

# GROUND RULES AND AGREEMENTS

## **Group Agreements**

- ✓ Answers the question: "How do we want to work together?"
- ✓ Help create open discussion
- ✓ Lay the groundwork for the group's internal working relationships.

How many times have you sat in a meeting thinking how much more effective your collaborative would be if a few people just changed their behavior? Whatever the offense, the good news is that there is a tool you can use to enlist people's best conduct in meetings - agreements.

Agreements are specific guidelines, approved by all meeting participants. Agreements are intended to promote positive meeting behavior. They commonly emerge from the implicit expectations of one or more participants, such as "I wish people would speak more supportively." By making these desires public,

expectations become explicit. Then they can be examined and adopted as agreements or rejected by the group.

## **How do you create agreements?**

Agreements must be clear and observable. You can observe people being on time, but you can't observe them "having a good attitude" because that is too subjective.

Include all group members in creating agreements; the more they feel they "own" the rules, the more they will adhere to them.

Document your agreements, make them available to all members, post them at meetings, and review them regularly. Members must freely enter into agreements and remain open to renegotiation. That's far better than having participants simply break them. Following group agreements goes a long way toward preventing and minimizing conflict.

## **SAMPLE AGREEMENTS**

- ✓ Keep time schedules: Be on time, start on time, end on time
- ✓ Make a decision at each meeting
- ✓ Decisions are made by consensus
- ✓ If you agree to something, fulfill it
- ✓ Communicate immediately if you think you may not be able to fulfill an agreement
- ✓ One conversation at a time
- ✓ Silence means consent
- ✓ Support the objective of the meeting by keeping discussion focused on relevant topics
- ✓ Cherish diversity of ideas
- ✓ Respect the views of all participants

## Steps for Creating Group Agreements

1. Think of one or more guidelines that might truly serve the group.
2. Take turns proposing them to the group: "I'd like us to agree to..."
3. Encourage discussion to ensure understanding. Don't permit evaluation or counter-proposals at this time.
4. Ask for a vote of those willing to agree to each proposal. A simple thumbs-up or thumbs-down will do.
5. If the vote is not unanimous, ask those who voted against it what it would take to make the proposal work for them. Listen to their answers and modify your proposed agreement.
6. Negotiate until you reach unanimous agreement or the proposal is withdrawn.
7. Post the agreements on a shared display.

## Keeping Agreements

Most agreements are broken because of neglect, not intent. Every collaborative member is responsible for helping to reinforce group agreements; it's not just the facilitator's job. Codes of conduct only work to the degree that members uphold the ground rules.

To reinforce collaborative agreements, post them on a shared display and review them periodically to make sure they still represent the commitment of the group. When you notice participants actively upholding agreements, recognize them and express your appreciation. When someone fails to keep an agreement, let the participant know you expect him or her to behave as agreed.

Have tolerance and create only those agreements required to maintain a well-functioning collaborative. We all have distinct styles and personalities. In the long term, supporting such diversity is one of the most valuable benefits of creating agreements in the first place.

### HELPFUL HINTS

- ✓ If you have a common or recurring problem in your meetings, propose a new agreement to correct it
- ✓ When voting on agreements use a simple thumbs-up/thumbs-down method - it's quick and effective
- ✓ Post your agreements in the meeting room where everybody can see them