

■ Making the Most of Ground Rules

by Tom Terez

Q. It seems like every group in the world develops a set of ground rules for itself. What's your take on this—are ground rules really worthwhile?

A. Ground rules are indeed popular, and they've been around for years. Translations of cave paintings have even revealed ground rules dating all the way to prehistoric times, including common ones like "no hogging the flint" and "share all carcasses." Even during the French Revolution, people adhered to a carefully developed set of ground rules, with a crowd favorite being "Begin and end all decapitations on time." So ground rules have certainly withstood the test of time.

The best way to understand ground rules is to think of them as agreements among group members on what kind of team they want to be. How will team members discuss things? How will they reach decisions? How will they ensure that delicate balance between effectiveness and efficiency? All of these behavioral and operational questions should be spelled out in the ground rules.

That's the theory. The reality is that nowadays, most groups come up with the blandest,

vague, boringest ground rules imaginable. Think about it: When was the last time you saw the word "carcass" in a ground rule? Seriously, vagueness suggests that team members have not really delved into the kind of group they want to create—and because of this, the ground rules are virtually useless.

Check out the following. I'll bet you've seen

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at least one of these on a list of ground rules during the past year.

- Everyone participates.
- Begin and end on time.
- No dominating the discussion.
- Everything that is said here stays here.
- Respect everyone's opinion.
- Leave rank at the door.
- No side conversations.
- Leave rank at the door.
- Donuts at every meeting—ha ha

There is some good stuff here, but there are also some problems. First and certainly most important is that the writing of "ha ha," whether

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in greeting cards or correspondence or ground rules or anywhere else, should be a capital offense. The “ha ha” ruins what is otherwise an excellent ground rule (though it could be significantly strengthened by adding coffee and, while you’re at it, boxed lunches for meetings that begin in mid to late morning).

Another problem is the presence of vague language: “Everyone participates.” I *think* I know what this means, but couldn’t five people have five different interpretations? Does it mean that everyone needs to comment on every issue as it’s being discussed? Or does it mean that each person needs to say at least one thing (“These are outstanding creme puffs.”) before each meeting ends?

If you want ground rules to be the group’s behavioral and operational guide, they’ll be much more effective if they are much more specific. Improved version: “Each person identifies pros and cons at each decision point, except for Sid, who seems more interested in creme puffs.”

Also, you may want the group to go beyond the traditional ground rules like those listed above. Here are examples from real groups that have tried to anticipate a wider variety of situations:

No spitting.

Never include the words “moron,” “boss,” and “my” in the same sentence.

Scented markers are prohibited.

Start meetings on time and end two hours early.

Value diversity by having regular and decaf coffee and tea, as well as diet and nondiet soft drinks.

Seriously, ground rules can be very worthwhile. All you need to do is follow the following, um, ground rules:

- Arrange for an outside (neutral) facilitator to guide the discussion as your team develops its ground rules. By their very nature, ground rules stir emotions and strong feelings, and a skilled facilitator can channel that energy into a productive direction. What’s more, the ground-rule discussion may mark the team’s first attempt to reach a consensus decision. A facilitator will increase the odds that this early decision-making unfolds successfully.

- Make the ground rules as specific as possible by constantly asking “what do we mean by...?” For example, “What do we mean by ‘everyone participates’?” “What do we mean by ‘leave rank at the door’?” Use the answers to rephrase the ground rules. In some cases, this will transform a big, vague ground rule into three others that are much more specific—which is fine. Remember, the group is trying to define how it will interact, communicate, reach decisions, and so on. Clear language will help all team members understand exactly what they’re agreeing to—and it will be much easier to notice when the team has fallen askew of its ground rules.

- During the first few team sessions, review the ground rules early into your agenda—preferably at the start of your meeting. This will serve as a gentle reminder, and it may even uncover ideas for modifications or additional ground rules.

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- Use the ground rules at the end of all meetings for a 5-minute self-assessment. Have group members look at their list and pick out the one or two rules that seemed to get trampled on as the session unfolded. Determine steps for preventing this during the next session.

- Some people don't like the term "ground rules," in part because they think it has a playground ring to it, and also because our organizations are already too infested with rules. Here's an excellent alternative: working principles.

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