

Society of St. Vincent de Paul Toronto Central Council



Meetings Chapter

FINAL DRAFT

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Society of St. Vincent de Paul
Toronto Central Council



Membership Manual - Meetings

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Effectiveness as a meeting participant. Try this brief questionnaire.	

Food for thought:
You can judge your
age by the amount
of pain you feel
when you come in
contact with a new
idea.

John Nuveen

Conference/Particular Council Meetings

Meetings and the Rule

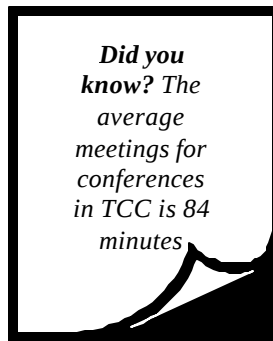
*“A meeting is effective when it **achieves its objectives** in a **minimum amount of time**, to the **satisfaction** of the participants.”*

It's such a short, simple, straightforward definition of an effective meeting. So why do we often find it so hard to make our meetings **interesting, satisfying, productive, affirming, and nourishing?**

Elements of the definition

1. *achieves its objectives*

- this assumes there are some objectives for the meeting, hopefully worked out in general by the members and reflected in the meeting agenda;
- it also assumes that the president and members are expecting and ensuring that the meeting does meet these objectives (or that changes will be made for future meetings to ensure that they do);



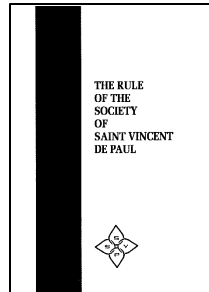
2. *minimum amount of time*

- Most people dislike long meetings. Others would be happy to sit and chat for hours. The challenge and the trick is **to do what needs to get done, in a way that satisfies the members**, in the **least amount of time**.

3. *satisfaction of the participants*

- This condition ensures that we're not just rushing through the business and getting out as quickly as we can, since that's not what conference meetings are about. Members wouldn't be satisfied that the matters had been dealt with in a thorough and thoughtful manner. They would likely also resent that insufficient time and attention had been given to the spiritual and social aspects of the conference.

Meetings can be repetitious and unimaginative if we just follow the agenda suggested in the Rule. However, before we place all the blame for boring conference (or particular council) meetings on Blessed Frederic Ozanam or those dedicated Vincentians who wrote the Commentaries in the Rule, let's just review what the **Rule** says about conference meetings.



- i. *“From their very first meetings the founders of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul drew such consolation from their experience of life in common that they regarded themselves as truly brothers and adopted the custom of sharing the joy of weekly meetings” (Preamble, IV, p. 11 in 1995 Revised Edition).*
- ii. *“Meetings are held in a spirit of fraternity, simplicity, and Christian joy. They provide for consideration in common of the experiences of each member and the problems encountered in the pursuit of better service.” (Schema 1, V, p.23)*
- iii. *“Conferences should meet as often and as regularly as possible. Frequent and regular meetings tend to strengthen the spirit of fraternity among members, ensure that the best possible service is available to those in need, and deepen the spirituality of members” (Schema II, Article 6 Commentaries, p.29)*

Remember: The purpose of the agenda is to **focus** the meeting. What do you and the members want to **focus** on?

Sample agenda

To help us achieve the above objectives for our meetings, the Rule provides a sample agenda.

“Deliberation should be carried on in a spirit of fraternity while remaining essentially practical.

- *Opening prayer*
- *Spiritual reading*
- *Adoption of the agenda and minutes of previous meeting*
- *Financial report*
- *Information from Councils at higher levels*
- *study of the needs of those requiring assistance...to seek out the best ways of helping them*
- *Secret collection*
- *Closing prayer (Schema II, Article 6 Commentaries, p.29)”*

MEETINGS THAT DON'T WORK

Roadblocks to Effective Meetings

How can a meeting that is carried on in a spirit of fraternity, that allows members to share their experience with the aim of improving service to those in need, that provides for the deepening of the spirituality of members, and that's held in a spirit of Christian joy be:

- **unsatisfying**
- **pointless**
- **or**
- **stressful?**

Some Possible Reasons:

1. Routine/familiarity

- The president and members may have slipped into familiar routine. They've been doing it so long the same way, that much of the joy, creativity, energy, and purpose has gone out of it. The same thing can happen with family meals.

Did you know? The average conference in TCC meets 1.56 times per month.

2. Expectations

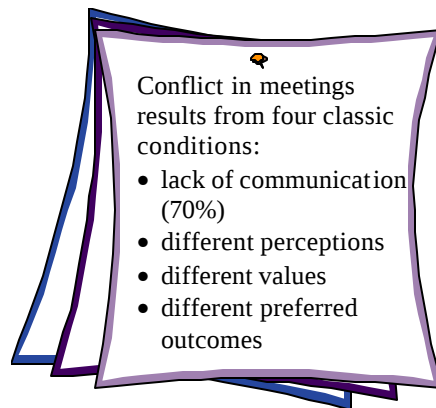
- We've all heard jokes and complaints about meetings of all kinds. If our experience with meetings (in our work, in parish life, etc.) is that meetings are boring and seldom productive, we tend not to expect much from them or to put much into them. We lower our expectations and demands and so aren't surprised or disappointed when conference meetings are boring, unsatisfying, or pointless.

3. Lack of skill and/or effort

- Planning a successful meeting takes some work and practice. Good conference meetings don't just happen because the president follows the suggested agenda in the Rule. Thoughtful preparation is required. *(We'll get to some suggestions shortly.)*

4. Too few members

- If there are only two or three members in the conference or present at most meetings, it is almost impossible to accomplish any of the goals Ozanam envisioned for conference meetings, other than, perhaps, having a financial accounting. It is the rare conference president that could run an effective, joyful, enriching, spiritually- nourishing meeting with two members present. When such a group is too small, it is hard to get any energy or chemistry, and there's a tendency just to get "right to business", perhaps omitting many of the key ingredients of an appropriate, effective conference (including the reflection).



5. Disruptions

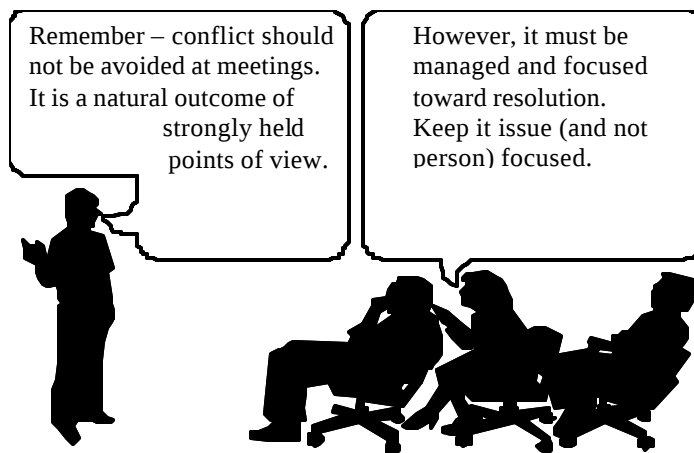
- It would be nice to think that Vincentians, who are members because they want to serve those in need and to live out their faith, would behave in a manner that would disrupt, sidetrack, or harm the conference or its members. However, one or more members may be deliberately or unintentionally (with a heart of gold and good intentions) destroying the meetings. They can do this in a variety of ways.
 - i **Aggressor**- the loud, aggressive, opinionated member who tends to silence and intimidate other members and, perhaps, the president. This person may use sarcasm, tone of voice, body language, or other means to dominate and have their way. To make matters worse, the person may fancy themselves as a know-it-all.
 - ii **Rambler**- everything reminds them of a good story (that may or may not be related to the point at hand). This person might bore everyone to death or be so entertaining that the real business never gets done.
 - iii **Grumbler**- is always complaining about someone or something. They are quick to criticize people and ideas.

Food for thought:
Don't get your knickers in a
knot. Nothing is solved and it
just makes you walk funny.
Katheryn Carpenter

- iv **Nit picker**- means well, but puts everyone to sleep with their endless pursuit of detail. They have trouble seeing the bigger picture or are less comfortable dealing with complexity or ambiguity, and so content themselves with microscopic analysis of every topic. They may prefer to publicly point out errors or oversights, rather than do so privately.
- v **Free loader**- doesn't really appreciate the fact that everyone in the conference has a responsibility to contribute to the extent that their talents permit. They leave decisions, ideas and active involvement in the meeting to others.
- vi **Autocrat**- although this may be the president, it could be another member. This person believes that members have few rights when it comes to discussing an issue or voting. This person doesn't have much faith in democracy or the will of the majority. He/she knows best.

Check out the **Rule** for Ozanam's and the Commentators' views on the role of the president. (Schema II)

Note: *Whether a meeting is successful or not depends, to a great extent, on how well the president manages these personalities or behaviours - more on that shortly.*



Meeting Preparation

They say that when a person's buying real estate, there are three important factors: location, location, location. When it comes to effective meetings, there are three important things: **preparation, preparation, and preparation.**

Appropriate /adequate preparation includes:

1) **The Reason:** Being clear about **WHY**

- The president needs to be very clear in his /her own mind about why Vincentians need to meet as a conference regularly and frequently. If the president is very clear about this, they will plan their agendas accordingly and will ensure that all conference members have a similar appreciation. **A regular visit to the Rule is helpful.**

2) **The Agenda:** A carefully thought out **Agenda**

- The president with a full appreciation and understanding of what Ozanam intended for conference meetings will ensure that spiritual readings are carefully chosen and that each component of the meeting is geared to meeting the needs of those they serve and the members.
- Everyone should receive an agenda (at least enough to be shared in pairs). You may find it helpful for members if you set up your agenda with spaces after each item (more spaces for more complex items) so that they can make notes, if they wish, right on their agenda. (see sample agenda at the end)

3) **The Plan** for dealing with **Difficult Issues**

- If a delicate or difficult matter needs to be addressed by the conference, the president and executive should think it through carefully **beforehand**. They should develop a plan for dealing with the item in a way that gets the fullest participation and best ideas. Where the item is placed on the agenda, who else might be invited to assist, what information needs to be available for a well-informed decision to be made, and strategies for facilitating discussion are some of the issues that should be thought through **before** the meeting. If you simply put it on the agenda and see what happens, the discussion is likely to get sabotaged (see #5 above) or an ill-informed, hasty decision is likely to be made.

Food for thought:
The three hardest tasks
in the world are
neither physical feats
nor intellectual
achievements, but
moral acts: to return
love for hate, to
include the excluded,
and to say "I was
wrong".

Sydney J. Harris

4) **A Plan** for dealing with **Difficult People**

- If you have disrupters similar to those described in #5 above, you need to work out a strategy for dealing appropriately and effectively with them. Hoping and wishing that they won't cause trouble or derail tonight's meeting isn't enough. Ask for God's help and then get busy developing strategies for encouraging each member to contribute but allowing no member to dominate, intimidate, sidetrack, or bog down the important work of the conference.

Food for thought:
A bore is someone
who persists in
holding his own
views after we
have enlightened
him with ours.

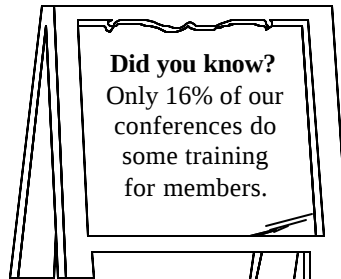
Malcolm S. Forbes

Generally:

- (a) speaking directly, honestly, and confidently to the person **outside** of the meeting and discussing your concerns deals with many of these

problems. This is especially true if the person wasn't aware of their behaviour or didn't realize its impact on the meetings.

- (b) being well prepared also solves many of the problems. The prepared chair of a meeting will be less defensive and better able to deal with challenges.



5) **The Plan** for the **Future**

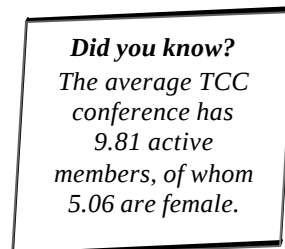
Planning for the future has a number of components

a) **Training for members**

- The members won't become more confident and effective unless there are opportunities for them to improve their knowledge and skills. Stronger members and a more effective conference require some training aspect be built into every meeting. It might be a speaker, a video, an article, etc. It might be only a few minutes or might involve much of the meeting at times.

b) **Dealing with issues**

- If there's a problem, challenge or opportunity facing the conference, **deal with it**. Ignoring it or minimizing it is unlikely to be in the best interests of those you serve or the conference. One way to deal with some issues may be to help the conference develop **objectives** aimed at addressing the issue in a systematic way and perhaps devoting a little time at each meeting to moving the issue forward. Examples of such issues might be improving relations with the pastor, increasing donations, or addressing safety issues for members.



- c) **Recruitment**
 - Some current members will move, become less active, or resign. There needs to be a plan for attracting and holding new members. The entire conference needs to be part of the planning and implementation. (**see the package on Recruitment for ideas and resources**)
- d) **Succession planning**
 - To ensure the uninterrupted pursuit of the work to which much effort has been devoted, the president should personally look after the preparation of one or more potential successors” (Schema II, Article 3 Commentaries, p. 26). One way of doing this is encouraging / facilitating members taking on a variety of leadership responsibilities and challenges.

Sample Conference Agenda

So, let’s take the sample agenda from the Rule, try to build in some of the points discussed above, and see what our agenda might look like.

Agenda
Opening prayer
Spiritual reading/reflection
Approve agenda & minutes
Financial report
Info from higher councils
Sharing
Secret collection
Closing prayer

The sample agenda in the Rule is meant to guide and assist conferences, not restrict or stifle them.

Greeting

- *It should be understood by members that the period of 15 minutes prior to the start of the actual meeting is important time for them to greet each other, catch up on news, and to lend an attentive ear to each other. This time should be considered as a part of the meeting.*

Welcome

- *A genuine, warm welcome and best wishes from the president to all present.*

Opening prayer

- In most cases, this will be the Vincentian prayer

Spiritual Reading/Reflection

- This should be chosen carefully by the person who will be reading it. The reflection should speak to the members and their work in some meaningful way. Please don’t let this important component of the meeting and the conference become boringly routine or irrelevant. The most effective ones are generally brief and meaningful.

- Give the members a few moments to comment on the reading, if they so choose.
- (i) **Approve agenda**
- members should feel very comfortable to request additions or alterations to the agenda. It's **their** meeting.
- (ii) **Approve minutes**
- if you have a good system for keeping minutes of meetings, this should only take a moment

Financial report

- the treasurer will generally just give a quick update on the state of the finances. Members can ask for more detail if they feel it's necessary.

Tip: Don't just pass information on.

Think ahead about:

- what members need to know.
- what members want to know.
- which items are appropriate.

Information should be relevant and useful.

Information from higher councils

- At times this item will be very brief and at other times more involved. It's an important item in that it helps the members to be informed about, and feel connected to, the broader Society. It's important that they have a good sense of the issues being addressed at the Particular and Central Councils, and what's being done through our Special Works, etc. One of the unique aspects of the Society is that each Vincentian shares a spiritual bond and a resolve with Vincentians throughout the GTA, across Canada, and around the world.

 **Please Note**

***Did you know?** The average conference in TCC does 20 home visitations a month and spends an average of 17.9 minutes per visit.*

Tip: With the help of your executive and members, make the next part of the agenda informative, interesting, varied, and creative. Members should look forward to this part.

Sharing

- From the screening interviews (2002/03) we have learned that a large number of the members want more opportunities to share.
 - a. they want to be able to learn from dedicated, experienced Vincentians, both from within their conference and from neighbouring conferences.

- b. they want to have more opportunities to discuss cases and issues, both at the conference and particular council levels.
- c. they feel that, by sharing experiences and views, they'll be more confident and consistent in their work with those in need.

Sharing the Difficulties

We also learned that many members are struggling.

- a. they're concerned that many people asking for help may not really need it;
- b. they're aren't sure how to accurately and appropriately assess the need;
- c. they're not sure if they're making any real difference in the lives of those they serve.
- d. many members, especially newer ones, want slightly clearer guidelines about how much is appropriate in various situations;
- e. they're unsure how to deal most appropriately and safely with the mentally ill and addicted;
- f. they want more information about what other services and assistance are available for those they serve.

Where better than your conference to start addressing these questions together?

The Process of Sharing

The sharing portion of your meeting is where some variety and creativity can be introduced. At a meeting it might involve one or two options such as the following.

- a. ask members to share their **most challenging or inspiring** home visitation since the last meeting. (For that meeting, this would be instead of having every member report on all of their visits.)
- b. invite members to each identify one thing that is holding them back from providing better service to those in need. Discuss how these issues will be addressed (perhaps considering one at each meeting);
- c. have a member present something they have prepared on a topic of interest or concern (e.g. perhaps a member agreed to look into a housing or immigration issue and make a little report or presentation). In the interviews, a large number of members said they'd like to be more helpful to their clients in the area of budgeting. Could your conference work out some ideas?
- d. have members share successful strategies (e.g. the ways they've found best for helping a new client relax and open up to them so that they can better determine the clients situation and needs);

Tip: If members are consistently missing meetings or coming late, **there's a reason**. It may have to do with their commitment. It may be because of the nature of the meetings. Either way, **you need to find out.**

- e. showing a video or having a speaker come in. Members indicated they want to hear from other Vincentians and from experts in various fields;
- f. sharing what aspects of conference life they find most nourishing or affirming;
- g. having a couple of members agreeing to role play a first visit or dealing with a difficult client;
- h. other approaches that stimulate and encourage sharing, cooperative problem solving, and fraternity.

Secret collection

Comments on the meeting

- *You may find it helpful at the end of each meeting to take one minute and invite members to comment (without discussion) on what they felt was the most encouraging or informative or nourishing part of the meeting. This is excellent feedback for the president who is working to improve the meetings.*

Closing prayer

- In most cases this will be the Vincentian closing prayer.

Final comment: The above meeting should take a **maximum of 90 minutes**. If a conference agrees that 90 minutes is an appropriate length for their meetings, the president has a responsibility to ensure the meeting **concludes by that time**. To do so shows good planning, effective management, and respect for the members. People also work harder and stay more focused if they know the meeting will end at a definite and reasonable time. Think about the time when the homilist or a speaker you were going to be listening to said they were only going to speak for twenty minutes - and they actually kept their word.

Sample Conference Agenda

Greeting

Welcome

Opening prayer

Spiritual Reading/Reflection

(i) Approve agenda

(ii) Approve minutes

Financial report

Information from higher councils

Sharing

Secret collection

Comments on the meeting

Closing prayer

Focused Meetings – Some Tips

Some challenging meeting participants were briefly described earlier. These people will make your task of keeping the meetings fraternal, productive, spiritually nourishing, and carried out in a spirit of Christian joy difficult at times.

Food for thought:

Rare is the person who
can weigh the faults of
others without putting his
thumb on the scales.

Bryon J. Langenfield

Some tips:

1. Have a **well-thought out agenda** that reflects the needs and wishes of the conference and its members and that is relevant to serving those in need.
 - It's easier to keep people focused (or to get them back on track) when they have a good agenda in front of them.
2. Through discussion, develop some standards and expectations related to meeting behaviour. For example, it's **not appropriate** for the president or any member to:
 - use body language, tone, or words to belittle, diminish or dismiss another participant;
 - interrupt another speaker;
 - disregard other members' feelings or interests;
 - waste people's time with self-indulgent storytelling or sermonizing;
 - dominate the discussion;
 - consistently wander into meetings late.

These and similar behaviours can distract, upset, or diminish other members and so are unacceptable in meetings. However, the rules/ understandings need to be consistently enforced, by the president and the members. If rude, thoughtless, or non-productive behaviour is accepted any time, it becomes more difficult to deal with. Have the confidence and **courage to challenge** members when they act in a way that is not in the best interests of the conference, the members, and, ultimately, those you serve.

Food for thought:

We are all
inclined to judge
ourselves by our
ideals; others by
their acts.

Harold Nicols

3. Often speaking to a member that is difficult is better done **in private**. This removes the complication of him / her being publicly embarrassed and feeling the need to save face or get even.
4. Start and finish meetings on time. It demonstrates respect for members and good organization.
5. Think about seating arrangements. Sitting around a square or circular table, or in a circle without tables, suggests that everyone is equal and welcome to participate. Having a head table makes it clear one or more people are in charge. Sitting in rows may be useful for a presentation but tends to stifle participation and interaction. Rows tend to discourage sharing and getting to know one another. Certain types of arrangements of tables and chairs may also help to break up little groups that tend to have side conversations during meetings.
How you arrange the chairs depends on what you want to accomplish.
6. When there is disagreement between two groups on how to **solve a problem**, try stopping the discussion and asking members where they stand on the following scale.

For 1__2__3__4__5__6__7__8__9__10 **Against**

Then ask one or more members who are strongly FOR (# 1-3) a given position to explain, as accurately and fairly as they can, why they think other members are AGAINST the position. Then ask those AGAINST (#8-10) to explain why the others are FOR. This allows the facts and perceptions to be clearly laid out and requires everyone to listen to and understand the other's position. Those who were in the middle could be then asked to suggest alternate solutions.

Tips for Meeting Participants (Conference/Particular Council)

1. Responsibility

The president has a lot of responsibility for ensuring the meetings go well, **but so do you**. Every meeting participant has a responsibility to help ensure:

- the meeting is Christ-centered;
- the meeting is productive and on the right track;
- members' feelings, ideas and gifts are valued and honoured;

- the conference and its members are continuing to grow and improve (and, therefore, service to those in need is improving).

The enclosed self-rating chart might be useful as a tool for reflection or discussion.

As you go through the items, it is hopefully clear that each conference member has a responsibility to:

- contribute to the smooth, appropriate, efficient, productive operation of the conference, to the extent one's gifts, experience, health and time permit – contribute in every way you can;
- realize there are meeting behaviours that are positive and helpful and others that are annoying, distracting, or hurtful;
- take their share of responsibility for the success of meetings, including helping other members to feel comfortable, accepted, and involved.

2. Getting your point across

You have ideas, concerns, and experiences to share. Although you don't want to dominate the meetings or call undue attention to yourself, you feel that you have valuable things to contribute and share. **BUT**, points that are made at the wrong time or in an inappropriate or ineffective way are likely to be lost. With a little thought, preparation and practice, you can become far more effective in having your idea, concern, or observation considered more seriously by the other members.

Try:

- a. **Organizing your thoughts** before speaking. Be clear on the one or two points you want to make. You may find it helpful to use a pad of paper.
- b. Presenting your point (especially if it might be controversial or complex, in **three stages**.
 - i. state your point clearly and briefly
 - ii. give your reasons or relevant information
 - iii. restate your main point in summary

(This approach allows the other members to see where you're going with your point, to hear your rationale, and then hear the point made again, for clarity)

- c. Presenting your point from a **positive perspective** and with a **positive tone** – be positive in what you say and how you say it.

(e.g. Rather than saying, "We waste too much time at our meetings" in a critical, accusatory tone, perhaps try, "I wonder if we could find ways to make our meetings more productive and satisfying for everyone?" in a hopeful, inviting tone.

- d. Waiting for the **right time** to bring up difficult issues.

(**e.g.** One minute before the end of a long meeting is not the time to suggest, “I don’t think the amount we give in food vouchers is adequate”. If a member were to bring up such a major point at the end of a meeting, the skilled president would say, “That’s an important issue you raise. Let’s make it our first business item on our next agenda. I would ask all the members to give the matter some thought in the meantime.)

- e. If you’re going to raise a concern, try to also be ready with a recommendation for improvement. Participants are far more open to hearing problems raised if a possible solution is attached.
- f. Listen carefully to the reactions to your point. Try to incorporate any useful suggestions into your idea so that the final solution is the result of collaboration.

Self-Evaluation Tool

(give yourself 3, 2, or 1 for each item – hopefully your score is over 40)

I contribute to our conference meeting by:

H	M	L
3	2	1

1. updating the conference on relevant developments or actions			
2. contributing actively and productively to discussions			
3. doing sufficient homework to ensure I am well prepared for the discussion and decisions related to agenda items			
4. ensuring that I am sufficiently knowledgeable of the works and activities related to the mandate of our conference			
5. contributing to the development of a clear mandate and set of realistic, appropriate objectives for our conference			
6. using my personality and skills to contribute to the efficient and effective operation of the conference meeting			
7. using my values, skills, and experience to contribute to the quality of the discussion			
8. making every reasonable effort to carry out tasks for which I have accepted responsibility			
9. making every reasonable effort to help ensure the conference meeting achieves optimal results			
10. attending meetings regularly and on time			
11. having the courage to confront or challenge the chair or other conference meeting members when I believe it is in the best interests of those we serve and the work of the conference			
12. taking on a leadership role when the situation calls for it			
13. supporting, encouraging, assisting and respecting other conference members			
14. helping to ensure the resources for which the conference has some responsibility are well managed			
15. helping to ensure the conference meeting has the information/input it requires in order to make informed, appropriate decisions			
16. to the extent that is reasonable, putting the interests of the conference's work and the organization ahead of one's personal agenda			
17. giving the time and effort necessary to be a fully contributing member of the conference meeting (i.e. making the conference meeting involvement a priority in my non-family, non-work schedule)			
18. by bringing appropriate humour and joy to the conference meeting			
19. by listening openly and respectfully to the views and ideas of others			
20. by liaising with individuals or groups, as appropriate			
21. by acting as an ambassador of the conference and the organization (informing and exciting others about the work of the conference and the organization)			
22. (other)			
Sub-totals			
Total			