



Using Group Agreements in Engagement Events

Metropolitan Area Planning Council
Community Engagement Division
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Group agreements are an essential part of any well-facilitated meeting. Group agreements help to set the tone of your meeting and are a great way to redirect a group that may be steering off course. They also help to hold participants accountable to being in a shared space together.

This document describes how and when to use group agreements and recommends specific agreements to include in your meeting. Think through the goal of the meeting before selecting which group agreements you would like to use. We encourage you to think through the goal of the meeting and the power dynamics of the meeting's participants prior to selecting which agreements to include. This will ensure that you have tailored the group agreements to the participants in the space.

Once you have selected the group agreements you want to use, we encourage you to share these with the group, explain each one, and give people an opportunity to add other agreements they want. Keep in mind that group agreements should be shared frequently during the meeting and that they can evolve over the course of the meeting. And lastly, make sure to add your group agreements to your agenda.

Core Group Agreements

We recommend that you propose/include these agreements in every meeting.



Be fully present

To the extent that you are able, please limit distractions (i.e., using your phone, looking at other screens, responding to email, etc.). We hope that everyone can show up in the space as fully as possible to the extent that they are able. Please take care of yourself as needed.



Use "I" statements

When you are speaking, frame your comments around how you are feeling and thinking. This will help to avoid making assumptions about other people and how they are feeling.



Take Space, Make Space

If you find you've been speaking a lot, consider listening to others. If you often talk a lot, make sure to share information that is geared towards the goal of the meeting and be specific about the information you share so participants are on the same page. Alternatively, if you find you have not spoken up much, consider speaking up/contributing. We want to hear from everybody, your input is valuable/meaningful hear and we want to know what you have to share.



Share the lesson not the story

What is said here stays here, what is learned here leaves here. Please share with others what you have learned from today! But, in doing so make sure to keep the details about who said what private unless you have the explicit permission of the individual.



One mic

Talking over other participants in meetings can be very disruptive to the flow of the conversation. If someone is talking, it is important to recognize that they have the proverbial mic and to wait for them to finish before you respond or join in.

Additional Group Agreements

- +** Consider including these group agreements in your meetings. Some may be more suitable for certain audiences or meeting types.

Be responsible

You are responsible for your actions and for ideas you share. You are also responsible for taking care of yourself in the meeting. Offer what you can and ask for what you need.

Use accessible language

Please use simple, accessible language and avoid jargon and undefined acronyms. If you use an acronym, make sure to define it for the audience.

Listen for understanding

Please focus on listening and appreciating what others are trying to say, not only on what you are hearing.

Accept and expect lack of closure

We are not going to solve everything or come to final conclusions in this one meeting. There may be points/concepts/conversations that we may want to go deeper. We hope to be able to do that in the future, but it's important to acknowledge that may not happen in this space.

Expand your comfort zone

We want to be at the edge of our comfort zones, where we feel safe enough to try something new and share ideas. Sometimes conversations can be uncomfortable, and you may experience that during this meeting. If you're experiencing discomfort, that's ok—discomfort is a sign of growth.

Think outside the box!

Sometimes we are used to thinking of certain structures or frameworks for our work. We dare you to think outside of the structures we are used to and unlock your creative energy.

Dare to dream!

We encourage you to be bold with your ideas and dare to dream big.

Everyone contributes energy to this space

We each have our own experience that we contribute to this space. We welcome different energy and strongly feel that will get us closer to our desired outcome.



Use these additional agreements for virtual meetings or events.

Side Bar

In virtual meetings, encourage people to direct-message the event manager or support staff with concerns, questions, or comments. People can use this "side bar" to flag issues or share thoughts or questions that they're not comfortable sharing with the public. If something wrong was said acknowledge it, apologize, and or flag it to a facilitator on private chat sidebar.

Mute Yourself

Please mute yourself when not speaking.

Framing Group Agreements



Each time you use group agreements, it is good practice to introduce them for the meeting participants so that they understand why you are using group agreements in the first place and what your role is in referencing them in your meeting/event. Below are some suggested ways that you can do this during your meeting, including additional language if you expect your meeting to be contentious.

Our suggested language:

We use group agreements to help set expectations for participation during meetings. Group agreements help to make sure that all of us in this meeting have a positive and constructive experience, especially for sensitive topics and conversations where there is likely to be lots of disagreement.

Ideally, we would take the time to create these group agreements collaboratively. However, with our time constraints, we have predetermined these agreements. We welcome any additions you might have!

We'll review these now and share them again in the chat during the meeting. Please keep them in mind as the meeting progresses. My role throughout the meeting is to make sure that we're living up to our agreements and I'll chime in to keep us on track if we are starting to deviate from them. If you don't feel that you're able to abide by these agreements, we would ask that you consider provide your feedback in a different manner. You can reach out to our project manager if needed.

Equity and Inclusion Statement

Another way that you could consider framing these group agreements is with an Equity and Inclusion statement. The below example is a statement that the Community Engagement Division has used during a meeting.

Our suggested language:

We are committed to fostering an inclusive and diverse learning and working environment and public events. We acknowledge our differences and accept our diversity in gender, sexuality, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, and culture as a strength. We strive to foster equity and to maximize respect and fairness. Today we ask all participants to engage constructively. Please feel free to contact our team if you would like to talk about any suggestions and/or concerns connected to this project.

How to Introduce Group Agreements



We recommend that you introduce group agreements at the beginning of your meeting and then again prior to any conversational opportunities (small group discussions, breakout rooms, etc.). When you first introduce group agreements, make sure to solicit additional group agreements (or changes to your suggested group agreements) from your participants, especially for smaller meetings. This will help to ensure a more collaborative, and thus more comfortable, experience for participants. In doing this, one prompt you could use is: What do you need to be successful? What do you need to have a productive space?

We recommend that you reintroduce the group's agreements at various points throughout the meeting. The frequency that you bring up the group agreements may also depend on the participants in your meeting. You may need to do reintroduce group agreements more often with youth or in confrontational settings. In either case, you want to make sure that you are not making participants feel that they are over-facilitated.

Often during meetings, especially virtual meetings, participants will join late and miss the initial group agreement introduction. **Reintroducing group agreements regularly throughout the meeting can ensure they are exposed to them as necessary.** In the event that somebody joins at a time when there are not future group agreement introductions, you can also share the group agreements with them directly, either by pulling them aside during in-person meetings or sending them a direct message on your virtual platform.

There are numerous ways that you can introduce group agreements. Make sure to include the group agreements in your presentation (if you have one) or as a separate visual presentation if you are not using a full presentation for the rest of the meeting. For virtual meetings, you can share the group agreements in the chat of the video conferencing platform you are using.

You should also consider sharing the group agreements with participants in advance of your meeting. You can do this by sharing the presentation in advance, including the group agreements in the meeting RSVP page, in the registration confirmation (if you are requiring registration), on social media, and on any other interface you may be using.

What to do When Group Agreements Are Not Being Honored



Enforcing group agreements can be tricky, especially if you are interested in maintaining a collaborative environment. We recommend that you get buy-in on the group agreements immediately after introducing them. Asking for buy-in can help to identify individuals who do not like or feel uncomfortable with the agreements, given you the opportunity to refine them. In smaller virtual meetings, one way to do this is to ask folks in the meeting to give you a thumbs up or raise their hands if they agree. For larger meetings, we recommend you ask people who do not agree to speak up. You can ask, **“Is there anyone that does not agree with the agreements we have outlined?”**

Lastly, you may also want to consider asking for buy-in multiple times throughout the meeting. During the middle of the meeting, you could revisit the group agreements in the form of a temperature check and/or again at the end of the meeting in the form of an evaluation (for example: plus, minus, delta).

During the meeting, we recommend several strategies for enforcing group agreements:

- Make sure participants have the ability to flag issues to the facilitator, regardless of what platform or format you use for your meeting.
- Consider using positive reinforcement throughout the meeting by pointing out when participants are exemplifying the group agreements.
- If there is a situation, reframe it to center the group agreements, i.e. *“I’ve noticed this situation going on, do we need to make any adjustments?”*
- If there is an individual who regularly breaches the group agreements, use your role as the facilitator to call them out directly, i.e. *“Are you aligned with these agreements? Is this a meeting that you want to participate in?”* If the problem persists, use strategies to close the meeting remove the individual from the meeting.

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