

Better Meetings Start with a Better Process

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I once attended a neighborhood meeting on the issue of curbs and sidewalks as potential additions to the street on which I live. Although I've lived at this address for more than 20 years, I didn't know many of the neighbors, as seems to be true of so many of us living in the suburbs now.

I was looking forward to the opportunity to meet some of the neighbors. The meeting didn't turn out quite as I expected. I left there feeling annoyed and frustrated because, I believe, of the process—or lack thereof—of the meeting.

As a professional facilitator, I had thought about suggesting a flip chart and ground rules, but decided not to be too formal. After all, this was a social meeting and I was not running it.

After we had gathered, the host suggested we go around and introduce ourselves and say how long we had lived on the street. Before the first two people had finished their introductions, people started talking about the topic. Like any issue, I discovered there were many views on the subject of curbs and sidewalks—they certainly weren't without controversy.

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Two hours of circular talk and arguments later, I was reminded how critical such tools as ground rules are and how easily I, as a participant, (and someone who certainly knew better) fell into bad group behavior.

Begin every meeting with ground rules

Let's explore some of the issues in this meeting and I'll suggest ways it could have been improved—ways that can and should be applied to any meeting to make it more productive.

Let's start with ground rules. They don't have to be fancy nor do they have to be long.

If time is short, have some ground rules prepared ahead of time and ask people if they agree to them. Leave room for additions, so people feel the ground rules are theirs, not yours.

- Ground rules set the stage for civility and for norms.
 - “One person speaks at a time.” “Listen at least as much as you speak.”
- Ground rules set the expectations.
 - “Attend all meetings.” “Start and end on time.”
- Ground rules contribute to conflict management.
 - “We will follow the agenda.” “Comments made here stay here.” “Focus conflict on ideas, not personalities.”
- Ground rules set the decision making process.
 - “Consensus will be the ideal for decision making.”
- Ground rules set the vision.
 - “All of us know more than any one of us.” “We meet each other as guests.”

By virtue of setting the expectations for individual and group behavior, ground rules are serious and may be an implied contract. But another helpful ground rule is to have fun. Consider two from a group of kindergartners:

- “No fighting and no biting.”
- “Don’t be weird.”