

Lesson 3

Small Group Meetings



Key Terms

agenda
consensus
decision-making
ground rule
simple majority
small group leader
small group meeting
timekeeper

What You Will Learn to Do

- Use the small group meeting process in decision-making situations

Linked Core Abilities

- Do your share as a good citizen in your school, community, country, and the world

Skills and Knowledge You Will Gain Along the Way

- Compare simple majority and consensus decision-making processes
- Explain the impact of the small group meeting agenda
- Describe each You the People ground rule
- Identify the small group meeting roles
- Explain the small group meeting process
- Design a process for the role rotations
- Define key words contained in this lesson

Introduction

Citizens participate in two types of Citizen Action Group meetings: small group meetings that are covered in this lesson, and representative group sessions that are discussed in the next lesson. In this lesson, you examine the purpose and process of small group meetings, from choosing a meeting leader to presenting the meeting **agenda**. You also practice using the seven citizenship skills as you participate in small group meetings.

NOTE

Before the first small group meeting, it is recommended that you view the You the People Video. It is a three part series on citizenship. The video also contains segments that refer to the separation between church and state. Please review the following sidebar for one perspective on that topic.

Key Note Term

agenda—a list of tasks or a schedule to be followed

Small Group Meeting

A **small group meeting** is a gathering of about five to nine cadets who use a process to discuss and decide issues (selected by you and/or your instructor). The overall purpose of these groups is to teach you how to become an effective citizen and how to guide the governmental activity in your school, town, state as the Founders of the United States of America envisioned. In practical terms, the small group meeting gives your group a forum to apply and practice the citizenship skills (see Figure 1.3.1).

Your instructor has pre-selected the members of your small group. Barring any unforeseen consequences (such as students moving away), members within your small group should not change.

One of the first things you will do as a group is to come up with a name or number for your group. Deciding and agreeing on this name or number may be the first opportunity you have to practice the citizenship skills as a group. This name or number will be used to identify your particular group when you meet with other small groups.

Choosing a Group Leader

After you have a group name or number, select your first group leader. A group leader runs a small group meeting. Every member of your group will have the chance to be a group leader. Ask a volunteer to be your first **small group leader**. If no one volunteers, your instructor will select a leader. This leadership role rotates around the small group with each meeting.

Key Note Term

small group meeting—one of two types of Citizen Action groups where a small group of five to nine persons meets periodically to discuss and decide on various issues and actions

Key Note Term

small group leader—leads a small group meeting

Figure 1.3.1: Small groups gather to discuss and decide issues.

Courtesy of Image Source/ Corbis Images.



Group Leader Responsibilities

As a small group leader, you are responsible for conducting the small group meeting. You learn the skills necessary to be a group leader as you conduct a meeting. The first few meetings you lead may be difficult, but that is also part of the learning process. Your responsibilities include:

1. **Prepare in advance.** Read over your worksheets and notes from the last meeting. Know what the old issues are. Write or type out an agenda and give it to the other group members before the small group meeting (at least two days before if possible). If this is the first small group meeting, your instructor will have an agenda prepared for you.
2. **Start your meeting on time.** Even if not all your group members are present, begin your meeting; otherwise,

you will be hard-pressed to finish on time. If you start on time, group members are more likely to be punctual.

3. **Distribute optional blank worksheets (group worksheet and decision making worksheet).** Members of your group can decide whether or not to use these worksheets. Your instructor may also have guidance for you pertaining to these worksheets.
4. **Keep the group focused on the agenda.** Keep the group focused on the agenda by assigning someone in the group to be the *timekeeper*. When it is time to move to the next agenda item, the timekeeper will notify you. Quickly bring the discussion to a close and move on.
5. **Distribute action assignments to all small group members.** Make sure that you come up with specific assignments for each group member before your meeting is adjourned. Do not let one or two group members end up doing all the work.

Being a group leader is a challenging job, but it is a great opportunity for self-improvement.

Small Group Meeting Process

Learning how to work together with other cadets and make real decisions on issues that affect all of you is a process; however, the process of making a decision will be as important as the final decision itself.

Key Note Term

timekeeper—an individual who keeps track of the time at a small group meeting

As you participate in these groups, you will find the need to develop group skills. The following section covers these skills that will come in handy when working in small groups.

Group Skill 1: Reaching a Simple Majority

Most of us are familiar with the skill of reaching a **simple majority**. It is the “show of hands” voting process. To have a simple majority, more than half of the votes must be in favor of a certain option. Your group can decide what to do with an issue using this voting process.

As an issue is raised, you will ask for a vote to see what to do with it (do we act on it, do we research it more, or do we drop it because we’re not interested enough). After you have brainstormed ideas on how to act on an issue or research it further, you will also call for a vote to determine which idea to select.

The following shows an example of how a simple majority works.

Simple Majority Example

A member of your group has raised the issue of reducing the voting age from eighteen to sixteen years of age. As a group, you must first decide what you want to do with this idea.

There are seven members in your group and you call for a vote to decide: Do you research it further? Do you drop it? Or do you act on it? The vote is:

- **Research it further: 5**
- **Drop it: 2**
- **Act on it: 0**

More than half of the group supports exploring the issue further; however, if the vote were 2, 3, 2, you would not have a majority because more than half of your group (that is, four or more) was not in favor of one option. You would then have to continue discussing the issue until your group came up with a simple majority in favor of one option. They could decide to delay discussing the issue until a later meeting where it might be easier to come to a majority (sometimes called “tabling” the issue).

For now, assume your group agrees by a majority that this issue needs further research. You brainstorm ways to research it further, and two ideas are thrown out for the group to consider:

- **Find out what the voting age is in other democratic countries**
- **Take a survey of your school to see if other students your age are interested in having the voting age reduced to sixteen**

You call for another vote to see what your group wants to do:

1. **Find out voting age in other countries: 0**
2. **Take a poll of other students: 1**
3. **Do both 1 and 2: 5**
4. **Do neither 1 nor 2: 1**

Key Note Term

simple majority—a show of hands in the voting process

By a majority, your group has decided to research both options.

After a week, members from your group who were assigned the tasks of exploring this issue give their reports. (Cadets who are practicing the cooperation citizenship skill may have found out more than they were asked to do.) Your group discusses the results, which show there is little interest in lowering the voting age among your peers. Your group votes on what to do now: act on this issue or drop it. The vote is:

- **Act on Issue: 3**
- **Drop Issue: 4**

By a majority, albeit a slim one, your group can now drop the issue if the entire group consents to the process it took to reach this decision. Consensus is the next skill you need to learn.

Group Skill 2: Reaching a Consensus

Consensus is coming to general acceptance on an issue. Consensus is a vital group skill. Without it, your groups may not function, and instead meetings may become squabbling matches and arguments.

The key to consensus comes from the word “consent.” It can be more a passive skill than an active one. Consensus is the skill of perhaps not agreeing with the decision the group made, but accepting it anyway because the process used by the group allowed your needs and opinions to be heard and acknowledged.

Consensus is more of a feeling than an action. You consent to the group’s decision and thus you ultimately support it or not actively oppose it even though it is not your idea of a great choice.

As a group, you will use the skill of reaching a consensus to evaluate the process your group went through to make a decision. In essence, you will determine whether the seven citizenship skills discussed in the previous lesson were sufficiently practiced by your group in reaching decisions. This is not to imply your group used the citizenship skills perfectly, but that your group did the best they could. Thus you can live with the decision you made together.

Consensus is critically important because the real test of whether we can govern ourselves is if we can work together toward our country’s ideals of freedom, equality, and unity.

One of the best ways to come to a consensus is to practice the seven citizenship skills. If you feel your group successfully used the seven citizenship skills to reach a decision, your group is working together and exercising the power envisioned by the Founders when they drafted the Constitution.

Conversely, if you do not feel your group used the citizenship skills successfully, if you or another member of your group was not heard or given respect, or if your group was uncooperative, you can decide not to consent to the process after a decision has been made.

You have power when you do this because then you can veto the decision. This power must be used wisely, however, or the **decision-making** process breaks down.

Key Note Term

consensus—a process by which everyone in a group accepts a decision. It is not necessary for everyone to agree to the decision to reach a consensus, but that everyone accepts the decision or the manner in which it was made, and will not oppose or undermine the results

Key Note Term

decision-making—the process through which a decision is made

The following shows an example of how your group might reach a consensus on the decision making process.

Consensus Example

Continuing with the example discussed under the simple majority example, imagine your group decided because of little interest, to drop the idea of trying to reduce the voting age from eighteen to sixteen. Also assume you were the one who raised the issue in the first place.

Now you are evaluating your group's performance at the end of the meeting. You feel that there were members of your group who ridiculed your idea, calling it stupid and foolish. Their behaviors were out of line and disrespectful, in your opinion.

Consequently, you feel your group did not follow the seven citizenship skills as best they could, and you do not consent to the group's decision process. Therefore, at the end of the meeting, you stand up and say, "I veto the decision," and give your reasons. Your group will now delay the decision and discuss it further at the next group meeting. In this instance a consensus was not reached.

A "veto" should be rarely used—only when a decision is reached with obvious and blatant disregard for the seven citizenship skills. It is important that every group member knows that he or she can use the "veto." It is also important that members learn to use it wisely; in other words, veto only when absolutely necessary.

The strength citizenship skill gives you the courage to be honest and indicate when you think your group did not work together. It serves no one, especially the group, if you remain silent when the purpose is to learn more about working together according to the seven citizenship skills.

Now imagine that you did raise the voting age issue, and your group listened to your thoughts and ideas without judging or ridiculing them. Your group went through the decision process considering this issue as objectively as possible and still decided to drop it after researching it further and finding little student support.

In this instance, as you evaluate your group's performance at the end of the meeting, you admit the seven citizenship skills were adequately addressed during the handling of this issue even though the final decision didn't go your way. Thus, you feel the decision was arrived at satisfactorily and so does the rest of your group. This is when a consensus is reached.

By now, you should understand why the process itself is as important as the final decision. Before you begin an actual small group meeting, there are a few ground rules to cover.

Group Skill 3: Following the Ground Rules

Rules are necessary to maintain fairness (Citizenship Skill 3) and give each participant an equal chance. Rules of conduct ensure the ideals of our nation (freedom, equality, and unity) are fulfilled for our citizens.

For this reason small group meetings have rules to ensure that everyone has an equal chance to participate fully and the group works together. The following are 13 **ground rules** to keep in mind during your small group meetings.

Key Note Term

ground rules—rules to ensure that everyone has an equal chance to participate fully and the group works together

- **Ground Rule 1:** Each group meeting will start and end on time. Group members need to be punctual.
- **Ground Rule 2:** A group leader will run each group meeting. This job will rotate among all group members so that everyone will have an opportunity to be a group leader. The group leader will be responsible for facilitating the group discussion, making sure everyone follows the ground rules, and for keeping the group on track and on time. He/she may assign someone else in the group to monitor the time.
- **Ground Rule 3:** Each group member will be conscious of the seven citizenship skills as well as the group skills of reaching a simple majority, reaching a consensus, and following the ground rules during all meetings. If group members start to label, judge, or blame other group members for problems, the group will review the seven citizenship skills again and find out why there are difficulties in the group.
- **Ground Rule 4:** At the end of each group meeting, each individual will evaluate the group's performance as well as his or her own individual performance.
- **Ground Rule 5:** Personal topics will be left out of group discussions. These groups are not meant to be therapy groups.
- **Ground Rule 6:** If a group member gets angry or emotional, he or she will be asked to leave the group for 5 to 15 minutes to cool off (the timing is up to the group leader and/or instructor, if necessary), but he or she must agree to return to the group after the cooling-off period.
- **Ground Rule 7:** Each group member will be allowed time to speak if he/she desires; however, shouting or screaming will not be allowed. The group leader (or instructor, if necessary) may ask a shouting participant to leave the room to cool-off. The group leader will also make sure that each member has voiced her or his views and participated in the process. An issue cannot be decided upon unless everyone in the group has spoken or has openly chosen not to speak.
- **Ground Rule 8:** An issue can be “tabled” by a simple majority of those present, if the following occur:
 - A person is absent from a meeting;
 - The right people are not there to make a decision
 - The group just cannot come to a simple majority for any reason (such as the need to take a break from a highly emotional topic or the need to further research a topic). This issue will then be delayed for discussion at a later meeting.
- **Ground Rule 9:** The person who vetoes a decision, will verbalize their reasons to the rest of the group. The issue will then be discussed at the citizenship skill portion of the following meeting.
- **Ground Rule 10:** An issue can only be discussed in a total of four meetings (counting the first meeting it was brought up) unless agreed to otherwise by your group (see next ground rule).
- **Ground Rule 11:** Any change in the group process will be approved by a simple majority vote of at least 75 percent of the group. For example, if an issue has been overdone and your group wants to stop discussing it before the normal limit (four meetings), 75 percent or more of your group must vote in favor of dropping the issue. If your group wants to continue discussing an issue past the four-meeting limit, 75 percent or more of your group must vote in favor of this.
- **Ground Rule 12:** Your group will agree to meet and work together as long as determined by your instructor.
- **Ground Rule 13:** Discussions within any group meetings are confidential. That is, each group member must agree to not discuss group topics outside the group meetings unless the entire group approves.

Helpful Hints for Running a Small Group Meeting

As the leader of a small group, there are a few hints that might make your job easier and more fulfilling. These hints include:

- 1. To keep the group discussion on track, use gentle reminders such as:**
 - “Can we get back on the subject?”
 - “Maria has a good point, let’s listen to her and not talk among ourselves.”
 - “If we stay on the subject, we will finish on time.”
- 2. Do not worry if you do not know all the answers. You do not have to be the most knowledgeable one in the group. Your job is just to keep the discussion moving and on track.**
- 3. You might have group members who do not like to talk in the group. If you haven’t heard from a group member, ask them for their thoughts, ideas, or opinions with specific questions like:**
 - “Chad, what do you think of Mary’s idea to hold an assembly on citizenship skills?”
 - “Belize, do you like the idea of having a senior litter pick-up day?”
 - “Will, what’s the best way you can see for us to present our opinions to the city council when they decide on the town’s curfew?”
- 4. Avoid having one person talk all the time. Keep everyone’s discussion brief so that all group members have an equal chance to talk. Tell each group member that he or she will have two minutes to talk and that the timekeeper will monitor the time. Then move on to the next person. If there is time at the end, you can come back to that person again.**
- 5. You might have group members who want to help others with personal problems (such as parent and boyfriend/girlfriend issues). Gently remind those group members that this type of discussion must take place outside the group meeting after class and then get back on track. Keep personal problems out of the group discussion.**
- 6. If you have a group member who seems to know a lot about a certain subject, he or she may monopolize the entire discussion. Acknowledge this person for his or her knowledge and then when time is up, move on to the next person. Your group can use this person as a resource for finding out more information on a certain issue. Be careful, though, of making this your only source. All issues have more than one side to them.**
- 7. Group members will want to talk among themselves. Eliminate side talking by calling attention to it such as: “Mandela and Leo, could you share your ideas with the group?”**
- 8. You may have members of your group competing for your job. Simply remind them that they had their turn or that their turn is coming. Ask them to help you out with this difficult job by letting you do it your way. Also, remind them that making mistakes is the only way you will learn. Perhaps they will show respect for your strong and weak points as a result. If you really have trouble, ask your instructor for help.**
- 9. If you have uncooperative members, remind them of the ground rule stating that they can walk out of the room to cool off, but emphasize that they must return to the group. If their behavior persists, ask them to leave the room to cool off. Get your instructor’s help if necessary.**

10. If group members start to label, judge, or blame other group members for problems, talk within the group about the respect citizenship skill.
11. When asking questions of your group members, wait a few seconds for the answers. Be patient. Give others in your group time to think about their answers.
12. Finally, if you have major problems in the group you cannot resolve, ask your instructor for help.

Small Group Meeting Agenda

The Small Group Meeting flow chart (see Figure 1.3.2), shows the general small group meeting process. Through a systematic process, an issue is brought up, discussed, and decided upon.

At first, your group might struggle with this process. Anytime we try something new (like a new sport for instance), it takes practice to excel at it. The same is true for this small group meeting. Have fun experimenting with this group process. Focus on the process itself and observe yourself and other group members.

Detailed Small Group Meeting Agenda

This section discusses what happens in each portion of a small group meeting. The small group leader is responsible for conducting the meeting and ensuring that each portion is accomplished.

1. **Administrative Business:** Read the group purpose: The purpose of these groups is to help us become effective citizens, able to guide and/or monitor the governmental activity in our school, town, state, and country. Take attendance. Name those group members who had homework and what they will be discussing later in the meeting (this will help those people get prepared). Schedule the next meeting. Pick the next group leader.
2. **Citizenship Skills Discussion:** Spend a moment in silence. Ask group members to close their eyes and visualize themselves practicing the citizenship skills during this group's session. Talk about homework (usually an individual assignment working on a specific citizenship skill, like patience, at home, work, and school). Bring up next skill and open it up to brief discussion. Distribute and explain citizenship skill homework (which your instructor will give you). Discuss any issues that were vetoed in the previous meeting to see if there are simple solutions to the problems or if they should be discussed again under old issues. Focus your group's discussion on the use of citizenship skills and not on the various slants to the issue itself (this discussion occurs under Old Issues following).
3. **Old Issues:** Ask for reports on assignments. For example: Maria says, "I spoke with Mr. Dean, and he's open to having an assembly on citizenship skills if we give him an outline of what we would cover." Be sure that an issue is fully discussed but not overly so. Ensure everyone's participation and do not let one person dominate the discussion. Ask the group if there is enough information to act on this issue. If there is, call for a vote to decide on a course of action. If there is not enough information, ask group members for ideas on research assignments. For example, "Mike, can you and Maria brainstorm a rough outline for a citizenship skills assembly and present it to us at the next meeting?" Finally, if any issues cannot be resolved at this time (as will be the case with sensitive and highly emotional issues), delay the issue until the next meeting (when it will be first on the agenda under old issues). An issue can only be discussed in a total of four meetings (includ-

5. **Evaluation:** Spend a few minutes evaluating yourself and the group as a whole. The purpose of this evaluation session is for everyone to think about how well they participated in the group and how well they exhibited the citizenship skills. Except for the veto (which is stated), this evaluation process is anonymous. Use the group and individual evaluation forms for this purpose. Any poor ratings on the group's performance will be discussed at the next meeting's Citizenship Skills Discussion, but the decision will still be in force. This is where the group decides whether or not a decision was arrived at properly, using the consensus approach. If even one member is not satisfied and openly vetoes the decision, the problem becomes the first topic under the next meeting's Citizenship Skills Discussion. The decision remains vetoed until this discussion is completed and a new vote is taken. With time, you and your group will become familiar with the importance of this evaluation process. Remember also if this process becomes overly obstructive your group can vote to change it by a 75 percent or more majority.
6. **Action Assignments:** Assign tasks to each member of your group based on decisions the group made under Old or New Issues and consented to under the Evaluation discussion. For example, Joshua is assigned to arrange a meeting with the principal and assistant principal and go over the outline for the citizenship skill assembly. Jane is the next leader. Bernadette will attend the student government meeting and take notes. Tanya will do some research on an issue the group decided to continue.
7. **Closeout Details:** Take time to tie up any unfinished business—do group members have anything further to say? Remind people of their assignments for the coming week. Remind all group members of the next meeting and the name of the new group leader. Adjourn on time.

Quick Overview of the Small Group Meeting Agenda

1. Administrative Business
2. Citizenship Skills Discussion
3. Old Issues
4. New Issues
5. Evaluation
6. Action Assignments
7. Close-out Details

Conclusion

As with any process, there are rules and guidelines for holding and attending small group meetings. These rules and guidelines keep the meeting on track and enable those attending to know what's coming up in the current meeting as well as what's expected of them in the next meeting. Small group meetings are headed by a group leader, and that leader will change to another member of the group each time a meeting is held. All seven Citizenship Skills should be practiced at each small group meeting.

In the next lesson, you will learn about representative group sessions. A representative group session occurs when all the small groups merge into a larger assembly or class to discuss an all-class or all-school position on a specific issue.

Lesson Review

1. How is the small group meeting leader chosen, and what are the roles of the leader?
2. Choose one of the seven Citizenship Skills and explain how it pertains to small group meetings.
3. What are the three group skills that should be practiced at each meeting?
4. Explain what is meant by an action assignment.