



Guidelines for Inclusive Meetings and Processes

Introduction

Collaborative work on National Forests requires frequent meetings and touchpoints between diverse partners. Structuring these gatherings to make them inclusive to all attendees increases effectiveness and improves the outcomes of forest work.

This document highlights best practices for inclusivity when planning convenings. Sometimes, incorporating all strategies may not be feasible or practical, so consider the ideas outlined as a starting point. For further depth on the concepts and tactics below, consult the resources and appendix at the end of this guide.



Diverse and inclusive organizations are more effective and influential.

Miriam-Webster defines inclusive as “including everyone, especially allowing and accommodating people who have historically been excluded.” A growing body of evidence shows that compared to their peers, inclusive organizations are more likely to make better decisions (Korn Ferry research), make employees feel empowered to perform their best (Salesforce), and promote more innovative ideas and environments (MIT).

Inclusive Gatherings Best Practices

The questions and ideas below are intended to spark thought about inclusivity, whether designing a one-off meeting or at the start of a longer collaborative process.

What is the purpose and value of this gathering?

Before bringing people together, it is essential to identify why the meeting should occur. Have clear answers to these questions before scheduling a meeting:

- Who will benefit from the meeting?
- What does the meeting accomplish?
- Why is it necessary to meet versus send an email or have individual conversations?

Who needs to be at the table, and what can be done to ensure they attend?

The composition of meeting attendees influences the content and nature of the conversation. After identifying the meeting purpose, determine who needs to be present to meet these goals. Then, ensure that the necessary people can make it to the meeting. Consider the following:

- **Timing:** Is the meeting scheduled for a time when everyone can attend? Given the group composition, is it better to gather during or after work hours?
- **Compensation:** Who amongst the attendees will be paid for attending? For those who won't be paid, are there ways to compensate for volunteer time, such as honorariums, travel stipends, or meal provision?
- **Meeting location:** How far are you asking attendees to travel? Will everyone be comfortable in the setting you have chosen for the meeting?
- **Physical needs:** If serving food, what are attendees' dietary restrictions? What accessibility needs do attendees have?
- **Relationship building:** How can you connect with attendees who have not attended past meetings? Consider calling them before picking a meeting date and location. Alternatively, "meet partners where they are at" by attending an already scheduled meeting or traveling to them.
- **Making it meaningful and fun:** What will draw people to the meeting, and what will they remember to encourage them to come next time? What activities will promote connection, authenticity, and enthusiasm amongst the attendees? [This list](#) by Liberating Structures is a great place to start.

What are the power dynamics between attendees?

How can these power dynamics be mitigated?

It is common for some attendees to have more influence and power over others, either through their position, outspokenness, and/or their identities. Review the attendees list to identify who has high, medium, or low power and predict how they will likely interact with and influence one another. Work to mitigate these power dynamics before, during, and after the meeting.

Consider these steps:

Before the meeting

- **Connect with attendees:** Connect with the “highest power” individuals to encourage them to limit their contributions (e.g., ask them to make only three comments on each topic). Connect with the “lowest power” individuals and ask them what they need to feel comfortable sharing. **Note:** Do not explicitly tell these individuals the power rating they’ve been given!
- **Set and enforce ground rules:** If someone “crosses a line,” pointing back to the ground rules can help reset a negative dynamic. See the Appendix for typical ground rules.
- **Structure the agenda:** to ensure that the most dominant attendees will have “natural” limits on their speaking time. This can include setting timers to ensure equal speaking time, having time scheduled for quiet reflection, and breaking into smaller groups.
- **Ensure everyone speaks in the first 10 minutes:** [Data shows](#) that people are more likely to participate in a meeting if they speak in the first 10 minutes. Design a low risk but meaningful way to get people talking. See [this inclusive meetings checklist](#) for creative strategies.

During the meeting

- **Assign a note-taker** and ensure they accurately capture attendees’ perspectives.
- **Carefully observe** power dynamics throughout discussions. Note when these dynamics occur and strategically intervene if possible.
- **Be responsive:** During a longer or multiday meeting, tweak the meeting structure to address the dynamics observed. For example, if one person dominates, pivot to a small group activity where quieter group members are paired and ask them to share their thinking first.
- **Present and gather information via multiple formats:** verbally and in writing. Have interactive displays that allow participants to share ideas and make connections between them.

After the meeting

- **Follow-up** with lower-power or quieter attendees to elicit opinions they may have yet to share and to get their feedback about future meetings.



Inclusivity during Remote Meetings

Remote meetings have a unique set of inclusivity challenges and benefits. When planning and executing a remote meeting:

- **Make it easy and necessary for people to have cameras on.** Starting the meeting by having everyone speak can help. However, allowing individuals to have cameras off can help accommodate a range of participation barriers (e.g., needing to be home with children or having internet connectivity issues)
- **Leverage interactive technology tools to take advantage of the virtual format.** Virtual whiteboards, such as Miro, can enable participants to collaborate and share nonverbally. Meeting polls are easier via virtual meetings – check out Mentimeter and Slido.
- **Ensure that all attendees have a computer and connectivity.** If not, help them problem-solve: Could they call in via phone or come to a partner’s office for better internet access? Is there a library near their home that provides free internet?

See more on planning inclusive remote and hybrid meetings [here](#).

Additional Resources



✓ Helpful Checklists

- **Doris Duke Meeting Guide:** This document is a resource for planning inclusive gatherings for more than 75 people. It covers all the details!
- **Harvard Business School Inclusive Meetings Guide:** This checklist focuses on marginalized groups and is easier to digest than the Doris Duke Guide. It merges inclusivity tips for in-person and virtual meetings.
- **Vital Smarts Inclusive Meetings Checklist:** This checklist is focused on making meetings more welcoming to introverts. It gives tips to both the organizers and the attendees. This guide has some excellent ideas about how to get people talking at the start of a meeting.

Thought-Provoking Articles and Books

- **To Build an Inclusive Culture, Start with Inclusive Meetings:** Thoughtful piece in Harvard Business Review that explains the powerful role of meetings in making organizations more inclusive.
- **Run Meetings That Are Fair to Introverts, Women, and Remote Workers:** Article that specifically shares tips for meeting attendees who are often excluded due to the structure of the meetings.
- **How to host inclusive hybrid meetings:** Article with specific tips about all stages of hybrid meeting planning and insights that apply to all meetings.
- **Meeting effectiveness and inclusiveness: Large-scale measurement, identification of key features, and prediction in real-world remote meetings:** Academic article that assesses what makes people feel included in remote meetings, with implications for in-person gatherings as well.
- **The importance of inclusion in the workplace:** Helpful article establishing why inclusive workplaces are more effective.
- **The Art of Gathering**, by Priya Parker: Book that explores how to make gatherings more meaningful and inclusive.
- **Facilitators Guide to Participatory Decision-Making:** Book that defines participatory decision-making and provides dozens of meeting activities to promote inclusive decision-making.

Appendix: Additional Tips for Facilitators



Set Ground Rules

Creating ground rules can often be the “first agreement” for participants.

Common ground rules are:

- Showing respect for others and their ideas
- Being aware of airtime – “Be clear and concise”
- Speaking from the “I” perspective



Model Appreciation for Different Viewpoints

Empathize with different viewpoints and foster healthy discussion around these differences. Focus the conversations on ideas (“Tell us more about why you prefer x to y”) and acknowledge strong feelings (“It seems you feel strongly about x, can you share why?”).



Observe and Intervene

Keep an eye on body language, speaking time, and level of distraction to assess participant engagement. If someone has been quiet, check in during a break. Do not make assumptions.



Gather Feedback

Suggested methods include:

- Asking a trusted colleague to observe for strategies above
- Doing a quick survey
- Checking in with each participant post-meeting