Guide for Chairing Bilingual Meetings Effectively

Office of Human Resources
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Introduction

This Guide was prepared to give provincial government employees the tools they need to help them chair bilingual meetings and encourage participants to communicate in their preferred official language. It is an adaptation of *Chairing Meetings*, published by the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat.

This Guide presents the basic tools needed to chair bilingual meetings in a professional manner.

No matter how much experience you have in leading bilingual meetings or how successful you have been in the past, this Guide will help you chair them even more confidently, more skilfully, and all in all, more easily. Good intentions are not enough. They are necessary, of course, but they must be accompanied by strategies and techniques appropriate to the situation and the objectives sought.

The purpose of this Guide is not to force participants to behave in a way they do not want to behave. Its goal is to help remove the systemic and psychological barriers that can hamper the use of both official languages in meetings and to set out the key elements you will need in order to establish a work environment conducive to the use of both languages in meetings.

Happy reading and good luck in your meetings!

Bilingual meetings

Small meetings v. large meetings

To establish the context of a meeting, it is important to distinguish between **small** meetings, such as meetings of teams, task forces, etc., and **large** meetings, such as regional meetings, interdepartmental meetings, annual meetings of departments, training sessions, public consultations, and so on.

As indicated in the Official Languages - Language of Work Policy, **small** meetings must be held in a manner that encourages the use of both official languages. Organizers of **small** meetings must ensure that participants have the option of communicating in their preferred official language.

Meeting facilitators or chairpersons can use various means to accomplish this, such as:

- alternating between the use of English and French; and
- encouraging employees to make presentations in the official language in which they feel most comfortable.

At **large** meetings, both official languages must always be used.

Organizers of **large** meetings must therefore ensure that:

- participants have the option of communicating in their preferred official language;
- all materials and presentations are available in both official languages.

Various means can be used to accomplish this, such as:

- simultaneous interpretation;
- bilingual facilitators;
- Anglophone and Francophone co-chairs.

Meeting organizers may also elect to conduct separate meetings in each official language.

Techniques for all types of bilingual meetings

To chair a bilingual meeting successfully, you must take bilingualism into account from the moment you start your preparations, which include the notice of meeting, the agenda, documentation, and presentations.

Notice of meeting

Notices of meetings must always be written in both official languages.
It is important to specify in the notice of meeting whether the meeting will be conducted in both official languages, whether simultaneous interpretation will be available, or whether separate meetings will be held in each official language.

Agenda

For **large** meetings, organizers must ensure that the agenda is written in both official languages.

For **small** meetings, organizers can choose between two options:

- Write the agenda in both official languages; or
- Write the agenda in English for one meeting, in French for the following meeting, and so on.

Documentation

Documents used in bilingual meetings must normally be made available in both official languages. However, depending on the circumstances and the type of meeting, any of the following procedures can be used.

- See that all documents that already exist in both official languages are distributed in both languages.

- Encourage authors of working papers to prepare them in their preferred official language. Do the same for drafts of important documents that will be produced in both official languages in final form. This will help create a truly bilingual environment in your organization.
- Translate drafts to be sent to several departments for comment.
- Hand out bilingual glossaries relating to the topics to be discussed. The participants can use them to familiarize themselves with the key words and the acronyms most frequently used in discussions.

One chair or two co-chairs

You may be unsure whether you are comfortable enough in your second language to chair a bilingual meeting. Being at ease does not mean being able to speak your second language without an accent and without structural or grammatical errors. But it does mean being able to understand the participants well and to take part in the discussions fairly easily, while being aware of your limitations.

If you are asked to chair a bilingual meeting and wonder whether you will be able to do it, consider these points:

- If your only problem is stage fright, dive right in, and you will probably be successful.
- If you are not comfortable in your second language, you can pick a co-chairperson to help you.

If you decide on the latter course, choose someone who has the necessary knowledge and the appropriate level of authority. Otherwise, the group may doubt your commitment to the language of work objective. Explain your expectations clearly to your chosen co-chair.

Contribution of participants

To create an environment conducive to the use of both official languages in meetings, the chairperson can, where the context is suitable, make arrangements such as the following:

- Suggest to some members of the minority language group that they participate in the discussions or make all or part of their presentations in their preferred official language.
- Suggest to a few members of the majority language group that they speak in the minority language occasionally during the meeting.

In both cases, choose the people who are likely to have the greatest positive influence on the group. Their behaviour will serve as an example and encourage the other participants. However, you should ensure that their contributions are not confined to trivial subjects and that all participants fully understand that the goal is to create an environment conducive to the use of both official languages.

Opening the meeting

It is your responsibility as the chair to convey to the participants that the meeting is to be bilingual, and that each person is free to speak in either official language. To do that, you can choose from several ways of proceeding.

The responsibility for breaking the ice is yours. Use both official languages from the time the meeting begins, and invite the participants to feel free to use their preferred official language.

If you cannot do this, and if you have a co-chair, call on that person, and make it clear that he or she has your support.

If you think it would be useful to you or to the group, mention your own level of fluency in the second language. If, for example, you cannot speak your second language with ease, tell them so, but still keep using it.

If you have only a receptive knowledge of your second language (that is, you can follow the discussion in that language but cannot participate), say so, and add that you will rely on your co-chair for help as needed. However, in that case, make it very clear that you do not want your inability to speak your second language to discourage the participants from using that language when they address you or speak to each other.

Ask the participants whether they understand both official languages. If any do not, tell them that they will be given short summaries in their preferred official language of the discussions and decisions that concern them, and of any information that is of particular interest to them. Introduce the person who has agreed to carry out this role.

However, remind the participants that the presence of unilingual persons is not to prevent anyone from using his or her preferred official language.

It is important that, from the start of the meeting, you are able to create an environment in which all participants feel that their rights are being respected and that they are free to use their preferred official language. The presence of one or more unilingual persons should not create an obstacle to holding bilingual meetings.

Avoid placing all the onus for bilingualism on the participants from the less well represented language group, for example by suggesting that the meeting be held in one language only.

When members of both official language groups participate in a meeting, no question should be considered so urgent or so important that discussion in both official languages is impossible. Otherwise, our meetings would probably always be held in just one language!

Presentations and discussions

Once the meeting is under way, do not lose sight of your objective in the heat of the discussion. Be flexible and tolerant but do not allow the group to fall back into its old ways. Provide discreet but effective leadership to encourage change by ensuring that the atmosphere of the meeting will truly enable participants from both language groups to use their preferred official language freely. The following techniques can enable you to create the conditions necessary for free use of both official languages.

- **Leadership**
  If you are able, switch from one official language to the other during the meeting. This will help the participants feel free to use either official language.

- **Assistance of participants**
  If you feel that the group is reverting to a way of functioning that suggests that only one language is authorized and considered worthwhile, call on the participants who agreed to support you before the meeting. Have them speak in the language they agreed to use then by addressing them in that language.

- **Immediate positive reinforcement**
  Speak in the official language that is used less often during the meeting. Occasionally address those who seldom or never use their preferred official language in that language. Encourage those who speak in the language of the minority group by continuing in the same language.

- **Receptive bilingualism**
  People who understand their second language but are not able to express themselves in that language can also be helpful. Try to make them feel relaxed enough that they can play a positive role by showing their openness to bilingualism, and can find an opportunity in these meetings to use their second language.

Remind the participants that when people respond in their first language to a question put to them in their second language; it does not necessarily mean that they want to be addressed in their first language. The dialogue can continue in this bilingual format, with each person using his or her preferred official language.

Continuing efforts

Suppose you have given all the necessary explanations and assurances, but you still sense that the group is not fully behind you. Be patient and persevere. Institutional change cannot be rushed, but it can be encouraged. Participants will have had different experiences and may not be as willing to change as you are.

In the past, employees have often found that announcements of bilingual meetings and invitations to participate in these meetings in both official languages did little to change the behaviour of the group. The chair was frequently ill prepared to assume this responsibility, and so could not always bring about real change. The result was that meetings continued to take place in one language only.

Be aware of these problems. Try not to be overly eager, especially during the first meetings. But don't give up!

Closing the meeting

When the meeting is about to end, you can proceed to the following:

- **Written communications**
  Tell the participants that they may prepare all documents in their preferred official language, whether in draft or in final form.

- **Planning for translation**
  Determine which documents are to be translated and when.

- **Evaluation**
  If you want to make progress in this area, discreetly try to find out what some of the participants think of the way you chaired the meeting and of their own performance in using both official languages. Make a note of the methods that gave good results or turned out to be inappropriate, as well as of any suggestions or criticisms made.

Keep at it!

Don't feel that you have failed if your first meetings do not go the way you want them to. Keep trying!

After the meeting

All follow-up to the meeting should reflect its bilingual nature. You, as chair, must ensure that these steps are taken.

Minutes

For **large** meetings, all minutes must be prepared in both official languages.

For **small** meetings, depending on the circumstances (for example, if all the participants are bilingual), chairpersons can use one of the following formats:

- Prepare the minutes of a series of meetings in English one time and in French the next time. This will help the participants improve their knowledge of their second language and facilitate preparation of the minutes.
- Prepare part of the minutes in English and the rest in French.

Reinforcement

It may be wise to tell participants who support your efforts in meetings that you appreciate their contribution. This will encourage them, reinforce their behaviour, and have a positive influence on the other members of the group.

Special techniques for certain types of meetings

Your techniques, approach, and behaviour will vary according to the type of meeting you are chairing. An interdepartmental meeting is not chaired in exactly the same way as a unit meeting.

This section presents some of the special features associated with certain types of meetings, which we could not deal with in the preceding general discussion.

Interdepartmental meetings

Interdepartmental meetings should adhere closely to the provincial government's bilingualism requirements. The chairing of the meeting (by one person or two) must be bilingual enough to keep the meeting moving steadily. The use of both official languages should be a positive element in the meeting, leading to better participation and better communication.

In certain circumstances, the departments and agencies organizing a meeting could indicate in the notice of meeting that participants will be free to use their preferred official language and that there will be no interpretation service. In such cases, it will be up to the chair or co-chair to manage the meeting so as to facilitate discussion in both official languages.

In some cases, it may be useful to have simultaneous interpretation.

Branch or inter-branch meetings within a department

In general, the chair would handle these meetings in the same way as interdepartmental ones. What happens at this level will serve as an example for the other levels of your department or agency. Participants should be invited and encouraged to make their presentations in their preferred official language.

If the presentations and discussions are likely to last for a long time (as in information meetings), it may be appropriate to call two separate meetings, one in English and the other in French. Bilingual employees who seldom have an opportunity to use their second language can then be invited to attend the meeting in their second language.

In some cases, it may be useful to have simultaneous interpretation.

Task force meetings

Sometimes a task force is set up in a branch with a mandate to discuss a question with other branches.

Insofar as possible, the task force leader must ensure that its meetings can be held in both official languages. This should be kept in mind when choosing the outside specialists. However, the task force members may decide as a group to use just one official language.

Division or section meetings

You can approach division or section meetings in a less formal manner, given the smaller number of participants, their greater familiarity with each other, and their common work routine. Why not set goals for yourself and evaluate your progress?

- **Defining the goals**:
  As chairperson, you may find it appropriate to define with your group the language of work goals to be attained. Each member will then be personally committed to the endeavour, and it will be easier for you to evaluate your group's progress. For example, you can propose (without making it an obligation) that the group increase its use of one of the languages, and then work together to achieve that goal. When there are only a few members of the minority group, be particularly careful that their legitimate expectations are taken into account in defining the goals.

For example, depending on the level of bilingualism of your group, you might decide to achieve your goal by discussing some of the items appearing on the agenda in French and others in English.

- **Evaluating progress:**

  A few months later, you might wish to review with your group the perceptions they had at the beginning, and see, by their attitudes and behaviour, whether things have improved or deteriorated.

  If the behaviour and attitude of some of the participants do not seem to be helping to create an atmosphere conducive to the use of both official languages, discuss this with them after a meeting. There may be good reasons for their behaviour, even if it is only old work habits (leaving them unaccustomed to thinking, discussing and working bilingually with their colleagues) or an insufficient grasp of technical vocabulary. Ask them how you can help.

Meetings with simultaneous interpretation

Simultaneous interpretation is a useful tool. The chair must still monitor the situation carefully and not take for granted that the meeting will proceed in a bilingual format simply because simultaneous interpretation is provided. The chair will direct the discussions effectively to facilitate the work of the interpreters and also to ensure that the participants take full advantage of this service by using their preferred official language.

Preparing for the meeting

Have the following preparatory materials sent to the interpreters several days before the meeting if possible:

- all documents relating to the meeting, in both official languages and in the order in which they will be discussed;
- a list of the names and titles of the participants and of their institutions, in both official languages;
- the principal acronyms and technical terms (in English and French) likely to be used at the meeting;
- the written texts (both English and French versions) of the presentations.

Ensure that enough microphones are ordered for the conference room so that the interpreters will be able to hear all of the participants, including those who will be making presentations using charts and tables.

Make certain that there are enough headphones for all participants so that each one can hear the interpretation. Your bilingual participants can always use them as a backup system to hear some speakers better.

During the meeting

From the outset of the meeting, encourage the participants to take full advantage of the simultaneous interpretation services provided by using their preferred official language.

Remind the speakers to use the microphones, since the interpreters can only translate what they can hear.

A member of your organization should be assigned to remain in contact with the interpreters during the meeting, to attend to such matters as giving them copies of formal resolutions made during the deliberations, and to handle problems with microphones or with participants who speak too rapidly.

If the participants use only one language during the meeting, remind them from time to time that you have provided translation services precisely so that they can use either official language.

Prerequisites for successful bilingual meetings

Some people believe that the success of a bilingual meeting depends only on the bilingual capability of the person who is presiding. That is certainly an important factor, but it is not the only prerequisite for a successful bilingual meeting.

The prerequisites can be grouped into three categories:

- those having to do with the institution itself, which are by far the most important;
- those that depend on the management style of the chairperson; and
- those related to language skills.

Institutions

As indicated in the Official Languages - Language of Work Policy, it is the policy of the Government of New Brunswick to promote the use of both official languages within the New Brunswick Public Service and to encourage and enable employees to work in their preferred official language. Provincial institutions must create a work environment conducive to the use of both official languages.

To that end, they must:

- communicate this policy to their employees;
- remind their employees that they may use either or both of the official languages in meetings.

Management style of the chairperson

Those chairing meetings must use their leadership skills to attain the institution's language of work goals. They must therefore take an open, innovative approach to the subject, so that they can create an environment conducive to the use of both official languages and obtain the participants' support for the institution's goals.

Chairpersons must be aware of the constraints with which they must cope. They must know the goals they seek and the forces at work in the situation, and they must direct their meetings accordingly. They must be able to combine flexibility with tenacity and be sensitive to the sometimes contradictory needs of the participants.

Language skills

Complete bilingualism

If the chairperson is able to converse easily in both official languages, then he or she is fully equipped to succeed in this role. Such a person will make judicious use of both languages and also encourage participants in meetings to feel free to use either or both official languages.

Obviously, apart from those who are "perfectly" bilingual, people who learn their second language later in life usually speak it less fluently than their first. This is normal, and no cause for alarm. Do you speak your second language with the accent of your first? Do you sometimes make errors in sentence construction? Do you sometimes have to search for the right word? Those small language deficiencies simply mean that the language you are using is not your first official language; they are of little importance if you succeed in making yourself understood, and if everyone in your meetings feels free to use his or her preferred official language.

Receptive bilingualism

Receptive bilinguals are those who understand their second language, but have little or no ability to speak it. Such people can make a much more valuable contribution toward the achievement of a language of work objective than is generally believed, and at the same time they can become more actively bilingual.

Receptive bilinguals can chair bilingual meetings if they are well supported and well organized. This implies making judicious use of the techniques presented in this Guide, showing unfailing determination, and giving constant positive reinforcement to participants who address the chair in their second language. In this way, a passively bilingual chair can turn into an advantage what some may consider a handicap.

Unilingualism

If your duties require you to chair bilingual meetings fairly often and you do not feel capable of doing this properly, you could take or continue language training and use a co-chair to help you during the transition period. If that is not possible, ask someone else to chair your meetings so as not to delay unduly the creation of a work environment conducive to the use of both official languages.

Discuss the matter with your immediate superior and your official languages coordinator or the language training and evaluation coordinator in your organization. They are in a good position to advise you on how to acquire, as quickly as possible, the ability to chair these meetings yourself. Other people have done it—why not you too?

Conclusion

Now it is up to you to choose the techniques that are in keeping with your management style and the type of meetings you chair in order to create an environment conducive to the use of both official languages by participants. You will certainly develop other workable ideas of your own.

Check List

- ☐ Send a bilingual invitation.
- ☐ Convey all material simultaneously (before, during, after) in English and French.
- ☐ Remember that the presence of some unilingual participants does not prevent a bilingual meeting.
- ☐ Use a bilingual co-chair if you cannot chair in your second language.
- ☐ Open with a bilingual greeting.
- ☐ Announce right away that everyone can use the language of their choice.
- ☐ Provide on-going summaries if needed and alternate between English and French throughout the meeting.
- ☐ Invite participants to ask for clarification when needed.
- ☐ Treat all ideas equally, whether voiced in English or in French.
- ☐ Ask for feedback on how the bilingual meeting went.

Basic English-French glossary of expressions relating to meetings

To hold a meeting	Tenir une réunion
To convene (to call) a meeting	Convoquer une réunion
To attend a meeting	Assister à une réunion
To sit on a committee	Participer aux travaux d'un comité
The quorum is reached	Le quorum est atteint
Order please!	À l'ordre s.v.p.!
The meeting is called to order	La séance est ouverte
Adoption of the agenda	Adoption de l'ordre du jour
Item on the agenda	Point à l'ordre du jour
To include in (add to) the agenda	Ajouter à l'ordre du jour
To remove from the agenda	Retirer de l'ordre du jour
Other business	Autres questions
Approved agenda	Ordre du jour définitif
To stick to the agenda	S'en tenir à l'ordre du jour
Terms of reference	Mandat
To make a proposal	Présenter une proposition
To second (to support) a proposal	Appuyer une proposition
To withdraw a proposal	Retirer une proposition
To ask for a vote	Demander le vote
To put a question to the vote	Mettre une question aux voix
Is there a mover?	Y a-t-il un proposeur?
Is there a seconder?	Y a-t-il un second proposeur?
Vote by show of hands	Vote à main levée
Secret ballot	Vote secret
For?	En faveur?

Against?	Contre?
Carried unanimously	Adopté à l'unanimité
Adopted by a majority	Adopté à la majorité
The motion is carried by 12 votes	La motion est adoptée par 12
to 9 with 2 abstentions	voix contre 9 et 2 abstentions
The motion is rejected	La motion est rejetée
We will now recess for 15 minutes	La séance est interrompue pour 15 minutes
Coffee break	Pause-café
We will meet again in 5 minutes	Nous nous retrouverons ici dans 5 minutes
To proceed to the next item of business	Passer au point suivant
This question is out of order	Cette question est irrecevable
To record in the minutes	Inscrire au procès-verbal
Action to be taken	Suite à donner
The meeting is adjourned	La séance est levée
The next meeting will be held on the...	La prochaine réunion aura lieu le...
To write up the minutes	Rédiger le procès-verbal