

NMC Website - Ground Rules
By Sylvie Lapointe – October 2004

Do you remember the book by Robert Fulghum entitled *All I Ever Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* that was popular in the eighties? It made the case that we have learned many (if not all) of the “rules” of life very early on, as children. Here is an excerpt:

Most of what I really need to know about how to live, and what to do, and how to be, I learned in Kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sandbox at nursery school. These are the things I learned.

*Share everything.
Play fair.
Don't hit people.
Put things back where you found them.
Clean up your own mess.
Don't take things that aren't yours.
Say sorry when you hurt somebody.
Wash your hands before you eat.
Flush.
Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
Live a balanced life.*

*Take a nap every afternoon.
When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.*

There is a lot of wisdom in this huh? We all have a set of rules we live by (whether consciously or unconsciously). Those rules influence our personal lives and professional lives. Teams of people have rules too. Sometimes the rules are proudly displayed in the meeting room but sometimes the rules are unspoken or informal or even non-existent...

If you are leading any kind of group process you need to determine what are the “**Ground Rules**” for the group work.

NOTE: For the purpose of this article I will call “facilitator” anyone who is leading a group process whether you are a manager, a team leader, the Chair of a committee or the hired facilitator.

What are Ground Rules?

Ground Rules are a *code of conduct* for the group. It answers the question: “How do we want to work together as a group in order to be the most productive?”

Ground Rules can address different areas:

Values and principles: respect diversity of opinions, conversational courtesies (e.g. one person speaks at a time and no side-bar conversations), confidentiality, promptness, or even...having fun!

Group process: decision-making, definition of consensus, handling of disagreements, collection and transcription of flip charts, etc.

Attendance: number of people needed for quorum, notification of absence, replacements, etc.

Interruptions: how do we want to handle cell phones, blackberries, and knocks on the door during the meeting, etc?

How to develop Ground Rules?

Suggest a process to help develop the Ground Rules at *the very beginning of the meeting*.

The manner in which you develop Ground Rules can have an impact on the team dynamics. Choose your approach based on the objectives of the session and what you know about the team dynamics of the group.

For example, a group that has a long history of working together might only need to be reminded of their Ground Rules so the Straightforward Approach (no. 1 below) is probably best suited. A new group who has asked you to do some team building might gain a lot by creating their Ground Rules through a more visionary approach like the Appreciative Inquiry method (no. 3 below) which helps them get clear about what they value and what they want to work towards in their team.

There are many ways to develop Ground Rules here are a few suggestions:

1. *Straightforward Approach:* I have seen many facilitators use this simple approach... They write 3 to 5 basic Ground Rules on a flip chart prior to the start of the meeting. As the meeting opens they present the proposed Ground Rules to the participants and they ask if there is anything they would delete or add to the list presented. The facilitator facilitates the ensuing discussion amongst group members. They then check for the groups' agreement to accept these rules as their own rules of conduct for the duration of the meeting.
2. *Traditional Brainstorming:* Present one of the areas listed above, for example the values and principles, and ask the group to brainstorm some rules. Record their ideas on a flip chart. Then move on to the next area and repeat the process. Once the list is complete, ask participants for their agreement to adopt these rules as their code of conduct for the meeting.
3. *Appreciative Inquiry:* Ask participants to go back in memory to one of the best meetings they have ever attended. Give them a minute or two to reflect on what made that meeting so positive and memorable for them. Ask them to jot down their thoughts on a piece of paper. Facilitate a round robin process where each

participant describes one of the factors that contributed to a positive meeting and record this on the flip chart. Repeat the process until all the different ideas have been expressed. Ask the group if they are willing to adopt these principles as their Ground Rules for this meeting.

4. It's all about having a *meaningful conversation*... I use this approach more and more to open meetings that I facilitate. A good colleague of mine, Catherine Auger, encouraged me to read and study a book by William Isaacs* entitled *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*. In this book Isaacs explains that we tend to have a misconception of what dialogue is. Dialogue is not talking at each other or talking with each other. Real dialogue is THINKING TOGETHER. Isaacs says that "dialogue is about a shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together." It "is a living experience of inquiry *within* and *between* people." I try to convey this concept to participants by giving a mini-teach of Isaacs' definition of dialogue at the beginning of each session.

So here you go, I will share with you one of my secrets of the trade... Transcribe the text below on a flip chart and post it in the room. State the root meaning of the words below. Give examples of each type of communication as we experience them in our organizations. Tell stories. Finish with the concept of dialogue as Isaacs describes it. Invite people to listen attentively, suspend their judgments, take time for reflection before speaking, and enter in conversations for relationship throughout the day.

Dialogue – Bill Isaacs
Root Meaning of Words

DEBATE - TO BEAT DOWN

DISCUSSION - CONCUSSION / PERCUSSION
To shake apart

CONVERSATION - TO TURN TOGETHER
TAKE TURNS SPEAKING
Deliberate - *suspend* what you think and stay open to new ideas or *defend* it with the assumption that you are right

DIALOGUE
DIA - through
LOGOS - word or meaning
Flow of meaning

DIALOGUE = a conversation in which people think together in RELATIONSHIP

How do we enforce Ground Rules?

The Ground Rules should be *posted and visible* to all participants. The Ground Rules *belong to the group* and they are responsible for their enforcement. It is up to the group to self-monitor and keeps itself on track. This means that the facilitator should resist the urge to take responsibility for enforcing the rules and trusts the group process (and believe me, sometimes that takes a lot of personal discipline!) Being a great believer in the wisdom of groups I have been rewarded many times for my decision to not interfere and let the group take care of itself. However, I have to admit that there are times when things derail and it becomes necessary to point out the rules to the group to remind them of the commitment they have made to each other at the beginning of the meeting.

Ground Rules – Are they a must?

This is cause for debate in the facilitation community. Some facilitators swear by them and use them as a matter of course. Others never use them. As for me, it depends... (“It depends” is one of my favorite answers - I am a Gemini after all and I am very proud of my twin personality).

It depends on what?

- Is this a newly formed group? Or has this group worked together several times?
- Am I, as the facilitator, new to this group? Or is this a regular client group?
- What is the history of this group? Do they work well together? Do they have a history of conflicts?
- Are the members of this group driven by output and very task focused? Or is it a professional network focused on relationships?
- What is the objective of the session? Are rules as necessary when it is a team-building day as opposed to a strategic planning day? What kind of rules are more appropriate in these contexts?
- What would be the purpose of the Ground Rules for this group? Manage relationships? Manage Process? Manage Both?

In the end...

There is no right way or wrong way to do this. It is what works for you and the group you are facilitating. Your experience and your intuition will let you know what is best. And in order to get experience... you need to have a few successes, and yes, a few failures along the way. Facilitation is a partnership. The group owns the process and the outcome and you, the facilitator, act as a guide along the journey.

References:

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