An event at this location may provide an educational opportunity and a different experience. You may have to ensure that aspects of the event such as decorations and background music are appropriate for the venue.

## **Space**

Make sure the area in which the event will be held has wheelchair-accessible elevators and bathrooms, ideally on the same floor as the event. For the safety of people who might have visual or hearing impairments, use spaces that have both visual and auditory alarm systems.

Seniors will need adequate seating. Make sure that there are enough chairs to accommodate everyone, and that the chairs are comfortable enough for the period of the event. If you are serving food, you will need at least some space for people to put down their food and drinks, especially for those seniors who use mobility aids. Make sure the room has good acoustics, and a sound system for a large event.



### **Dates and times**

Since seniors are a very diverse group, it can be difficult to find a time of day that works for your target audience. If you are unsure of the best time for the event, you could conduct a survey in advance to determine the times that would work for most people based on their transportation needs and family responsibilities. In terms of the date, check on the internet or on a multi-faith calendar to make sure the event does not conflict with religious or cultural events.

### **Promoting your event**

Make sure that the event is well marketed to the intended audience; this could include members as well as other seniors in the community so everyone has a fair chance to plan their attendance in advance.

Reach out to groups of seniors who may not usually attend events. If you have a diverse organizing committee, members of the committee will have their own networks through which to promote the event. You may want to send information about the event to other groups and venues such as cultural organizations, ethnic media, places of worship and seniors housing units to draw a broader audience.

Think about the most appropriate communication channels for the target group, and the use of RSVP notices. Include information of a contact person in case a senior has questions or concerns about the event. This is also important for people who might have special needs (more on this below). Make sure that the language and images used in the event promotion materials reflect the inclusive organizational culture that your senior serving organization wants to promote.



## Implications of serving alcohol

There are many implications of serving alcohol at events. These range from considering whether serving alcohol may mean that people will NOT attend an event, ensuring that a wide selection of non-alcoholic beverages are also available, to the legal obligation senior serving organizations may have regarding the safety of their members and employees. Please remember that if a person appears intoxicated, steps must be taken to provide for the safety and well-being of the individual. This might include limiting alcohol consumption or providing transportation or accommodation.

## Dietary requirements and other considerations

If you are planning to offer food at your event, it is a good idea to ask participants if they have any food allergies or special dietary requirements. The organizers should be aware of various requests and requirements and try to offer appropriate choices such as nut, sugar, dairy or gluten-free options, vegan, vegetarian, and non-pork or non-beef options.

Remember that 1 in 13 Canadians have a serious food allergy and many people do not eat meat, especially pork and beef, due to cultural and religious reasons. Depending on your audience and event, consider listing ingredients of foods served and/or label foods that are Halaal or Kosher (which has to do with how certain meats are prepared and served in line with Islamic and Jewish dietary laws).

## Special needs

Senior serving organizations do not have a legal obligation to provide reasonable accommodation for special needs but doing so allows for the full participation of all seniors in the community. Requests for accommodation might include providing modified materials in either large print or Braille or requesting a sign language interpreter for someone with a speaking/hearing impediment. Ask about special needs well ahead of time and include the cost of providing for the needs in the event budget. If you are receiving funding for the event, ask funders if this cost can be covered in the funding.

Let seniors know about the details of the event so they can ask for accommodation or assistance. For example, if seniors know that there will be a presentation during the event, they can ask for an interpreter.


## Evaluating your event

When planning your event, think about how you will evaluate the success of your event. Feedback on the event from the perspective of both participants and organizers will help you plan events in the future, and to improve each event based on the feedback you receive. Feedback can be collected informally by chatting with participants, but a simple evaluation form distributed towards the end of the event can be a better way to make sure that everyone has a chance to express their opinion about the event, rather than just the seniors who tend to be more involved in events at the organization.

There is a sample evaluation form on the next page that you can use or modify as needed.

Once you have compiled the results of your evaluation, you can use the results to:

- Communicate the importance and value of your program with funders, staff, volunteers, and community members
- Promote future events
- Let seniors who participated in the evaluation know that you care about their feedback
- Improve future events by asking:
  - Should this event be repeated in the future?
  - Were the objectives of the event met?
  - What went well during the event?
  - What could be improved?
  - What are participants' suggestions for future events?



Feedback on the event from the perspective of both participants and organizers will help you plan events in the future, and to improve each event based on the feedback you receive.

## e.g | Sample Evaluation Form

### XYZ Senior Senior Organization - Event Evaluation Form

Thank you for attending our event! Please take a few minutes to answer the following questions. Your answers will help us to improve future events at XYZ Senior Serving Organization.

**1** | The goal of the event was to \_\_\_\_\_  
Did we meet that goal? \_\_\_\_\_

YES       NO

Please briefly explain your answer:

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**2** | What did you like most about this event?

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**3** | How can we improve future events?

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Thank you for your feedback.

