



WORKING COLLABORATIVELY IN GROUPS: CREATING GROUND RULES

In a small group where trust is high and controversy low, you may not need any formal ground rules to work well together. But in a larger group, if issues are charged, or if conflict is emerging, ground rules are a very helpful tool for groups to use to maintain a respectful and productive meeting environment and to work through difficult issues together. Ideally you would have a conversation about ground rules before you really need them, as they can be a useful preventative, but it's never too late for a group to create and use this useful tool! Here are some steps to use to create guidelines for your group.

1. What Kind Of Atmosphere Do You Want To Create?

The first step is to think about what kind of environment the group is aiming for and to make a list. Some of the kinds of things that many groups include are:

- Respectful
- Non-blaming
- Honest
- Open
- Trusting
- Keeping the big picture/greater whole in mind
- Tolerant
- Respectful and welcoming of different perspectives
- Creative

2. What Can Get In The Way?

The second step is to think about what kinds of behaviors have you seen get in the way of productive meetings in the past? Some of the kinds of things that groups often think of are:

- Name-calling and put-downs.
- Side conversations.
- Interrupting (verbally and/or with body language, e.g. sighs, eye rolling).
- Attacking, blaming.
- Bringing up unrelated issues.
- Making assumptions.
- Withholding important information or concerns.
- Talking behind people's backs.
- A few people dominating the conversation, other people remaining silent.

3. What Ground Rules Will Help?

The third step is to create a list of Ground Rules that the group agrees to adhere to during meetings. Look at the atmosphere that you want to create, and think of how to get there. Then look at the list of undesired behaviors and make sure that your ground rules address them. Every group is different and needs to create its own guidelines based on its particular needs, dynamics, goals, participants, and cultural norms. Some ground rules that groups often include are as follows, but each group needs to create a list in its own words, that works for them.

Sample Ground Rules

- Respect each person's right to their values, beliefs, and perspective.
- Listen to each other with a spirit of learning, curiosity, and openness.
- One person speak at a time.
- Use "I" statements, speak for yourself and not for others.
- Check out assumptions before reacting, assume that everyone's trying their best.
- Be open – bring up issues and concerns that are important to you, and share all relevant information.
- No put downs of self or others.
- Be specific and give examples.
- Stick to the topic at hand.
- Share air time.
- No cross-talking or side conversations.
- Keep the big picture and group goal in mind; think about what's best for the group and not just you individually.
- Be flexible and open to alternative viewpoints and solutions.

4. Use The Ground Rules! Once you've agreed on your ground rules as a group, write them up on a large poster and post them so they're visible at every meeting. Use the poster as a visual reminder to help each other stick to the ground rules if people are forgetting. Practice using them for less charged issues so that they're easier to follow in more challenging moments.

Is Your Group At An Impasse?

If your group is stuck, experiencing conflict, or communication has broken down, consider engaging the assistance of an outside neutral third party mediator/facilitator. The Dispute Resolution Center can help groups to resolve difficult issues, improve communication, and positively handle conflict. We provide skilled and effective mediation and facilitation for conflicts between individuals, within a group, or between groups. We also offer highly rated conflict resolution skills training for groups and individuals.

Contact Community Outreach Coordinator Vivien Sharples at 206 -443-9603 ext. 108 or vsharples@kcdrc.org for more information, or visit our website at www.kcdrc.org.