Group Agreements
Setting the tone for working well together

Background – why and how to set them up

Creating expectations within the group

Agreements are designed to help a group establish a set of behavioural expectations on how they are going to work together. The word "Agreement" rather than "RULES" is used because we are talking about behavioural norms established collectively by the group. Everyone agrees to what's in and what's not in their set of Agreements.

Anything could potentially be included, but rarely does anything particularly controversial come up during the process.

There's a fear that people won't be able to agree, which seems to stem from the idea that people are more likely to muck up than get along with each other. Ironically and not surprisingly, it can trigger the very behaviours in people we are fearful of because that idea spreads unconsciously throughout the group. If you think the worst of people from the outset, then your leadership techniques may be more controlling than they are enabling for people.

It's all about the conversation, not the words on the page

Putting together Agreements is actually very simple but it needs to be facilitated well. The key is the conversation that gets you there, not the final words you come up with. This is why it never works to use Agreements crafted by another team. It can be tempting to do this but just because previous ideas may look and sound helpful, doesn't mean the group in question will come up with them.

If a group doesn't come up with the words themselves, then ownership and commitment to the Agreements isn't there. The real power of Agreements is in the fact that everyone has an opportunity to contribute, has their personal needs heard and mostly met, and as a result, now feel safer. This is the key that most people don't understand: Agreements are first and foremost about creating safety, not about policing behaviour.

Success of the process comes down to how well you facilitate it

So, needless to say while simple, Agreements require a present and astute leader or facilitator who is truly at the service of the group for the best result. Park your own needs as much as possible and trust that, if important enough, someone else will advocate for your own particular need. If this doesn't happen, then it's OK to ask someone else to take over the facilitation for a short while to enable you to have your say. However, it's essential NOT to be in the leader/facilitator role when arguing your own personal view.

Facilitating the Process

What's going to help us work well together?

This is the key question to ask a group putting together Agreements. You could use Agreements for a one-off meeting, or it could be for a team who will meet many times.

Capture the words on a piece of butcher's paper, so everyone can see them. People can keep coming back to this poster as you gather ideas. Scan the room and look for input. It can take a while to get started. Be patient.

If people throw up one-word values like 'respect' ask them to unpack the word:
> *"Ok, great … So what would that look like? What would someone be doing if they were sticking to that agreement and demonstrating [respect]?"*

Once a set of words is offered (for example, something like "Listening without interrupting"), check it out with the whole group.
> *"Does that make sense what Lisa is saying?"*

Look for nods of approval and a vibe that the words are acceptable. Don't re-interpret what people offer. If you assist with wording, make sure the group is still happy once the words are written!

Check for agreement as suggestions are made

As each suggestion is put forward, check for agreement. Others will often give agreement by nodding - but not always. People are sometimes thinking and may be in agreement but not showing any outward sign that they do. What you need to look out for is body language that might suggest disagreement – folded arms, scowls, audible sighs or eye-rolling in extreme cases. When this happens, don't be afraid to check it out.

> *"It looks like you might not be100% on board with this agreement Eric?"*

One of the things people are looking for is a sense that they won't be rail-roaded into agreeing to things they have a problem with. You need to work against your internal need to have everyone agree quickly which can come across as not listening or rushing the process.

Trust the group!

These Agreements are for them after all. Whatever is offered will add vital content to the conversation that is revealing the needs and characters of the individuals who are in the group.

In a very short space of time you are helping create and expose the beginnings of a group's culture. At the same time, you as collaborative leader or facilitator are - through your actions - showing people how you will keep the group safe.

By listening to people who disagree, you help everyone to feel safer because they witness your willingness to engage with different ideas. As members of a team or group, we all worry that our opinion won't be valued or will be different in some way (which in our minds means "wrong"!), so your response as facilitators during this whole process is critical.

Keep looking for offers. *"So, what else is going to make our day/team go well?"* Keep harvesting and writing.

Confidentiality and Mobile Devices… ask the group

You may need to offer a couple of key items if they're not brought up by the group. One is mobile phones or 'devices'. Simply ask people:

> *"What do you want to do about mobile phones and devices?"*

Then have the conversation. Mostly people will be happy to have them on silent and checking them in a break. There may be special needs, such as people on-call or with sick kids. Stand by these people and show that special needs can always be negotiated. This brings out the goodwill in others.

> *"Are people happy for Bob to have his phone on vibrate so he can take the call from home?"*

When given the opportunity and responsibility, people are almost always happy to help.

The other key agreement that should be checked out is confidentiality. Sometimes it's really important, and if not included, can limit the extent to which people feel safe to share information. We find that something around **'sharing the learnings but protecting the stories'** is one way of navigating an otherwise 'cone of silence' approach to confidentiality, which can be both impractical and unhelpful for taking learnings back to others beyond the group.

Reaching agreement is not as hard as you might think. People are quite reasonable generally, and will sit happily with a range of group norms when the process is open and transparent. The impact on group behaviour and the resulting effectiveness of the group can be very significant.