

Ground Rules and Group Norms

Ground Rules

Establishing ground rules for meetings makes it possible for any team to use time more efficiently and effectively. Typical ground rules include the following:

1. Begin and end meetings on time.
2. Respect the opinions of others.
3. Stay focused on the discussions.
4. No side-bar conversations, personal or electronic.
5. Everyone is expected to contribute.
6. Maintain confidentiality – “What is “said here stays here,” and “What is “learned here leaves here!”

Group Norms

Group norms influence the behavior of team members during meetings, but the purpose for the following group norms is to influence the behaviors of members 24/7.

Group norms, whether stated or unstated, influence the behaviors of group members. When individuals violate or are perceived to violate these group norms, they will be “sanctioned.” These sanctions may be carried out informally or formally and can range from just being ignored for a short period of time to being “kicked out” of the group.

In unhealthy organizations, informal group norms can be expected to reinforce the status quo and reinforce unhealthy behaviors. By contrast, formalized group norms can have a very positive impact upon the internal dynamics of any organizational unit. A commitment to positive group norms can assist members in unhealthy organizations in moving out of the win/lose or “red zone.” Furthermore, in Stage 6 of our Team Development model, group norms make it possible for teams to continue to function at the Interdependent level because members are willing and able to hold themselves and each other accountable.

The following group norms have been field tested and advocated by our Organizational Health consultants for over three decades:

1. **The “5 minute rule.”** When the “5 minute rule” is accepted by a team as a group norm, individuals make a commitment not to get “trapped” into a gripe session for more than 5 minutes (maybe it should be the 60 second rule).

The “5 minute rule” can be honored by team members in the following ways:

- a. *We could just walk away and not get involved in the negative talk.*
 - b. *We could invoke the “5 minute rule” and call “time out” and say:*
 - *“It sounds like you understand the problem very well; what do you see as a potential solution?”*
 - *“How do we get this issue placed on the appropriate agenda?”*
 - *“Who or what team should be responsible for resolving this issue?”*
 - *“Why don’t we place this issue on the Problem Analysis form?”*
2. **Can’t complain unless we have a potential solution!** This group norm changes the language from blaming others and complaining to accepting responsibility for potential solutions. This group norm reinforces and reaffirms the “5 minute rule.”
3. **Honor the absent!** Simply stated, we should avoid spending time and energy speculating about what someone was reported to have said or done. We could say, *“I feel uncomfortable talking about this issue because we do not know the facts and because (he/she) is not present. We are just wasting our time and energy by speculating about . . . !”*
4. **“May I quote you as the source for this information?”** Unfortunately, some individuals relish in sharing rumors and half-truths. When these individuals share questionable information in private or small groups, someone just needs to say, *“Are you sure this information is correct?”*
- a. *If they say, “I think so,” we can say, “You need to check it out and be sure you are right before sharing it!”*
 - b. *If they say, “I know it is correct,” we can say, “May I quote you as the source?”* Most of the time, they will say “No, because” Then we are in a good position to say; *“Therefore, you should not be sharing this information.”*
5. **Let History be History!** Negative history within an organization can cause trust to be very fragile and can contribute to infighting in the organization for long periods of time. Since we cannot change history, we need to find ways to learn from history and then move on. You might hear someone say, *“You cannot trust him because on March 15, 1999, he said, or he did”* When individuals cannot let go of the past, team members may be helpful by saying:
- a. *“Let’s talk about today and the future!”*
 - b. *“You need to ‘work through’ that problem with (him/her) or just let it go!”*