

Group agreements for collaborative processes

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What is a group agreement and why do we need one?

Group agreements are a set of shared norms about how to interact in a collaborative setting. Thoughtful agreements help groups communicate and collaborate effectively. They also help build trust and set expectations about how the group will work together. Group agreements can be a helpful supplement to more formal policies and procedures governing group behavior.

Group agreements can be called many different things. Find the wording that works best for your process. Here are some possible titles:

- Conversation agreements
- Group/Community norms
- Guiding principles
- Ground rules

What groups benefit from having group agreements?

Any collaborative group can benefit from having group agreements, including work teams, formal committees, councils, community groups, and more. They can be used in an on-going basis or could be established for a one-time meeting or event.

What group agreements are not

Group agreements should not be used to stifle conversation, prevent people from sharing their honest and respectful views, or as a way for one or more group members to control others. They are intended to help people interact effectively, and to enhance listening and build understanding.

Group agreements are typically not effective if they are used in a punitive manner. They reflect norms the group is striving toward, even if they are not achieved in every single interaction. People bring many different worldviews and perspectives to the table in a group process. What feels disrespectful to one person may not be intended as disrespect by the other. Group agreements help everyone realign around shared principles of interaction.

What is the process for creating a group agreement?

There is no one right way to develop a group agreement. For some groups it might be important to create a list together from scratch. For other groups, it may be helpful to have a facilitator generate a draft list for the group to review (this takes less time). Yet another option is to have a subgroup of members develop a draft list to bring to the rest of the members.

For most groups, a list should not be longer than 10 items. It should include high-level principles of how the group intends to conduct themselves. Group agreements are not the same as bylaws or procedural guidelines.

The process for creating a group agreement should include buy-in from the group. This could be done through a quick informal discussion: “Do these guidelines sound right to you? Is there anything we need to change before we get started?” Or group agreements could involve all members reviewing, editing, and signing their name to a shared document. Find the approach that works best for your collaborative effort.

Keeping group agreements alive

Once you create a group agreement, it is helpful to keep the principles alive in your collaborative process. Here are some approaches you could take:

Visibility

- Print the group agreements on a large sheet of paper and hang them on the wall during all meetings.
- Include group agreements on all meeting agendas.
- Include the group agreements in a binder of resources that is regularly referenced during meetings.
- Post group agreements on a website.
- Create a visual or graphically designed version.

Facilitation and onboarding

- Have the facilitator or meeting chair remind the group of the agreements at the start of each meeting.
- If group agreements are being broken, any group member can take a pause and remind participants of the group agreements you are striving for. For example, “These comments are not feeling respectful. How can we improve the way we are talking to each other?”
- If a group is onboarding new members, take time to discuss the agreements and how they are used. Allow new members to ask questions and give input on the agreements and how they are implemented.

Reflection

- Close a meeting by having participants reflect on which agreements were honored well during the meeting and where they could do better.
- At each meeting, take time to call out and appreciate positive interactions. For example, “This was a difficult conversation. I appreciate that everyone spoke from the heart and also listened well to each other.”
- On a periodic basis (e.g., quarterly or annually) use the group agreements as an entry point into a deeper conversation about what is working or not working with the group. For example, “We

all agreed to work together to build trust, but I still feel trust is still low in this group. How could we build deeper trust as we move forward?”

Revision

- If the group agreements are for a body that meets on an ongoing basis such as a board or commission, it is recommended to record the date the agreements have been last revised, and the frequency with which they will be updated going forward (for example, on an annual basis).
- Review and revise the groups agreements on a regular interval you define (annually, any time new members are added, etc).

Example group agreement statements

Below are example group agreement statements. Some of these are redundant with one another; choose the wording that sounds right for your process. For most groups, a list should not be longer than 10 items. Select the statements that are best for your group or develop your own!

General principles

- Build trust. Nothing can be accomplished if those at the table don't believe each other.
- Commit to creative resolution of differences that integrate the needs of all participants.
- Demonstrate respect. Speak and listen with respect. Even the strongest objections or points of view can be delivered and received respectfully.
- Commit to develop a shared understanding of the issues.
- Allow space for differences.
- Be open to changing your mind and don't make assumptions – instead, ask questions.
- Look for areas of common ground and points of agreement.
- Remember to attack the problems, not the people.
- Assume the best of each other.
- Express differences of opinion in a constructive manner.
- Give credit where credit is due.
- Be future focused; look for solutions that move us forward rather than dwelling on the past.
- Suspend certainty and be open to creative ideas.
- Don't question the motives of others.
- No personal attacks.

Listening

- Listen to for deeper understanding.
- Listen to learn when others are speaking rather than plan a rebuttal.
- Accept that what each person says is his or her sincere belief.

Speaking

- Speak from the heart. Share *why* something is important to you and not just what you want.
- Speak to heart of the matter. Share your core concerns and genuine needs.
- Be mindful of how long you speak for the purpose of ensuring that all voices are heard.
- Lean into challenging conversations by bravely raising concerns.
- Slow down the conversation, allowing pauses between speakers.
- Refrain from using stereotypic language.
- Help everyone understand acronyms and technical language.

Conversations outside of the group

- Adopt the Chatham House Rule: The conversations stay in the room; but the learning gets shared. (Another variation - what's said here stays here, what's learned here, leaves here.)
- Refrain from discussing the process on social media.
- Refrain from disparaging group members to other colleagues.

Other ideas

- We welcome each other with all our differences and needs, acknowledging that we all have good intentions, and always seeking to deepen our bonds.
- We speak openly and take initiative, yet practice humility and grace.
- We will acknowledge the past, present, and future within, among, and beyond us.
- We will safeguard the trust of our group by sharing information as transparently as possible, listening with an open heart, and engaging broadly.