

CONFLICT SOLUTIONS

Expert Advice to Resolve Workplace Discord

Volume 25, Issue 1



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Facilitation:

Ground Rules That Work

The organization's twelve staff members had been to the bottom: a demoralizing year-long reorganization, the involuntary departure of a well-liked colleague, and a relatively new manager promoted from within after a contentious competition. Now they were tasked with working together to resolve the accumulated tensions.

The intrepid manager led several meetings, but the group lurched deeper into disharmony. In-Accord was hired to restore their esprit de corps and productivity.

A small but contributory factor in their problem was a literal billboard on the meeting room wall entitled "Meeting Ground Rules." It listed 14 bulleted instructions for participants. Let's give this team some positive feedback by first highlighting that this well-intentioned list would, if operationalized, make for an extraordinarily effective meeting process. It was also, evidently, the result of everyone having input.

As to the billboard's less praiseworthy qualities, the list was both overly

verbose and routinely ignored. No matter how well intentioned, these "shalts" and "shalt nots" were fated to be as readily ignored as the room's wallpaper. There were too many rules and most were too complex.

The following are attributes of truly effective meeting guidelines:

- They are brief—there should be no more than five.
- They are actionable, not aspirational.
- Violations are recognizable.
- They are easy to enforce.

I have successfully facilitated dozens of high-tension, high-stakes sessions using the following four guidelines:

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- Listen until the speaker finishes.
- Focus on the agenda.
- Engage in dialogue and negotiation.
- Everyone gets a voice.

Notice that "listen until..." is sly. With this guideline, the facilitator discourages interruptions by underscoring the intent behind the ubiquitous "No interruptions!" edict, which is to encourage authentic listening. Rather than averting outbursts with a chastising "Don't interrupt!" the facilitator asks, "Are you listening?"

Adopting the "engage in dialogue and negotiation" guideline elevates the two most important activities in group decision making, and thereby precludes many of the destructive behaviors that sabotage group processes. (For instance, argumentation, belittling, huffing and puffing.)

While eliciting ground rules from the group may seem to be in the spirit of collaboration, this practice often churns out 15-point PhD dissertations. Such intricate guidelines are difficult to remember, challenging to enforce, and often serve as a distraction rather than as a framework for conversation. It is more efficient, and demonstrative of your facilitation expertise, to suggest the rules you believe will be most effective and then invite participants to revise them, if desired.

Bonus Tip: An effective and fun trick when introducing the rules of engagement is to have

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participants turn to a neighbor and request their assistance in keeping them vigilant about the rule they know they will have the most difficulty following. This simple gimmick makes each participant aware of their personal pitfalls in group processes, and it diffuses responsibility for enforcing guideline adherence throughout the group.

After liberating the 12-person team from their former ground rules and leading them through a challenging series of discussions, they emerged with team agreements and, more importantly, a renewed faith in their ability to perform together.

With the strategies described above, you now have the golden keys to generate perpetual positivity in every meeting you facilitate. But if, for any reason, things don't go that way and you are faced with a team process in which critical decisions must be made amidst an air of tension, then [In-Accord](#) can help.



PERSPECTIVE:

**The earth's rotation
slows by 1.8 seconds
every century.**