

Rhizome guide to Facilitating Group Agreements

Group agreements, or working agreements, are simply mutually agreed 'contracts' for the way a group choose to interact. They're often manifested in written lists of behaviours, such as *"turn mobile phones off"* or *"raise a hand if you would like to speak"*.

Group agreements can be a very useful facilitation tool. They have the potential to head off the vast majority of 'difficult' behaviour and domination in any group process. This opens up the way for the quieter voices and the least assertive to play a more active role in the group.

But it would be a mistake to think that the group agreement does all that on its own. Negotiating an agreement simply raises the consciousness of the group about issues of group dynamics and participation and needs to be supported by a constant flow of reminders, gentle (and some less gentle) challenges and body language - gesture and facial expression.

Tips for negotiating a successful agreement:

If you choose to use an agreement:

- **Ensure the agreement is proposed in practical terms** - *"what does this tool do for us as a group?"* People need to understand what they're being asked to sign up to. A clear rationale is essential for this.
- See every agreement as negotiating space for those who find the dominant culture difficult to participate in, for whatever reason. **Negotiate for full participation.** The agreement should answer the question *"How will this behaviour make this meeting accessible for all of its participants?"* rather than just reinforcing mainstream norms.
- The agreement should list **behaviours** and not vague concepts. *"Encourage participation"* is laudable, but vague... ask the group what behaviours will encourage participation and list those instead.
- **Get full agreement!** Don't simply read through a proposed list of behaviours for agreement and end with an *"is that OK?"*, accepting the resulting low murmur as assent.
- Take the time to **negotiate the agreement fully** at the start. It sends a clear message to the group that you, the facilitator, are serious about participation.
- Use the negotiation process to **cement your mandate** to facilitate with the group. It's a 2 step process - *"Can you all sign up to these behaviours?"* and *"Can I have your mandate to support you in behaving this way?"*
- **Negotiate a culturally appropriate agreement.** Not all cultures share the same behavioural norms. One voice speaking at a time might be polite and sensitive group behaviour in one culture. *"No interrupting"* might be appropriate for an agreement in that context.

Why NOT to use a group agreement

It's perfectly possible to facilitate respectful group work without a group agreement, so don't use an agreement if it's not appropriate. Deal with any issues that arise in the moment if that works better for you and/or the group using the facilitation tools we all have in our tool kits. Some facilitators like to use issues as a learning point for the group - finding it more powerful to allow inappropriate behaviour to occur and then to explore it and learn from it than to 'suppress' it with a group agreement.

Why NOT groundrules?

Rules imply a power structure of someone who imposes and enforces rules and others who obey. We don't see that as the relationship a facilitator has with a group. **Group agreements** imply participation - that the group itself makes decisions and takes responsibility for the way it behaves.

However another culture might find more animated conversation, with several voices speaking and frequent interruption, the norm.

- **Go back to the underlying purpose of the agreement** - what do we want to achieve? A safe space for everyone to feel able to contribute, have their voice heard and their point respected? So work from that - it may lead you to behaviours like *"No interrupting"* but equally it may not.

Rhizome is a co-operative of experienced facilitators, trainers and mediators. We work with co-ops, and campaigning and community groups across the UK, and with those national organisations that support activism and participation in all its forms.

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