Ground Rules for Effective Groups
Adapted from Schwarz, R.M. *The Skilled Facilitator*, 1994.

The sixteen ground rules discussed below are suitable for a group to the extent that it is responsible for solving problems, it deals with complex or non-routine problems, each member is treated as making an important contribution, group decisions require the commitment of every member to be effectively implemented, the group meets regularly, and the group has sufficient time to solve problems. The ground rules are based on three core values: **valid information** (sharing all information in a way that others can understand it and in a way that others can validate it while continually seeking new information to determine whether previous decisions should be changed), **free and informed choice** (defining one's own objectives and methods for achieving them, not coercing and manipulating others, and basing choices on valid information), and **internal commitment** (feeling personal responsibility for one's decisions, making choices that are intrinsically compelling and satisfying). The ground rules are also supported by each other and work together. Together, the ground rules address the process problems that typically occur in groups.

1. Test assumptions and inferences.

When people assume something, they consider it true without verifying it. When people infer something, they draw conclusions about what they do not know based on what they do know. Imagine, for example, that Bob, the group's chair observes that Hank, although productive, has considerable more work that any other group member. To lighten Hank's work load, Bob begins transferring some of Hank's work to other members. One day, when Bob tells Hank he will no longer have to prepare a certain report, Hank replies, "Is there anything else I'm doing that you don't like?"

Bob had assumed Hank would know why he was trying to lighten Hank's work load, and Hank had incorrectly inferred that Bob was dissatisfied with his work. Bob did not test his assumption with Hank, and Hank did not test his inference with Bob; thus neither could find out that he was incorrect. Consequently it was only when Hank revealed his anger that bob discovered his well-intentioned plan had backfired.

Testing assumptions and inferences enables members to get valid information to make informed choices. Before reacting to someone or making a decision based on something assumed or inferred, ascertain whether your assumption or inference is correct. In this case Bob should have said, "Hank, I want to lighten your work load because I think that you have got too much to do. I don't want you to misinterpret the work reassignment. I assume you know that I think the quality of your work is excellent. Do you know that?" Even if Bob did not test his assumption, Hank could have said, "when you started removing some of my duties, I inferred that you were dissatisfied with my performance. Am I correct?"

2. Share All Relevant Information

This ground rule means that each member tells the group all the information she or he has that will affect how the group solves the problem or makes a decision. Sharing information ensures that members have a common base of information. This includes sharing information that does not support one's preferred position. Group members' feelings are also relevant information to be shared. For example, an employee may want to tell a supervisor about how the supervisor's behavior creates problems. But the employee is concerned that the supervisor will use the comments against her. In this case, sharing all relevant information would include the employee's saying, " I am worried that if I tell you this, you will use it against me. But I want to be honest with you, so I will tell you." Here, the employee shares three pieces of relevant information: concern about retribution, need for some assurance on the part of the supervisor, and willingness to be vulnerable in order to solve a problem.

3. Focus on Interests, Not Positions

To make decisions to which all members are internally committed, members must find a solution that meets everyone's interests. Interests are the needs, desires and concerns that people have in regard to a particular problem. Solutions or positions are the ways that people meet their interests. In other words, people's interests lead them to support a particular solution or position.

An effective way for members to solve problems is to start by identifying their own interests. Unfortunately, many groups start by talking about solutions or positions. For example, if a group is trying to solve the problem of when to meet, one member may start by saying, "I suggest we meet every other Monday at 7:30 A.M." Another may respond, "My position is that we sould meet the second day of each month." Yet, their positions do not help the group identify each member's real needs, desires, and concerns. Here the person who suggested meeting every other Monday at 7:30 A.M. was interested in meeting early in the morning before some important customers would call. The person who wanted to meet the second day of each month was interested in meeting immediately after a relevant biweekly computer report became available. Each took a position that met his or her individual interests.

The problem with solving problems by focusing first on positions is that people's positions are often in conflict even when their interests are compatible. This occurs because people tend to offer their positions after they have provided for their own interests but before they have included the other member's interests. In the meeting example, each member's solution was rejected by the other because it failed to meet the other's interest. However, had each member been aware of the other's interest, either one may have been able to offer a solution that satisfied both.

To help the group focus on interests rather than positions, start by asking each member to list the criteria that must be met in order for that member to accept a solution. For example, if a group were to buy a car, one member might be interested in a car that can hold all six group members. Another might be interested in a car that uses fuel efficiently, while a third member might be interested in a car that has a good repair record. Notice that none of these interests specifies a particular make and model of car (position). If a member states a position (such as, "I want to buy a Chevy"), identify this as a position and then ask, "What interests do you have that lead you to favor that position?"

Eventually, when all members have stated their interests, members can begin to generate solutions or positions. In the car example, solutions would be the names of specific cars, such as a Ford Taurus or Dodge Caravan. When a member offers a solution, it helps to point out how that solution meets the interests on which the group agreed. In this way, the group increases the likelihood that there will be consensus on the solution.

4. Be Specific -- Use Examples

Specific examples use directly observable behaviors to describe people, places, things, or events. Unlike general statements, specific examples generate valid information because they enable other members to determine independently whether the examples are valid. For example, If Vera makes the general statement to the group, "I think some of us are not doing their fair share of the work," other members cannot determine whether the statement is valid. Members cannot observe who "some of us" are; neither can they directly observe whether someone is "not doing their fair share of the work." In contrast, if Vera states specifically, "Selina and Joe, you did not complete and distribute your section of the report," other members can determine whether the statement is valid by directly observing whether Selina and Joe's section of the report is complete and whether they distributed it.

5. Agree On What Important Words Mean

This ground rule is an extension of "be specific -- use examples." When members unintentionally agree or disagree with each other, it is often because the same word means different things to them. For example, a group decides to make decisions by consensus. However, to some members *consensus* means that a majority of people agree, while to others it means unanimous agreement. The first time the group makes a decision that has majority but not unanimous support, it will learn that it had not agreed on the meaning of consensus.

One way to determine whether all group members are using a word to mean the same thing is to ask them the first time the word is used. Say something like, "You used the word consensus. To me consensus means unanimous agreement and not majority agreement. Is that what it means to you?" Notice that describing what a word means helps also to describe what it does not mean.

6. Explain the Reasons Behind One's Statements, Questions, and Actions

This ground rule simply means that one person tells others why he or she is doing something. It is part of sharing all relevant information and identifying interests. For example, in asking a group for statistics on the number of days that people are late to work, one might say, "I am asking for this information because it will give me a better idea of how flexible working hours may have an effect on tardiness and absenteeism." Explaining one's reasoning helps people interpret one's behavior correctly and reduces the chances of people assuming or inferring things that may not be true. In this example, people may infer that the individual is considering some punitive action if that person did not explain the reasons for requesting the tardiness statistics.

7. Disagree openly with Any Member of the Group

Disagreeing openly is consistent with the core value of valid information. Sometimes the composition of the group makes it difficult for some members to disagree with others. For example, a member whose supervisor (or whose supervisor's supervisor) is also a member of the group may find it difficult to disagree with that person. Sometimes groups are made up of subgroups, and members of one subgroup may be reluctant to disagree with each other in the presence of another subgroup's members. For example, managers may be reluctant to disagree with each other in front of employees. Watching members' nonverbal behaviors may provide cues about whether they are reluctant to disagree with other members. Of course, the cues are only inferences that must be tested with those group members.

8. Make Statements, Then Invite Questions and Comments

Making statements and then inviting questions and comments about them means expressing one’s point of view (making sure to explain the reasons) and then asking others to respond, including whether they agree or disagree. For example, a group member might say, "I think it would help to give department heads their own budgets to work within, so that their accountability will be commensurate with their responsibility. But some of you may feel differently. I’d like to hear what each of you thinks about my idea, even if you disagree."

Inviting others to comment on one’s statements encourages them to question and challenge the ideas and helps focus discussion as a dialogue rather than a series of monologues. The resulting discussion enables the group to determine the validity of the ideas and enables each member to make an informed choice. It may seem counterproductive to encourage disagreement, yet reaching a decision to which all members will be committed requires that members identify their disagreements and resolve them.

9. Jointly Design Ways to Test Disagreements and Solutions

Imagine that a group is discussing whether the organization responds quickly enough to customer complaints. Diane believes that customers are getting timely responses, but Kate disagrees. Normally in disagreements like this, each person tries to convince the other that she or he is wrong. Diane will offer all her evidence to support her position, and Kate will do the same for her position. Each may doubt the other's evidence, and neither will offer evidence to weaken her own position. Even when the disagreement is over, the "loser" is still likely to believe that she is right.

If Diane and Kate jointly design a way to test their disagreement, it would work like this: once the two realized that they disagreed, and after they agreed on what the words *timely responses* meant, one would suggest that they work together to determine the true situation. To do so, each would have to be willing to accept the possibility that her information is inaccurate or incomplete. Then, they would jointly develop a method to test which facts are relevant. The method would include jointly agreeing on who to speak with, what questions to ask, what statistical data to consider relevant, and how to collect the data. Whatever method they use, it is critical that both agree to it and agree to use the information that comes from it. Once Diane and Kate have collected their information, they should discuss it together and reach a joint decision about speed of response to customers.

Two important questions to ask when jointly testing disagreements are, "How could it be that we are both correct?" and "How could we each be seeing different parts of the same problem?" Often, members have different sets of facts because they are talking about different times, places, or people. In this example, both Diane's and Kate's information could have been correct but incomplete; some units could have responded to calls from customers in a timely fashion, while others did not.

By jointly resolving disagreements, members are more likely to be internally committed to the outcome because they freely agreed to the test.

10. Discuss Undiscussable Issues.

Every group typically has undiscussable issues. These are issues that are relevant to the group's task but that members believe they cannot discuss openly in the group without some negative consequences. Some examples include members who are not performing adequately, members not trusting one another, and members reluctant to disagree with their superiors who are group members. Unfortunately, because such issues often raise feelings of mistrust, inadequacy, and defensiveness, members usually deal with the issues either by not talking about them at all or by talking about them outside the group with people they trust. However, such issues are usually critical for the group to resolve, and the group's performance may suffer as long as they remain undiscussable.

In order for the group to share valid information and allow members to make free and informed choices, members need to make undiscussable issues discussable within the group. One way to achieve this is to raise the issue and acknowledge that it may be considered undiscussable: " I realize what I'm about to say may be considered an undiscussable issue, but I think we can be a more effective group if we deal with this issue." Group members can also explore their concerns about discussing such issues without actually discussing the specifics. For example, a member might say, "I want to raise an important issue for the group, but I'm concerned that there may be reprisals toward me if I do. I want to talk about this before I decide whether I want to identify the undiscussable issue." If members can be assured that their fears will not be realized, they will be more willing to talk openly about previously undiscussable issues. Finally, once the group successfully discusses one undiscussable issue, members may find it easier to deal with others.

11. Keep the Discussion Focused

Focusing the discussion means ensuring that members are discussing relevant issues, everyone is focused on the same issue, and everyone fully understands the issue. Sometimes, a group spends time discussing issues that are irrelevant to its task. To get a group refocused on relevant issues, it helps to identify how the group got off track: "We began this discussion talking about work loads, and now we are talking about photocopiers. I think that we have gotten off the track; do others agree?"

At other times, group members are focused on different issues. To get everyone in the group focused on the same issue, it helps to identify the various issues that people have raised: "I think we are talking about different things. It sounds like Leslie and Debra are talking about the problem of coordinating different schedules, but Nancy and Hank are talking about how flextime will affect the amount of work that we can accomplish. Do other people agree that we are talking about different things?" If other members agree, ask which topic would be best to discuss first.

One time when it is particularly crucial that members be focused one the same issue is when the group is defining the problem on which it will work. If various members believe they are solving different problems, the group will not accomplish its task.

Keeping the discussion focused also means discussing an issue until all members understand it. This ensures that every member will have the same information and will be able to make an informed choice. If even one person does not understand something, the group needs to discuss it until it is clear to everyone in the group.

12. Do Not Take Cheap Shots or Otherwise Distract the Group

At some time, almost everyone has been the target of a cheap shot – a witty or snide remark that insults someone. A cheap shot generally makes the target feel bad and does not help the group. In addition, there is a practical reason for not using them. Someone who has been the target of an insult usually spends some time thinking about the comment – wondering why the comment was made, being angry, or thinking about clever comebacks to use later in the meeting. In any event, the person is usually distracted from the group's conversation. A distracted person cannot participate cannot participate in identifying and solving the problem being discussed. As a result, the person may later withhold consent.

When everyone's full participation is needed, members cannot afford to distract each other. In general, members should not engage in any behavior – such as side conversations and private jokes – that distracts the group from its task.

13. All Members are Expected to Participate in All Phases of the Process

This ground rule means simply that each member's participation is essential for the group to work effectively. Because each member has a different position in the organization, each will likely have different experiences and different views about how to solve problems. In order for the group to benefit most from the different views, all must contribute to the extent that they have relevant information to share. Sometimes, this means simply stating why they agree or disagree with what others have said or that they have no interests that the group needs to consider when solving the problem.

14. Exchange Relevant Information with Nongroup Members

To be effective, a group must work well with people outside the group with whom the group members are interdependent. To make decisions based on valid information, groups often need to obtain information that resides outside the group. Working effectively with nongroup members includes continually sharing information with and seeking information from those whose work affects and is affected by the group.

Consequently, the group must decide what information is relevant to share with various nongroup members and how to share it.

Because all the ground rules for group members are also effective when used with nongroup members, some groups may choose to add a related ground rule, which states, "Use the ground rules when working with nongroup members." The ground rules can increase effectiveness even when only one person knows how to use them. But because the ground rules are used *with* people, not *on* people, they become more useful as more people who are involved in a conversation understand and use them. This distinguishes ground rules from manipulative tactics, which lose their effectiveness when the target person also knows the tactics.

Of course, nongroup members decide whether to use the ground rules with group members. Group members can help nongroup members make a more informed choice about whether to use the ground rules by describing the ground rules and explaining how they work.

15. Make Decisions by Consensus

Making decisions by consensus is at the heart of the ground rules. Consensus means that everyone in the group freely agrees with the decision and will support it. If even one person cannot agree with a proposed decision, the group does not have a consensus. Consensus ensures that each member's choices will be free choices and that each will be internally committed to the choices. Consensus decision making equalizes the distribution of power within the group, because every member's concerns must be addressed and every member's support is required to make a decision. For example, a member who needs to understand more about an issue can withold consent until reaching an understanding. Reaching consensus usually takes more time than voting, because it is hard work to find a decision or solution that everyone supports. But because people are internally committed to them, decisions made by consensus usually take less time to implement successfully and encounter less resistance in the long run.

When the group thinks it is close to reaching consensus, one member should state the decision under consideration, and the each member should say whether he or she consents. This avoids the mistake of assuming that silence means consent. Voting is inconsistent with consensus decision making, but the group can take straw polls to see whether it is close to consensus and to see which members still have concerns about the proposal.

Consensus should be used throughout the time a group is solving a problem, not just at the end when members are selecting the best alternative. Whenever the group is about to move to the next step of the problem-solving process, it should reach a consensus to do so.

Individuals are often reluctant to use this ground rule, because in their experiences groups rarely are able to reach consensus and because they fear that key decisions may not get made. However, many groups are unable to reach consensus because they do not use an effective set of ground rules; using the other ground rules increase the likelihood that a group will reach consensus.

16. Do Self-Critiques

For a group to become more effective over time, it must have some way to sytematically incorporate its successes and learn from its mistakes. Self-critiques provide a way to do this. Before the end of each meeting, the group asks three questions: What ground rules did we use well? What ground rules do we need to improve on? Exactly what will we do differently next time?

For the critique to be helpful, members must be very specific and give examples (a ground rule) when answering each question. For example, John might say, "I think Debra helped the group focus on interests, not positions, when she asked Bob what interests led him to oppose flexible working hours. Do others agree?" A general comment such as "I think we should all do a better job of staying focused," does not help the group identify exactly how the group lost its focus, and it assumes that other members agree that the group was not focused.

Giving someone negative feedback can be difficult, but it is easier if it is given in a way that is consistent with the ground rules, such as making a statement and then inviting people to disagree. It is easier to give negative feedback if members also keep in mind that the purpose of the self-critique is to improve the group's performance.

One way to conduct effective self-critiques while reducing the amount of negative feedback that members must give to each other is for each member to identify ground rules that he or she has used well or poorly during the meeting. After each member has assessed his or her own performance, members can give each other feedback.

Because self-critiques can be uncomfortable and because groups are often pressed for time, groups sometimes do not conduct them. Ultimately, however, the only way a group can systematically improve its performance is to learn from its experiences – by doing self-critiques. In the short term, conducting the self-critique will increase the length of the meeting. In the long term, if the group learns from its self-critiques, its effectiveness will increase and it will take less time to make higher quality decisions.