

Tool 9: Ground Rules

Aim of the tool

To help create a safe and productive atmosphere for group work.

When to use it?

Connection stage, when the focus lies on becoming a group that can collaborate.

Why develop Ground Rules?

Bringing different stakeholders together implies bringing different communication cultures into one space. Ground rules can help to avoid irritations and inefficiencies that naturally can become part of MSP meetings. Groups operating in a more formal context are often well-served by adopting a coherent, ongoing set of agreements about how people will interact with each other during the meetings.

Ground Rules – Step by step

If ground rules are needed, the group is probably quite capable of brainstorming its own. However, if you want ideas, here is one possible “starter set” provided by Tree Bressen:

1. All focus on one conversation. Stacking: If there are multiple people wanting to speak at the same time, then raise hands and wait to be called on. If you need to have a side conversation, first step out of the room.
2. Fairness: No one will be called on twice on a particular topic until all those who want to have spoken once. Step up then step back —share the available time with others.
3. Be constructive. Create a positive context and supportive framework. Acknowledge the past fully, yet focus on the future. Make good-faith efforts.
4. Test assumptions and inferences. Ask for more information.
5. Be specific. Use examples if needed so people know what you're talking about.
6. Take responsibility for your own feelings and experiences. Use “I” statements (for example, “I felt so angry when I saw that,” instead of “You made me so angry when you did that”).
7. Keep it real, keep it relevant. Be honest. Be direct, yet kind. Discuss complicated issues. Focus on what most needs to be talked about.

Once the group adopts a set of ground rules, then one of the responsibilities of the facilitator is to hold members accountable to them. Other group members should help with this as well and not expect the facilitator to do all the heavy lifting, especially if the facilitator is a novice.

Remember that ground rules are only means to an end. Avoid spending too much time of your first day (which is prime-time) on debating and defining ground rules. Try to avoid suggestions for punishments (“Anybody doing Facebook during sessions should sing a song”), as they are notoriously hard to enforce and create an unnecessary classroom-like atmosphere.

It is sometimes appropriate to communicate certain ground rules prior to the meeting. This saves precious plenary time and helps participants to know what they can expect. Chatham House rule is an example of a specific format often used for this purpose: anyone who comes to the meeting is free to use information from the discussion, but is not allowed to reveal who made any comment. The rule is designed to increase the openness of discussions.

Learn more

http://treegroup.info/topics/facilitation_primer.pdf

www.chathamhouse.org.uk/about/chathamhouserule/