

Creating Group Ground Rules or Working Agreements

A safe, friendly meeting or group environment can help leaders achieve meeting goals and can help set the tone for how a group interacts both during meetings and between meetings. It can be frustrating and very unproductive when opinions are not respected, people are criticized openly, and all views or perspectives are not expressed.

Establishing ground rules, group norms or guidelines for discussion respects individual rights and responsibilities and builds trust among participants. They can be used as a guide to reinforce expected group and individual behavior that can be useful in both controversial and routine meetings or situations. Setting or creating ground rules are usually developed as a group and be altered or changed as a group evolves as needed. The role of enforcing these ground rules is often vested in the group's leader but it is also important to share this responsibly collectively.

To set ground rules or guidelines for discussion, first ask members of a group to think of times they have been in effective groups and what made those meetings or groups effective. Then decide together which of these characteristics, your group or meeting would like to use. Write the list on a flip chart and bring it to all meetings with this group. Make a written copy of this list available to all who attend the meetings of this group. When new members join, explain the ground rules and how the group is enforcing them. Evaluate the effectiveness and revise the ground rules as needed

Here are some common areas for which a group may establish ground rules:

- Participation
- Conflicts and disagreements
- Personal needs, and issues
- Confidentiality
- Leadership roles and responsibilities
- Communication practices
- How decisions will be made

Sample Group Agreements

- We start and end our sessions on time.
- Everyone gets a fair hearing.
- What is said here stays here.
RESPECT CONFIDENTIALITY.
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
- Share “air time.”
- If you are offended, say so; and say why.
- You can disagree, but don’t personalize it; stick to the issue. No name-calling or stereotyping.
- Speak for yourself, not for others.
- Ask questions to clarify concerns or issues as needed.