

GROUND RULES / PRINCIPLES FOR WORKING TOGETHER

In order to develop a high performing team agreed Ground Rules, or establishing some principles for working together, are essential. Ground Rules help to build trust in teams. Without trust people will not perform at, or give of, their best. They should outline the behaviours that everyone must work within. This means that, once agreed, if someone breaks a Ground Rule, his or her behaviour can be addressed immediately. It gives team members a structure and the 'permission' to manage unacceptable behaviour of their colleagues, irrespective of real or perceived hierarchy.

The ideal way to develop a set of Ground Rules is with the team or group of people that are going to have to abide by them. By asking the team or group to contribute to the development of the Ground Rules you can get immediate buy-in, which is essential if people are going to behave in the way that is being asked of them. An efficient way is to use a brainstorming approach to generate the rules, and then clarify understanding of what is meant behind the proposed rule, and gain agreement of the group immediately.

It is important to ensure that everyone has the same understanding of each Ground Rule, to avoid misinterpretation at a later date. In conversation, people use the same words but may have very different interpretations, depending on experience, background, culture, etc. A classic example is the Ground Rule of confidentiality, which can mean different things to different people. Most people would accept the notion of 'what is said in the room stays in the room' or 'Chatham House Rules'. For another it might be that nothing 'personal' gets repeated, but anything else is acceptable to be taken outside of the meeting room. Therefore, it is important to have a shared understanding and agreement on each Ground Rule.

Once the Ground Rules have been established it is up to each individual to ensure that they form the basis of all dealings within the group, including how they communicate with each other, what they communicate, to whom they divulge information, where, why and when. All need to self-monitor that they adhere to the Ground Rules; it is not the responsibility solely of the team leader to ensure adherence to them. Similarly, any member of the group or team has the responsibility to challenge a colleague who is breaking a rule.

Thus, the clear purpose of developing a set of Ground Rules is to build trust and create a safe environment in which people can be open and honest in their dealings with each other. They do not have to fear that their thoughts and opinions are going to be shared with others inappropriately, or that they going to be judged by their opinions and contributions. They know that they will be treated with respect and that their input will be valued. The team will flourish in such an environment.

Examples of Ground Rules are listed below. It is important that teams and groups make them their own, rather than have them imposed. However, in order to develop a strong, high performing team, it is advisable to include some key principles. These 'essentials' are listed in bold and expanded on below.

GROUND RULES

Confidentiality

Active Listening

Non-judgemental

Respect all contributions and opinions

Value Difference

Clarify Understanding

Support and Challenge

Openness and Honesty

Prompt timekeeping

Mobile phones switched off

The Essential Ground Rules to Building a High-Performing Team

Confidentiality

When someone tells you something in confidence, ensure that you always maintain that confidence. If a person starts a conversation with “I’m going to tell you XXX but you mustn’t tell anyone else” challenge them before they tell you XXX. It is very tempting to feel ‘special’, that you have been chosen to hear this piece of news that ‘no-one else will know about’. However, all you do is collude with someone who has been asked to hold a confidence. Question “what is their motive in telling you?” Tell them that you don’t wish to hear it. If they break this confidence, what does it say about them and their trustworthiness?

Active Listening

This includes having one person speak at a time, without interruptions or talking over people; no asides to a neighbour, but focussing attention 100% on the person speaking. It involves active engagement, and not ‘switching off’ or going inside yourself. This means that you have to quell the ‘inner chatter’ that is going on inside you. An example of inner chatter is when you start to formulate your own response to the speaker before they have finished speaking. Whilst you are listening to your own thoughts and feelings, you are not focussed on the speaker – i.e. you have stopped listening.

Non-Judgemental (Value Judgement)

At its most basic, holding a value judgement is about “I’m right, you’re wrong”; or, that’s better / worse. This is unhelpful in meetings and amongst teams. It is important that everyone values each other’s opinions and contributions – they may be different to our own, but all are equally valid and should be received as such. It is important to recognise that value judgement is not the same as making a judgement about something that does have a right and wrong answer.

This Ground Rule links to **Respecting all contributions and Valuing Difference.**

Clarify Understanding (Make No Assumptions)

It is important not to assume that we have communicated exactly what we intended, or that we have interpreted accurately what we have heard. People use the same words but may have a different understanding or interpretation, depending on experience, background, culture, etc. This is the basis of much misunderstanding and breakdown in communication. So, if there is any doubt on how something might be interpreted, clarify understanding of what was meant.

If someone responds to something you say in a manner that was very different to what you expected, it is important that you check out with them what they have heard and understood from your comment. It may be that you have not communicated what you expected – they interpreted your words differently.

Support and Challenge

Challenge in this context means to ask questions. The Ground Rule makes it safe to ask difficult questions. It is not meant to imply being aggressive, confrontational or ‘in your face’. It is about asking someone to explain their thoughts or actions, especially if the rationale for their particular approach or suggestion is not clear to you. The purpose of asking the question, or delivering the challenge, is to understand the intention behind the action. It should be asked in an enquiring, unthreatening way e.g. “please would you explain why”. “I’m interested in the way you did that”, etc. Asking the question should not imply value judgement.

Supporting colleagues isn’t about a closed network of colleagues protecting each other. In this context it means supporting decisions, etc., even if it is not your preferred decision; backing the agreed approach and not trying to sabotage things; not talking about people behind their back; not undermining people, etc.

Openness and Honesty

Saying what you mean, in a respectful way. It is important to be able to state your mind rather than withholding your opinion and then privately slating people / their ideas behind their back.

