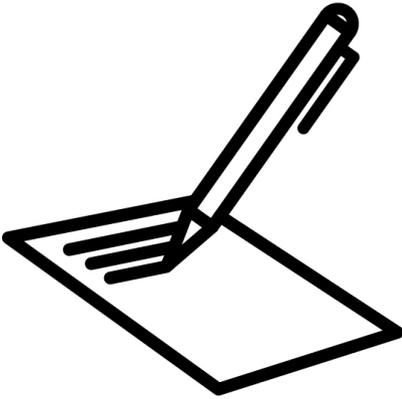


Seeds for Change Short guide



Group agreements

A short guide to creating group agreements for workshops and meetings

Group agreements

Group agreements can be a useful tool for making your event or meeting a good experience for everyone involved. The idea is for members of a group to create their own groundrules for how to work together effectively and respectfully.



Benefits

One benefit of group agreements is that everyone gets the chance to express their own needs around what will enable them to participate fully and feel as safe as possible. We may assume everyone wants the same as us, but the reality is that everyone's needs are different, and we don't know what they are until we ask! Starting with an open conversation about how to meet the different needs may give us the best chance of making the space work for everyone.

Creating ground-rules together also gives more power to the group, compared to a facilitator or chair imposing rules on everyone else. People are then more likely to feel responsible for implementing the ground-rules.

Potential pitfalls

However, a potential pitfall of group agreements is that the group members who feel most empowered to voice their needs may gain even more power by creating rules for everyone else to follow. This is a particular concern if the rules themselves could make it harder for people to challenge each other. For example, a guideline like 'Be polite even if you disagree' sounds inoffensive, but it could be a barrier to people voicing things if they are too angry to be polite! This in turn could discourage people from raising issues they feel strongly about, e.g. around oppressive behaviours or power dynamics.

What to aim for

No agreement will be perfect for everyone. A useful yard stick is that a set of ground-rules is 'good enough' if it meets all the core needs, and as many preferences as possible. Needs are things people have to have in place in order to participate. Preferences are things we can be flexible about if they don't work for others. For example, someone might have a need for a venue with step-free access, and a preference for people using 'hands up' when they want to speak. In addition, try to be:

Concrete

It needs to be clear how to implement the agreement. For example, if the rule says 'respect confidentiality' each person may have a different idea of what they can and can't share. Encourage people to be specific, for example: "Don't share personal stories outside of this group".

Realistic

It needs to be possible for people to implement the agreement throughout the session. It is unlikely that anyone will completely transform the way they communicate simply because they have 'agreed' to a rule. Group agreements should also use language everyone is familiar with - for example, there's no point saying 'express yourself in I statements' unless everyone is already familiar with the concept!

Genuinely agreed

In order to be empowering, a group agreement needs the genuine consent of everyone involved. Using the word 'agreement' would be unhelpful if some people didn't support it and didn't feel able to say.

For this reason, it is very important to go through a process that gives everyone time and space to really think about what their needs are and listen carefully to other people. Make sure to check at the end that people really do agree to stick to the suggested guidelines.

Creating a group agreement

It helps to have a facilitator to guide a group through this process.

Allow a minimum of 45 minutes to allow space for everyone to reflect on what they need, share their thoughts and listen to everyone else. This seems like a lot of time, but it is necessary if you want the ground rules you create to be genuinely based on consent. If the group is going to work together long term, it could be worth giving the process even longer.

1. Explain the purpose of the group agreement

Make it clear that everyone's input is welcome, and encourage people to say if a suggested groundrule doesn't work for them.

It can also help to remind people of the purpose of the workshop or meeting. For example, 'We need to make some big decisions on controversial topics. That will be more effective if we spend a bit of time first sharing what we need in order to participate effectively.'

2. Make space for people to reflect on what they need

Knowing and expressing needs is easier for some people than for others. Allow time for people to think on their own or by chatting in pairs. A facilitator can help by offering structured questions.

Questions to help people tap into their past experiences

- Think about a workshop or meeting that worked particularly well for you (and / or one that worked less well).
- Were the facilitator or other group members doing anything in particular that made it work / not work for you?



Questions to help people come up with specific suggestions for the session

- How do you feel about participating in today's meeting / workshop?
- What are your hopes and fears?
- Is there anything that the facilitator or other group members can do that would help make this session work well for you?

3. Give everyone the chance to feedback

It is important to hear from each person who wants to make a suggestion. For example, you could do a go-round, and write up all the suggestions. Or each person could write their ideas on post-it notes which you collect together.

If you have your own requests for what will help you facilitate, you could add them in at this stage.

4. Use the suggestions to create potential groundrules

Look for ways to summarise and cluster similar suggestions, to make the list more manageable.

Ask follow on questions to help people be more concrete or realistic. For example, if someone asks for 'respect each other even when we disagree', try asking how someone might *show* that respect.

5. Edit the suggestions until everyone is happy

Make space for everyone to look over the list you've created, and really think about what will and won't work for them. That includes thinking about whether they can realistically stick to it, and considering whether there need to be exceptions or tweaks to any of the items.

Take feed back. Explore any differences and look for amendments that everyone can consent to. This may include striking items off, and accepting that no group works for everyone all of the time!

6. Test for agreement

Remind the group that they are making a commitment to each other. It is much better to raise concerns now than simply ignore the groundrules later. You could ask people to do something proactive to signal their consent, e.g. raising their hands.

7. Implement the group agreement!

If you spend time creating ground-rules and then ignore them, it will undermine trust in you and within the group. Below are some ideas for ways to help remind people what they agreed to:

Visible: Make sure the group agreement is visible throughout the session.

Easy to read: If the original copy is hard to read, take a chance early on during a break or small group work to create a neat version. Type it up if necessary, so people can use text-reading software.

Reading it aloud: Not everyone will want or be able to read it. You could read it aloud at suitable intervals, e.g. at the start of each session for a long term group.

Reminding people about the agreement: You could also remind the group of parts of the agreement at specific moments when it is especially relevant. For example, "We're going to have a whole group debate on this topic. Can I remind you that you agreed at the beginning you wanted to make sure there was space for everyone to contribute. I'll give you a moment now to think whether you are someone who has already offered a lot during this session and could hold back now."

Explaining it to new people: Remember that newcomers or latecomers haven't agreed anything, so take the time to show them the agreement and explain it to them. If they want to make major changes to the agreement, you could re-open discussion with the whole group. If there is no more time for this, you may simply have to tell them so.

If you don't have time for this process...

In a short session, it wouldn't be possible to go through the process outlined above. Even if you are spending a full day together, you might not want to give so much time to a group agreement.

Below are two alternative options.

Facilitators' requests

The facilitator simply presents the group with a list of their own requests to help them facilitate. Common examples are: 'phones on silent', and 'keep to time limits in small group work.' The facilitator then gives people the chance to look the list over and suggest changes. This could then be followed by testing for agreement, though be aware that it may be hard for people to challenge the facilitator at the beginning of the session. Therefore it may be best to look for an alternative name, e.g. 'Facilitator's requests' instead of 'Group agreement.'

Needs go-round

Another option would be to start with a go round where everyone says what they need from others in order to participate effectively. The difference between this and a group agreement is that you don't go on to hammer out ground rules that people can commit to. Instead you hope that the chance to express, share and hear each other's needs will increase people's awareness and good will.

Group agreements

Group agreements can be a useful tool for making your event or meeting a good experience for everyone involved. To be effective, they need to be concrete, realistic and genuinely agreed by all members of the group.

In this guide we look at the process for creating a group agreement, as well as its benefits and potential pitfalls.

A publication by

www.seedsforchange.org.uk

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Second edition published in 2021

Printed on recycled paper by Footprint Workers Co-operative