



THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF THE FAIRFAX AREA

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GUIDE FOR THE UNIT DISCUSSION LEADER

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Good meetings, whether consensus, concurrence or informational, don't just happen. They require preparation, attention and teamwork.

The **Discussion Leader** facilitates the discussion at unit meetings.

A **Recorder** is appointed by the Unit Leader to summarize discussion at the unit meeting.

(Optional) The **Resource Person** serves as a “background expert” to help the Discussion Leader with questions about the subject and is usually a member of the study committee.

Leading the Discussion

1. Read the study. As part of preparation, it is a good idea to note the answers to the questions in the article.
2. Attend the briefing. The briefing is an opportunity to ask questions, express your opinion and gain insight on the topic. Additional background information may be presented at the briefing. Discussion questions may be changed. If this is a consensus or concurrence, the Discussion Leader's and Resource Person's opinions will be counted at the briefing instead of at the unit meeting.
3. The members should have read the study before the meeting. The Discussion Leader asks the questions and encourages the members to participate and express their views. Summarize as soon as areas of agreement are evident. Explore opposing views and attempt to narrow areas of disagreement.
4. The most important job of the Discussion Leader is to listen! Use points of disagreement to phrase questions which will move the discussion on, “In other words, you can see her point that...but you think...” Or “We all seem to agree we have to provide for..., but should we include...?” Ask for clarification whenever you are not completely sure of what was said or intended, “In other words, you mean....?” Or “Are you saying...?” The Recorder can help facilitate for understanding.
5. Keep the members talking to each other by never answering a question. Turn it back to the group and resist the urge to react to a member's comment. Cloak your reaction in a question, “Do the rest of you feel this would be practical?” If there has been little pro/con discussion, encourage minority opinion or ask the Resource Person to elucidate. Your interest in all viewpoints will create a warm, friendly atmosphere in which all participants feel free to express their ideas without fear of disapproval. A light relaxed touch is often a key to success in a discussion. Be prepared to add additional background and information learned at the briefing. If there is an unanswered question, ask the Recorder to submit it with the Discussion Questions Report.
6. Try not to express a personal opinion, especially during a consensus or concurrence.

7. Remember the clock. Be sure that the discussion proceeds in a timely manner. The order of the questions may not be important as long as they are answered in time.
8. If it is a consensus or concurrence study, be sure to answer all the questions. If it is an informational study, don't feel every question must be answered if the discussion has progressed.
9. Be sure that the Recorder's notes are read back to the unit. This may be done after each question or at the end of the meeting. The notes should accurately reflect the members' concerns and opinions. The Recorder's notes should be sent to the Unit Coordinator as soon as possible.

Dealing with Possible Problems

1. Long Silences – Let silences happen. Don't leap in with another question. Members are thinking. Give them a chance. Although 30 seconds may seem like eternity, allow the group time to think. When it is time to break the silence, do not ask a new question. Rephrase the original.
2. Over-talkative Member – Listen, then cut them off by briefly summarizing what they said. Then redirect the discussion. Don't frustrate the member; make a point of recording those views.
3. Personal Experiences – If a comment has gone on long enough, remark how "It certainly is a good example of ...aspect of the problem, but what about this other aspect...?"
4. The Quiet Ones – Don't put anyone on the spot. Make an open invitation, "We haven't heard from everyone. Are there any comments or questions before we record our unit as being in favor of...?" Ask "Does the head nodding mean they agree that...?"
5. Lack of Discussion - If it is a result of members not having read their studies, face facts and ask them to turn to page...paragraph... and review the material before trying to answer the question. If all attempts to get the discussion moving meet with failure, admit it and ask the unit members why this occurred. Isolating concrete factors that have contributed to low interest is often as valuable as more positive reactions.
6. Disagreements – At times, a unit will not come to consensus or concurrence. Indicate points of disagreement in the Discussion Report.
7. Encourage expression of different points of view in a respectful manner.