

Working Agreements

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When people meet in groups, there generally are agreements about how interactions between the group members will happen. These agreements can be discussed, assumed or written down. These agreements can be called working agreements, ground rules, working guidelines, etc.

Effective group leaders find that the work that needs to be accomplished in the meeting or group can be done more effectively if everyone knows in what environment the work will occur. It helps provide a safe space for group work. Often the leader or facilitator will have an existing – or proposed – list of working agreements. Sometimes the group will write their own.

Working agreement are guidelines that define how groups want to work together, and what they want in the working environment and from each other to feel safe and free to learn, explore and discover.

(Haskell, Cyr & McPhail, Strengthening Your Facilitation Skills, Level 1, 2007)

Working agreements:

- are developed *by* the group and determine *how* the group will work together
- describe positive behaviors that need to be present for the group to be effective
- *are most effective* if they:
 - are simple and direct
 - limited in number
 - are posted at every meeting in order for the group to refer back to them to make sure they are being followed
 - are enforceable
 - can be shared with “new” people in less than 30 seconds
 - are posted (hung on the wall) at every meeting
 - are typed up and given as a handout for group members

In general, for Working Agreements to work, they have to be important to the group, direct, limited in number and supported by each group member. An example of a working agreement might be: “*Encourage everyone to participate*”; another might be “*Begin and end on time.*”

- Other examples of working agreements are:
 - Share all relevant information
 - If you miss a meeting, support decisions made in your absence
 - Stay on subject; stay on task
 - Be constructive
 - Listen to each other
 - Observe time frames
 - Keep to time and agenda
 - Start and end meetings on time
 - Take risks

- All ideas are valid
- There will be no review for those who are late
- Listen with an open mind before you speak
- No side conversations
- Participate fully
- Think creatively
- Share responsibility for the meeting's effectiveness; remind the group of its own guidelines if necessary
- Respect and share air time
- Be brief – share air time
- Speak for yourself, not on behalf of others
- Differences of opinion are natural and useful
- One person talks at a time
- Take responsibility for what you need in the meeting
- Encourage everyone to participate
- Let group know your attendance plans
- Cell phones are off or on silent notification
- Respect confidentiality where appropriate
- Have fun

Three methods for developing working agreements

You can learn how to develop working agreements use them in your own meetings. This activity will demonstrate three different ways or methods of developing a set of guidelines. Each method gives a bit of background of when it is appropriate to use, lists the supplies needed, what you might say and give the steps to complete the method.

Method A

Background: If a group will be meeting for more than a couple of meetings and has important work to complete, it is important for the entire group to develop its own working agreements, rather than having the leader arrive and suggest the working agreements (see Method C).

Time needed: 25 minutes or more

Supplies needed:

- ◆ Pieces of paper and writing tools
- ◆ Large sheet of paper, like easel paper
- ◆ Markers

What you might say:

“One of the roles of a facilitator or leader is to provide a safe space or meeting environment for the work of our group to happen. This is done by establishing working agreements/guidelines/ground rules/ etc. In the purest sense, working agreements are simply the rules by which you – or we - play the game, run the meeting, attend the meeting, etc.

These working agreements are the operating instructions that help you – or us - complete the activity, work or meeting without getting hopelessly snagged in arguments or going in circles.

Working agreements are best if they are simple and direct. They need to be enforceable. They need to be able to be shared with “new” people in less than 30 seconds.

As a facilitator or leader, I could have a list of guidelines and invite you to add others ... or ... I could make and provide all the rules ... or ... I could invite you to create your own.

Since we will be meeting [insert the time frame, for example, all year], I thought it was important that we all have input into how we work together. So you are going to create your own. This is how we will do it.”

Steps:

- ◆ *“Individually write two things that need to be in place for you to feel safe or to feel that you can work or learn while you’re [in these meetings]. Take a minute or two of quiet time to do this.”*
- ◆ *“With the person sitting next to you, share what you both have and together narrow it or combine it to two.”*
Take two to five minutes.
- ◆ *“Now I’d like to ask each group (or pair) to share what they’ve come up with and we will decide which guidelines we will adopt.”*

Scribe or write “answers” on flip chart page; ask each pair or group to report one of their answers; go until all different answers have shared and all “answers” have been written on flip chart. Post so all are visible.

Ask:

- ◆ *Are there any of these that need clarification?*
- ◆ *Are there any of these that could be combined?*
- ◆ *Is there anything that could be stated differently?*
- ◆ Note to the leader - Be transparent:
 - ◆ *“It is important for us to have consensus, meaning we each agree with the guidelines, before we adopt them.*
 - ◆ *I am going to read through the list, and then I will ask each of you individually if you agree to use or adopt these working agreements. A simple yes or no will be fine.”*
 - If yes- we adopt agreements.
 - If no- ask no to clarify what they don’t agree with and suggest ideas for making language more comfortable
 - ◆ *“These working agreements you developed will be posted for the rest of the meeting and at every other meeting.”*

Method B

Background: If you do not have as much time with the group, or the group is unfamiliar with how to develop working agreements or if you will not be working with a group for a long period of time or for many meetings, this is a way for the group to have a bit of input into developing the agreements rather than the leader or facilitator coming in with the ones that will be used (see Method C).

Time needed: up to 25 minutes

Supplies needed:

- ◆ Decks of eight (8) cards with a different working agreement written on each card. Each deck has the same eight working agreements. These working agreements can be the same as used in this scenario or eight that you've chosen that you feel might be more appropriate for the group. Note to the leader: be willing to 'let go' of any of these, since these are the agreements for the group and not for you!
- ◆ Large sheet of paper, like easel paper
- ◆ Markers

What you might say:

- *"One way to reduce anxiety about how your group meets is to have working agreements.*
 - *Simply, working agreements are rules by which you play the game, run the meeting, attend the meeting, etc.*
 - *They are operating instructions that help groups and their leaders be effective and complete the work or the activity without getting hopelessly snagged in arguments or going in circles. They are agreements about how the group will interact with each other.*
 - *They provide safe space or meeting environment for work to happen.*
 - *These agreements can be discussed, assumed or written down.*
- *If it is a short meeting, a leader might go in with a list of two or three working agreements.*
- *If you are going to meet with a group for more than one time, you might want the group to create their own.*
- *I am going to have you participate in one quick way to develop working agreements that we will use."*

Steps:

- ◆ Hand out a deck of cards (eight cards per deck) to groups of three or four people. You may wish to tell people that everyone (each small group) is getting an identical set of cards.
- ◆ Say, *"Choose two working agreements that your small group would like this entire group to adopt for this [insert name of activity/workshop session/meeting]."*
- *You have [insert a time depending on the group, for example, 5 minutes], or less, to work together to choose your 2 agreements.*
- Ask each group to then share one working agreement they chose. Move to the next group. Ask them to share a different working agreement they chose. Repeat until each group has shared its different agreements.
- Note: this process illustrates getting more participation by asking for one agreement at a time. It also illustrates asking for different information rather than repeating what has been said.
 - Be transparent: State, *"For us to have consensus, meaning we must each agree with the guidelines, we must each agree to adopt these agreements. Before we adopt them. I am going to read through the list, and then I will ask each of you individually if you agree to use or adopt these working agreements. A simple yes or no will be fine."*
 - If yes- we adopt agreements.
 - If no- ask no to clarify what they don't agree with and suggest ideas for making language more comfortable
 - *"These working agreements you developed will be posted for the rest of the meeting and at every other meeting."*

Method C

Background: Working agreements sometimes work best when they are developed on expert experience from those who already 'know the game' or with participants who may not know what rules are needed.

In the interest of time, a leader may also bring and present a list of suggested working agreements to the group, rather than being generated by group members. Also if a group is going to meet only once or twice for two to four hours total, it is more efficient for the leader to arrive with three or four ground rules that s/he feels will work with the group.

- ◆ How does the leader know what might work with the group? The leader will have conversations with one or more people who know how the group works and may ask questions such as:
 - ◆ Are there people who frequently interrupt?
 - ◆ Dominate air time?
 - ◆ Speak what they think others are thinking or feeling?
 - ◆ Keep mentioning things that are not on the agenda?
 - ◆ Arrive late and want the group to catch them up on what has happened?
 - ◆ And so on.
- ◆ From this information, the leader generally suggests no more than three or four working agreements.

Time needed: 5 minutes or less

Supplies needed:

- ◆ Large sheet of paper, like easel paper, with the written working agreements
- ◆ Marker (if an agreement needs to be added)

What you might say is:

“I have talked with [how many ever – and have it be more than one so you are sincere about learning how the group works and you are not just bringing in your own perception and agenda] and these are the agreements that I think will help us do our work most efficiently and effectively today.” They are:

- *Be brief and share air time*
- *Speak for yourself, not on behalf of others*
- *Stay on task and topic*
- *Have fun*

Post them on the wall where everyone can see them. Ask, *“Is there is anything missing that needs to be present for this meeting only?”* If there is, write it down. Then ask the group, *“Do you agree to adopt these agreements for the rest of [the meeting, the workshop, etc.]?”*

State: *“These working agreements will be posted for the rest of [the meeting, the workshop, etc.]”*

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