ESTABLISHING GROUND RULES FOR GROUPS

Ground rules can be very useful indeed in group work contexts. The following suggestions include some of the issues and starting points from which groups can be encouraged to agree their own set of ground rules.

1. Create ownership of the ground rules. The various ground rules agendas suggested below should only be regarded as starting points for each group to adopt or adapt and prioritize. It is important that groups feel able to include ground rules which are appropriate for the particular people making up the group.

2. Foster a culture of honesty. Successful group work relies on truthfulness. Suggest that it is as dishonest for group members to 'put up with' something they don't agree about, or can't live with, as it is to speak untruthfully. However, it is worth reminding learners about the need to temper honesty with tact.

3. Remind group members that they don't have to like people to work with them. In group work, as in professional life, people work with the team they are in, and matters of personal conflict need to be managed so they don't get in the way of the progress of the group as a whole.

4. Affirm collective responsibility. Once issues have been aired, and group decisions have been made as fully as possible, the convention of collective responsibility needs to be applied for successful group processes. This leads towards everyone living with group decisions and refraining from articulating their own personal reservations outside the group.

5. Highlight the importance of developing and practicing listening skills. Every voice deserves to be heard, even if people don't initially agree with the point of view being expressed.

6. Spotlight the need for full participation. Group work relies on multiple perspectives. Encourage group members not to hold back from putting forward their view. Group members also need to be encouraged to value the opinion of others as well as their own.

7. Everyone needs to take a fair share of the group work. This does not mean that everyone has to do the same thing. It is best when the members of the group have agreed how the tasks will be allocated amongst themselves. Group members also need to be prepared to contribute by building on the ideas of others and validating each other's experiences.

8. Working to strengths can benefit groups. The work of a group can be achieved efficiently when tasks are allocated according to the experience and expertise of each member of the group.
9. Group should not always work to strengths, however! Activities in groups can be developmental in purpose, so task allocation may be an ideal opportunity to allow group members to build on areas of weakness or inexperience.

10. Help group members to see the importance of keeping good records. There needs to be an output to look back upon. This can take the form of planning notes, minutes or other kinds of evidence of the progress of the work of the group. Rotate the responsibility for summing up the position of the group regarding the tasks in hand and recording this.

11. Group deadlines are sacrosanct. The principle, 'You can let yourself down, but it's not OK to let the group down' underpins successful group work.

12. Cultivate philanthropy. Group work sometimes requires people to make personal needs and wishes subordinate to the goal of the group. This is all the more valuable when other group members recognize that this is happening.

13. Help people to value creativity and off-the-wall ideas. Don't allow these to be quelled out of a desire to keep the group on task, and strike a fair balance between progress and creativity.

14. Enable systematic working patterns. Establishing a regular program of meetings, task report backs and task allocation is likely to lead to effective and productive group performance.

15. Cultivate the idea of group rules as a continuing agenda. It can be productive to review and renegotiate the ground rules from time to time, creating new ones as solutions to unanticipated problems that might have arisen. It is important, however, not to forget or abandon those ground rules that proved useful in practice, but which were not consciously applied.

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