



GROUND RULES AND AGREEMENTS



Getting
down to
business

3M Meeting Network

How many times have you sat in a meeting thinking how much more effective and efficient things 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.

What are agreements and what do they do?

Agreements are specific guidelines, agreed to by all meeting participants. “Start and end on time” is a common example. 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 wishes public, expectations become explicit. Then they can be examined and adopted as agreements or rejected by the group.

Examples.

Some common agreements for meetings include:

- Support the objective of the meeting by keeping discussion focused on relevant topics.
- Respect the views of all participants.
- Keep time schedules: Be on time, start on time, end on time.
- If you agree to something, fulfill it.
- Communicate immediately if you think you may not be able to fulfill an agreement.
- Allow one conversation at a time, no side conversations.

How do you create agreements?

Agreement terms 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.

Agreements must also be entered into freely and remain open to renegotiation.

That's far better than simply having participants breaking the agreements!

To create agreements for your meeting:

1. Think of one or more guidelines that might truly serve the group.
2. Propose them to the group: "I'd like us to agree to . . ."
3. Encourage others to discuss for understanding. Don't permit evaluation or counter-proposition at this time.
4. Ask for a vote of those willing to agree to your 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 withdraw your proposal.
7. Post the agreement on a shared display (see

our meeting guide *Shared Space, Shared Understanding* for more information.

Reinforcing agreements.

Most agreements are broken because of neglect, not intent. To reinforce meeting or team 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. Codes of conduct only work to the degree that members uphold the ground rules. Create close tolerance on only those agreements required to maintain an effective meeting or team. 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.

Make the meeting.

Related Reading

Breakthrough Business Meetings: Shared Leadership in Action; Robert E. Levasseur; Adams Publishing; 1994.

First Aid for Meetings: Quick Fixes and Major Repairs for Running Effective Meetings; Charlie Hawkins; Career Research Institute; 1997.

Helpful Hints

If you have a common or recurring problem in your meetings, propose a new agreement that would 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.

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