

What it is

A method for establishing clear rules of engagement on a team

What it can do

This tool can assist you to:

- Establish agreement in a working group about the behaviors that will create maximum success.
- Create a team culture that exemplifies the group's values.
- Produce a clear set of team agreements (also called ground rules or rules of engagement).
- Gain the commitment of group members to live by these agreements in a meaningful way.

When to use it

- With any ongoing work group: management teams, boards, alliances, etc.
- With project teams that exist for a limited time: campaign teams, coalitions, project teams, etc.
- For important one-time meetings, conferences, or retreats.

How it works

This process can take between 30-120 minutes.

The wide variance in time has to do with the investment of people in the product. If creating ground rules for a one-time meeting, 30-45 minutes will probably suffice. If these are to be permanent ground rules for a management board, people will likely want to debate the meaning and application of the agreements in greater depth.

Step 1 SET THE CONTEXT FOR SETTING CLEAR GROUND RULES

- The purpose of clear, agreed upon ground rules is to:
 - Help ensure behavior that maximizes success
 - Eliminate the potential confusion and conflict that comes from people playing by different rules
 - Hold ourselves and each other accountable

- Ground rules:
 - Can be both tactical/strategic and behavioral
 - Establish a clear framework for intentional interactions
 - Provide a consistent, understandable, and repeatable standard
 - Work best when all stakeholders own and commit to them
 - Speak to but are not limited to how we:
 - Relate to one another
 - Share information
 - Come to agreement
 - Make decisions
 - Work through differences

Step 2 CLARIFY PURPOSE AND EXPECTED RESULTS

- The team agreement should be tied to the purpose or results to which the group is committed.
 - Begin by clarifying or restating the particular results this group intends to create.
 - For some existing groups, this may simply be reviewing the existing mission or charter.
 - For new groups (or sometimes existing ones), this may require a deeper discussion to clarify purpose/results.

Step 3 IDENTIFY BARRIERS

- Ask the questions:
 - What gets in the way of really producing these results?
 - What kinds of behavior or type of working environment limits or weakens our ability to work together and make this happen?
- Let people share comments and suggestions without much discussion.

Step 4 INDIVIDUAL WORK

- Each person takes a few minutes to write down the 2-3 most important agreements they think the group should make with each other in answer to the following:
 - What kinds of agreements do we want to make with each other that will really help make this the best possible working environment and create excellent results?
 - These agreements are not just the “right sounding words,” but statements that will help us move the action forward and to which we are willing to hold each other accountable.

Step 5 SMALL GROUP WORK

Depending on the size of the large group, create smaller working groups of 4-5 individuals.

- Have the small groups:
 - Share their individual ideas
 - Sort for similarities
 - Notice any differences
 - Agree on their top 3-5 agreements.
- Make sure the groups define general words like “Respect” or “Open Communication” by clarifying what that would look or sound like exactly.

Step 6 SMALL GROUP REPORT-OUTS

- Each small group reports out their top (3-5) suggested agreements to the whole group.
- Sort for similarities and clarify any vagueness. Make sure everyone understands what each proposed agreement means.
- Reduce the list to those agreements that are essential to producing excellent results together and to which the group is willing to hold each other accountable.

Step 7 WORKING WITH TEAM AGREEMENTS

- Create an agreement that the “rules of engagement” will be part of the regular process of the group.
- When checking for agreement, be sure to ask:
 - All in agreement to show some visible sign.
 - Any in disagreement to show some visible sign.
 - If someone is not in agreement, what is the nature of the disagreement? (Be careful not to make the person wrong for not agreeing.)
- Discuss how the team agreements will be used, in actual practice, to help make the group more effective. Best practices include:
 - Posting the agreements at all meetings
 - Using the agreements as part of the check-in and “temperature check” procedures
 - Evaluating meetings on the basis of how well the agreements were kept
 - Giving feedback to individual members on how they model the behaviors

Things to consider/Additional benefits

When coming up with the final list of agreements, be mindful of the following:

- Groups often want to simply create a long laundry list of agreements. The “rules of the road” won’t be useful if people can’t easily remember them. Five agreements is a good number. Seven is probably the maximum, as research shows this to be the number of items most people can easily remember.
- Groups often try to avoid having to make choices by clumping together two or three behaviors into one agreement. Don’t allow this. Challenge the group to prioritize the most critical behaviors for their success.
- If there are more than five or six small groups, you may want to add an extra step, in which the small groups cluster into two or more sub-groups, synthesize their lists, and then report out to the large group for the final synthesis.