

Setting ground rules for meetings

First and foremost, we must think about ground rules. What are ground rules? Why do we need them? Why are they important?

Ground rules

Ground rules guide people to behave properly during the meeting and are the rules that must be acknowledged and made by all participants. They aim to make sure meetings are conducted smoothly and effectively. Ground rules may also be a venue for participants to increase their meaningful participation. The rules should be made at the beginning of each meeting and placed where everybody is able to see and follow them.

Ground rules apply to everybody to ensure equality and fairness. The rules do not only apply to participants – facilitators must also observe the rules that he or she participated in making. If the facilitator forgets the rules, participants should be encouraged to remind the person. Ground rules aim to increase participation, create a positive meeting atmosphere, and set clear expectations for all.

If a series of meetings have the same participants, ground rules may be set at the outset for the entire series. Nevertheless, in later meetings, participants should be given

Materials List

Flipchart Paper
Index cards
Blu-tack or tape
Markers

the opportunity to review the rules and discuss if anybody wishes to make any changes.

Ground rules setting exercise

Steps:

1. Explain what ground rules are and why we need them;
2. Give everyone two index cards and ask them to write two ground rules that they think the group should follow;
3. Go around the room and ask each person to share their rules *and* to explain why they think the rule is important;
4. Have one facilitator or trainer take notes, writing down each new ground rule on the board;
5. After everyone has listed her/his words, open the list up to general discussion. “Is anything missing?” “Do the rules make sense to everyone?”
6. When everyone agrees on the rules, ask “what happens if someone violates one of the rules? What should the consequences be?”
7. Let people share their thoughts, and the facilitator or trainer takes notes on the board;
8. After everyone has expressed their ideas, have a round of votes on the disciplinary measures brought up by the participants; if people have disagreement, then throw the question back to the discussion until one or few best disciplinary measures are chosen;
9. Put the ground rules and disciplinary measures in a place where everyone can see them, once the group has reached consensus.

Notes

Everybody should participate in setting the ground rules; allow each person to raise suggestions, and write down their suggestions on a place where everyone can read;
If anyone in the group has questions on any rule, the group should discuss the rule again.

In addition to the established ground rules, there are many other rules that may arise in a meeting. Please think about past meetings, what could have been avoided by setting ground rules but you did not?

In the course of a meeting, remind participants of the ground rules every now and then. For example, if you notice someone keeps interrupting others when they are speaking, then you might say: “as a reminder, we have agreed that we shouldn’t interrupt others during a speech – as you can see on the rules written over here!”

Example Ground Rules

1. Be punctual.
2. Participate actively.
3. Listen to others.
4. Respect new or different views.
5. Do not interrupt or have sidebar conversations during others’ speeches.
6. Avoid demeaning and aggressive words.
7. Only discuss items on the agenda.
8. No smoking.
9. Turn off your cellphone.