

# BETTER ASTRONOMY CLUB MEETINGS

- By Dennis J. Webb

What brings people out to an astronomy club meeting? What keeps them away? What hooks a new member and gets them actively involved? What keeps the old members coming back? These are the issues that face club leaders. Successful clubs find good answers to these questions.

Meetings are only one facet of club activities but perhaps the most visible. Many people come to their first club meeting out of curiosity. Whether they come back depends on how they perceive the club and whether they like the personality of the active membership. Club leaders are responsible for the conduct of the meeting and the overall tone of the organization. Large organizations recognize the importance of effective meetings and equip their leaders with appropriate training. Even though our societies may be small or informal, we can improve our meetings as well.

We lavish tremendous intellectual energy preparing observing plans, analyzing observing results, and selecting, purchasing, designing and building our telescopes. Clubs are fortunate to have leaders spending this kind of energy preparing for our club meetings. Here are some considerations in designing and running your meetings:

1. Evaluate your current meetings. Step briefly back from the tradition of the club and look analytically at how the meetings work, what gets people excited, what seems to drag on forever. If you are running the meeting, ask someone you respect to observe the meeting as if it were an occultation, and get their detailed report later.
2. After the meeting, visit with the new people and actively solicit their feedback on what they enjoyed about the meeting. People are usually very polite as newcomers and sometimes you have to gently push, asking specific questions about what they learned or enjoyed and if they intend to come back. An observer's first view of an object is a very special truth, one that the experienced observer may have forgotten.
3. Visit meetings of other clubs, astronomical or not. Any community that boasts an astronomy club will have other organizations successfully running meetings and you can learn from every experience. If you live in a large metropolitan area, you may have other local astronomy clubs in the area to visit and there is probably some of your membership that regularly attends those meetings. When you travel for vacation or business, try to visit astronomy club meetings; it may take a letter or a couple phone calls to find out their meeting places and times but most clubs would welcome out of town astronomers. Many clubs post their meeting information on the Internet as well.
4. Document the purpose of the regular club meeting. Take pencil or keyboard in hand and write it out for yourself. Do it right now and then discuss it at the next board meeting or club elders' pizza dinner. The following statements of purpose are not sufficient: "It's the monthly meeting, that's the purpose," "To conduct the business of the club." Try to

use specific action verbs in this statement. If your club has documented mission and goal statements, start with those. Here are some common purpose statement themes:

1. Provide information (about what to whom?)
2. Generate enthusiasm and support for organization projects.
3. Club leadership get feedback from the membership.
4. Generate new ideas for new activities.
5. Problem-solving or issue-resolution.
6. Make decisions (about what among whom?)
7. Advance science (by whom doing what?)
8. Development of personal leadership and organizational skills.
9. Have fun.
10. Recruit new members.
11. A mixture of some or all of these.

Every club is different and must find its own answer.

5. Consider changes to your meetings. Start with the purpose, look at what is going on in the club, the community, and in astronomy at large. Start with a fresh sheet of paper, at least as an exercise. Look at how this relates to current meetings and identify candidate changes.
6. Consider the effect on the membership if you change the meetings. We gather in organizations to share, enrich, and find comfort in the company of our “own kind.” The conduct of meetings, however, is often a matter of tradition rather than explicit written policy. For some participants, there is a great comfort in doing it the way we always have. They will be uncomfortable if the organization takes a new direction. Others may become bored and move on seeking new experience. Organizations must have mechanisms for managing change in a controlled way. Normally this will be parliamentary procedures applied to changes in the bylaws. If there is widespread dissatisfaction or disinterest in the meetings, the leader needs to move out aggressively. If the club is growing and there is high satisfaction with the meetings, tinker delicately. Your club is probably somewhere in the middle. A freshly elected leadership will usually have more freedom and energy to make changes. Don’t take the telescope apart unless you are confident you can get it back together.
7. Evaluate candidate topics for appropriateness for the meeting. Most clubs have alternate ways to get information out. Some examples to consider:
  1. Use the newsletter to introduce members to complex club information or issues.
  2. Use board or committee meetings to handle routine administrative business.
  3. Use the phone, post or E-mail for communication that concerns few.
  4. Post a detailed treatment on the club web page.
  5. Call a special meeting of the concerned if there is a major conflict.

Use care in relying on e-mail and web pages. Not everyone lives this way yet.

8. Design the next meeting agenda in time to get it in the newsletter. For each item, include a clear title, the presenter's name, the expected start time and the duration. You really need to do all of this because it really makes a better meeting. Work with the presenters on the title so it will be accurate and stimulate interest. Have some fun with the title if that is consistent with the culture of your club. Work with the presenter to establish realistic and beneficial estimates of the length of time for the presentation. Work to improve your skill at estimating durations. Program in enough time for lively club questioning, answering and discussion if the topic or speaker is likely to generate some. Program in a break. Consider community norms and real life when determining the time when the meeting should end.
9. Include something for every level of astronomical sophistication at each meeting. The new astronomer in his first months of participation may be willing to sit through a 30 minute discussion of controversies in CCD flat fielding techniques if he also gets to see the current Star Hustler and a slide show with entry-level discussion of observing Jupiter. The experienced observer may be willing to sit through Star Hustler if he knows he will get to argue his theories of CCD flat-fielding with a noted expert. A narrowly focused meeting may turn off candidate new members. A brief report that reveals the joys of personal observing may trigger enthusiasm in the newcomer more than a brilliant cosmological discussion by a distinguished guest expert. Many clubs provide a special session at a different time for new people, but we should be concerned with their needs during the general meeting as well.
10. Alternating serious and humorous, the experiential and the scientific, the rational and the mystical in an agenda breaks up the meeting and keeps people interested. It is possible (and I think, healthy) for these polar opposites to coexist in an individual and organization. Some members may disagree with discussion of some of these extremes at the meeting. You can go pretty far out with an astronomy club meeting as long as it relates to the sky and you handle the topic with respect for all viewpoints and a little humor. Exercise special care around the topics of spiritual belief, family values, and partisan politics. Consider your membership and don't get too far out in front of them, but don't let them rest in their comfort zone either.
11. Involve members in giving programs or reports. Giving your first talk at an astronomy club meeting is a rite of passage for those concerned with expanding the number of people interested in astronomy. Cultivate a group of accomplished speakers in the club and use them. Don't be afraid to ask as their leader. Encourage members to try it. Members are often the best source of introduction-level presentations. Shy members often do a great job because they will take the time to prepare well. Eccentric members often do a great job because their unusual viewpoint may cause us to look at something familiar in a new or humorous way. Less experienced speakers may need a little extra support, guidance, and protection but it is usually a sound investment. Encourage presenters to prepare and distribute a simple handout containing the details of their message. People love to get a freebie and it allows the audience to listen to the speaker rather than take notes. Nothing is more annoying than having to write down the Right Ascension and Declination of an object in a dark auditorium. Well, actually writing

down and obscure Internet address (URL) in the dark is more annoying.

12. Cultivate short regular standing features by opinionated, knowledgeable or entertaining members. This reveals the personality of the club and helps make it accessible to the new people. Good recurring features also bring people back. Pick a catchy name including the presenter's name and put it on the agenda. Some ideas that have worked:
  1. A professional science educator shares an editorial on issues of importance.
  2. An experienced member tells funny stories of his life in astronomy or jokes he has heard.
  3. A good communicator presents objects for observation and generates discussion about them.
  4. A brief (two minutes tops) old-fashioned interpretive reading from our literature (Chet Raymo's *Soul of the Night* is full of opportunities).
  5. An astronomical or scientific puzzle or riddle with discussion of the solution.
  
13. Cultivate short verbal reports from groups of members who work together regularly on interesting activities, such as amateur telescope making, film and CCD astrophotography, graze observing, or volunteer public education. The structure and organization of these activities will vary according to the club and its methods. A brief status and show and tell will help all the members know about the subject and generate more enthusiasm and participation. Again, keep these reports quick and engaging, identify this segment on the agenda and reserve detailed discussion for a featured program.
  
14. Promote the meeting. It is a scientifically repeatable observation that people who don't know about your club or meeting will not attend. Get the word out through all of your communication channels: club newsletter, community newspapers, radio, TV, Email-mailing list, Internet website, posters and spare newsletters to appropriate stores and schools. Most of these channels require only that you provide timely accurate information to the right person. Learn to write a punchy press release; all the big astronomers do. People will come to a meeting if they think they will get something of value. A lot of people come no matter what you have on the agenda. Love and respect these people. Many come based on their interest in the specific agenda topics. Make the data available to the discriminating.
  
15. Prepare your meeting room for the meeting. Arrive early, check the audiovisual equipment, the heating and cooling, unlock the door, turn on the lights. Chat with the early arrivals. Look around nervously for the main presenters. If you have special equipment for an unusual meeting, double verify that it is going to show up and make sure somebody knows how to work it. Plug in the TV and VCR and locate the remote controls if you are going to have videos. Try to get the first video in the machine before the meeting starts. Look around nervously for the person who has the first video. Make sure the slide projectors have working lights and will advance to the next slide. Carry a few slides to check it out before the meeting. Have a mostly empty carousel in case your speaker shows up with slides but no carousel. Look around nervously for the

speaker.

16. Do something that makes the meeting room your territory. This is important for a level of comfort of some members and recognition by new people, particularly if you do not have exclusive use of the room or hold meetings in various locations. Some clubs have big banners with the club's name and logo. This can be a great project for the artistic or sewing-inclined members. You can entrust telescope makers with the task but they are likely to make it out of plywood and aluminum and spend half the schedule engineering the transportation and erection methodologies. Make special 35mm slides with the club's name, logo and a welcome for projecting on the screen at the start of the meeting.
17. Bring a copy of the agenda with all the details listed in Item 7. Yes, all the details. The correct spelling of the speaker's name will help members address the speaker respectfully. The start times and durations allow people to make good decisions about staying or leaving. Leaders hate it when people leave in the middle of a meeting but everybody has a different constraint. It is also unfair to expect people to stay beyond the time when they need to be home. The times also help a person who is disinterested or lost during one segment to know how long to hang on until something more accessible. The times are also your tool for assuring that the meeting will end on time, a respectful and professional way to run meetings. Make the agenda viewable by all members several times during the meeting. The computer-literate can print directly on transparencies for overhead projection. Those with clear handwriting can manually write the agenda on transparencies or on a fixed or carried-in chalkboard or white board. A run to the copy shop or copier to get everybody a paper copy also works. Remember to recycle.
18. One person should run the meeting. Meetings do not run themselves. This is a serious responsibility. Smile and speak loudly.
  1. Start the meeting on time and manage it to the conclusion:
  2. Signal an official start of the meeting and get people in their seats.
  3. Introduce yourself and thank people for coming.
  4. Welcome new people and ask them how they found about the club.
  5. Applaud the new people for coming and visit with them at the break.
  6. Review the agenda in detail and ask if there are any late items or walk-ons.
  7. Get to the first item on time.
  8. Introduce each item on the agenda and work a smooth transition between items.
  9. Cultivate "first question" people among the membership to get question and answer sessions started. As the host, be thinking of a first question yourself, just in case.
19. Keeping a meeting on schedule is a delicate balancing act that takes skill and luck. Meetings tend to run long. After introducing each segment, look at where you are in the agenda, pay attention to the speaker, watch the door nervously for the next speaker to arrive, all the while looking charming and pleasant. You can do it. If you need help, deputize a person to help you watch the time, with them signaling you and the speaker.

Signaling can be a pain; it is OK to softly say “five minutes.” Anything more can be distracting. If the speaker is using visual aids, you can generally see progress through the talk by watching the slides move around the carousel or the overhead transparency stack get shorter. Professional speakers are accustomed to working within time limitations and if you are clear with them, they will hit the mark on their own. Inexperienced speakers will benefit from your guidance. If a speaker appears to be going longer than planned, you have choices: (1) if the members are involved and it is a great program, adjust the downstream agenda to make up for it, (2) accept that the meeting is going to go long and call the baby-sitters or (3) gently intervene with the speaker. Here are some gentle interventions:

1. If the speaker is taking a long time responding to a detailed question, “Dr. Smith, let me ask you and Billy to finish this discussion after the meeting. Thanks.”
  2. If the speaker is on a long digression or has lost the audience’s attention, ask a question that leads back towards the conclusion or the general truth.
  3. If there have been a lot of question and answer during the talk, limit the Q&A after the talk to one or two questions and keep their follow-up short.
20. If the meeting involves spirited discussion, either of an issue facing the organization or following an interesting program, moderate the discussion and watch the clock. Moderating is a balancing act that assures all viewpoints get heard equally. Sometimes you must prompt a shy or reluctant person to speak up. Sometimes you have to take control away from a member who has made the point but won’t let go. If emotion runs high, assure all viewpoints get an equal hearing and maintain a neutral demeanor. Sometimes careful application of humor can defuse a tense situation but only if it is funny to both sides. Leadership does involve executive decision but in voluntary organizations, it is essential to keep the membership’s needs and desires at the center of club activities. Do not let your own opinion on an issue control the discussion. Parliamentary procedure is a useful tool for group decision making if it enforces discipline on a chaotic situation, but the leader must use personal skill to keep the discussion on track.
21. At the end of the meeting, make a point of briefly summarizing, thanking the speakers and attendees and crisply concluding the meeting. After adjourning, visit with those who are hanging around and get their feedback on the meeting. Afterward, prepare a summary of what happened (having kept a few notes while it is going on) and publish it in the newsletter. If the meetings appear interesting in the newsletter, more people will attend.

Few of us have done all of these things. Many of us have seen them done well or regretted not doing them. Most of these things are obvious. As leaders, we can improve our meetings. Our membership depends on it.