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Ground Rules

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Do you remember the book by Robert Fulghum entitled *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*? It made the case that we have learned many (if not all) of the “rules” of life very early on, as children. Here is an excerpt:

All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sandpile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned:

*Share everything.
Play fair.
Don't hit people.
Put things back where you found them.
Clean up your own mess.
Don't take things that aren't yours.*

*Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
Wash your hands before you eat.
Flush.
Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
Live a balanced life.*

*Take a nap every afternoon.
When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.*

We all have a set of rules we live by (whether consciously or unconsciously). Those rules influence our personal and professional lives. Teams of people have rules too. Sometimes the rules are proudly displayed in the meeting room, but sometimes the rules are unspoken or informal.

If you are leading any kind of group process, you need to determine whether to have “**Ground Rules**” for the group’s time together, and, if so, what those rules should be.

What are Ground Rules?

Ground Rules are a *code of conduct* for the group. They answer the question: “How do we want to work together as a group in order to be the most productive?”

Ground Rules can address at least four different areas.

Values and principles: These could include: respect for diversity of opinions, conversational courtesies (e.g. one person speaks at a time and no side-bar conversations), confidentiality, promptness, or even.....having fun!

Group process: How the group makes decisions (e.g. definition of consensus), handles disagreements, collects and transcribes flip charts, etc.

Attendance: How many people will be needed for quorum, protocols for notification of absence, naming of replacements, etc.

Interruptions: How we want to handle cell phones, blackberries, and knocks on the door during the meeting, etc.

Ground Rules – Are they a must?

This is cause for debate in the facilitation community. Some facilitators swear by Ground Rules and use them as a matter of course. Others never use them. As for me, it depends.....

- Is this a newly formed group? Or has this group worked together several times?
- Am I, as the facilitator, new to this group? Or is this a regular client group?
- What is the history of this group? Do its members work well together? Do they have a history of conflicts?

- Are the members of this group driven by output and very task-focused? Or is it a professional network focused on relationships?
- What is the objective of the session? Are rules as necessary when it is a team-building day as opposed to a strategic planning day? What kinds of rules are more appropriate in these contexts?
- What would be the purpose of the Ground Rules for this group? Manage relationships? Manage process? Manage both?

How to develop Ground Rules?

If the group decides that it does indeed want explicit Ground Rules, suggest a process to help develop them at *the very beginning of the meeting*. The manner in which you create Ground Rules can have an impact on the team dynamics. Choose your approach based on the objectives of the session and what you know about the dynamics of the group.

There are many ways to develop Ground Rules, but here are a few suggestions.

1. *Straightforward Approach*: I have seen many facilitators use this simple approach. They write 3 to 5 potential basic Ground Rules on a flip chart prior to the start of the meeting. As the meeting opens, they present these Ground Rules to the participants and ask if there is anything they would delete or add to the list presented. The facilitator manages the ensuing discussion among the group's members as they reach agreement on their own rules of conduct for the duration of the meeting.
2. *Traditional Brainstorming*: Present one of the areas listed above, such as values and principles, and ask the group to brainstorm some potential rules. Record their ideas on a flip chart. Then move on to the next area and repeat the process. Once the list is complete, ask participants for their agreement to adopt these rules as their code of conduct for the meeting.
3. *Appreciative Inquiry*: Ask participants to go back in memory to one of the best meetings they have ever attended. Give them a minute or two to reflect on what made that meeting so positive and memorable for them. Ask them to jot down their thoughts. Facilitate a round-robin process where each participant describes one of the factors that contributed to a positive meeting and record this on the flip chart. Repeat the process until all of the different ideas have been expressed. Ask the group members if they are willing to adopt these principles as their Ground Rules for this meeting.

For a group that has a long history of working together and that only needs to be reminded of its Ground Rules, the Straightforward Approach is probably best. However, a new group that has asked you to do some team building might gain a lot by creating its Ground Rules through a more visionary approach, such as the Appreciative Inquiry

method, that helps the group get clear about what it values and what its members want to work towards in their team.

4. But increasingly, I use another process to open meetings that I facilitate: *Meaningful Conversation*. This approach is drawn from a book by William Isaacs entitled *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*. In his book, Isaacs explains that we tend to have a misconception of what dialogue is. Dialogue is not talking at each other or talking with each other. Real dialogue is THINKING TOGETHER. Isaacs says that “dialogue is about a shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together.... a living experience of inquiry *within* and *between* people.” I try to convey this concept to participants by giving a mini-teach of Isaacs’ definition of dialogue at the beginning of each session.

Here is what I do. Transcribe the text below on a flip chart and post it in the room. State the root meaning of each word. Give examples of each type of communication as we experience them in our organizations. Tell stories. Finish with the concept of dialogue as Isaacs describes it. Invite people to listen attentively, suspend their judgments, take time for reflection before speaking, and enter into conversations for relationship throughout the day.

Dialogue – Bill Isaacs
Root Meaning of Words

DEBATE - TO BEAT DOWN

DISCUSSION - CONCUSSION / PERCUSSION
To shake apart

CONVERSATION - TO TURN TOGETHER
TAKE TURNS SPEAKING
Deliberate - *suspend* what you think and stay open to new ideas or *defend* it with the assumption that you are right

DIALOGUE
DIA - through
LOGOS - word or meaning
Flow of meaning

DIALOGUE = a conversation in which people think together in RELATIONSHIP

How do we ensure adherence to Ground Rules?

The Ground Rules should be *posted and visible* to all participants. The Ground Rules *belong to the group* and its members are responsible for their enforcement. It is up to the group to self-monitor and keep itself on track. This means that the facilitator should resist the urge to take responsibility for enforcing the rules and should trust the group process (and believe me, sometimes that takes a lot of personal discipline!). Being a great believer in the wisdom of groups, I have been rewarded many times for my decision to not interfere and let the group take care of itself. However, I have to admit that there are times when things derail and it becomes necessary to point out the Ground Rules to the group to remind them of the commitment they have made to each other at the beginning of the meeting.

In the end...

There is no right way or wrong way to do Ground Rules. It is what works for you and the group you are facilitating. Your experience and your intuition will let you know what is best. And in order to get experience.... you need to have a few successes, and, yes, a few failures along the way. Facilitation is a partnership. The group owns the process and the outcome, and you, the facilitator, act as a guide along the journey.

References:

Fulghum, Robert. *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (Random House Canada, 1988) ISBN : 0394571029.

Isaacs, William. *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together* New York (Currency, 1999) ISBN : 0-385-47999-9.