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Breaking the Rules

How Ground Rules Can Hurt Us

By Daniel Hunter

I am not always against ground rules. However, ground rules as widely practiced are poorly understood and are often a waste of time. At worst they are pious rituals of political correctness designed to enforce mainstream norms. Too many facilitators limit themselves to using ground rules when other tools might work much better. Here's why.

What Are Ground Rules?

The last time I watched ground rules being led the facilitator started with this explanation, "Ground rules are a way to help support each other's behaviors, by setting ways of communicating and rules for how the group operates." With a little encouragement the group made a list: no talking over each other, no interruptions, active listening, step up/step back.

Sometimes the facilitator asked for a little more specificity. One person said "no judgments" and was asked, "Do you mean internally or externally?" The reply: "Both." So "no judgments – internally or externally" made it onto the list. At the end, the facilitator reviewed the list. She asked if people would agree to that list. About a third of the group nodded. She then announced these were our ground rules for the workshop. They were never mentioned again.

Making Ground Rules Work

First, before I say why I think ground rules are mostly a waste time, I'll explain how ground rules can be effective. When done well and in the right context, ground rules can be a powerful tool for assisting a group to interact better with each other and practice new behaviors for more effective communication.

First, ground rules need to be understood as a real group process. After a list has been made, the facilitator must test for agreement in a genuinely open way. The question must be understood: is this a list of behaviors you agree to hold yourself accountable to as an individual? If there's not some open resistance to the list, you're not asking enough. Therefore, if you plan on ground rules taking 10 minutes, you are rushing the process. Rushing makes it a ritual and reduces its meaning. It needs time for people to air concerns, clarify what's on the list, and make an internal commitment to the items on it – or, throw items off the list. One facilitator makes individuals stand if they are in agreement, emphasizing the process as a personal pledge. If they don't stand, then they keep facilitating until they have full agreement. Secondly, the list needs to be behaviors that can actually be regulated. "No internal or external judgments," for example, may be one group's idea of a good goal – but it can't be enforced. If the group can't enforce it, it's not a rule. Items that regularly get on lists are short-hand for behaviors. "Active listening" or "step up/step back", for example, are not behaviors but principles of behavior. To be meaningful on this list they need to be pared down to reflect specific behaviors.

Take "active listening" -- it is so broad and means a whole range of behaviors that are understood very differently by different people. The facilitator should help the group break that down into specific behaviors. That might include: no talking while others are speaking, letting people finish saying a point,

reflecting back during disagreements, etc. That is important because, thirdly and finally, ground rules need enforcement. And who enforces? At least at the outset of a group, the facilitator does. The whole enterprise of ground rules is wasted if a facilitator does not uphold ground rules. Not doing so is saying to a group, "We agree to these behaviors. But agreeing to them is meaningless." How disrespectful to our commitments!

Enforcement need not be harsh. Relaxed reminders of the agreed upon behaviors can be fine. "Alberto, please try not to interrupt" or "We've agreed to not have our cell phones on, Nancy." But enforcement is best when explicit and direct – identifying behavior in the moment or shortly after it. In other words, don't review the list of behaviors and hope that Nancy will notice her behavior and act to stop it. Use that moment, if appropriate, for a teachable moment. Not turning off your cell phone may be more about self-care than just an oversight. If so, your enforcement and thoughtful facilitation could be high-quality learning for Nancy and the group. The role of enforcer can be tough for many facilitators, because we fear being nagging teachers. But nagging teachers don't ask students what behaviors they want to strive towards. The act of enforcement is an act of empowerment because, assuming the ground rules are not coerced, then the ground rules are the groups' goals and your enforcement helps them get there. And you will know you're being successful when the group will take up the mantle and become self-regulating on their desired behaviors. Do these things and you will take the process of setting ground rules from a tired repetition to a powerful empowerment exercise.

Mainstream Coercion

So why don't I do ground rules in all my workshops? Because of the stipulation I mentioned before, "If ground rules are not coerced, then they are empowering." The reality: ground rules tend to be created by the mainstream of the group, who are clueless in their coerciveness. Take, for example, "no interruptions" as a ground rule. It explicitly privileges one communication style over another. In this case the mainstream believes interruptions reduce effective communication because people cannot make their points when they are cut off – a belief more associated with white, middle-class, and professional cultures. African-American cultures and other cultures that may be marginalized have different styles of communication and view interruptions differently -- they can be part of keeping the pace of conversation moving. It's still rude to cut off someone if they have not been able to make a single point, but even more rude to hog the floor making multiple and even unrelated points (as white people do all the time). But "interrupting" allows people to handle a conversation point-by-point, keeping a flow of a conversation.

Every group will have its own set of mainstreams and margins, and when the full group is asked to make a decision, who tends to get their way? The mainstream or dominant culture of the group! And the dynamic is toughest when the group is early in its formation -- exactly when ground rules tend to be done -- and there is little container to hold the groups' disagreements. Rather than speaking up against a mainstream norm, people holding a margin position will tend to be quiet, deferential and outwardly polite.

Legislating Behavior

Even assuming one navigates the terrain of mainstreams and margins, there are still other downsides of ground rules. George Lakey, in a draft of a forthcoming book from Jossey-Bass Publishers writes,

"Some groups use ground rules to legislate against "misbehavior" when the group would learn far more if the behavior actually showed up. For example, in a workshop on communication it might be far better for a man to interrupt a woman and use his louder voice to get the floor. At that point the group could intervene and practice handling the problem, with the support of the facilitator. Far more might be learned

about dynamics of gender and power, for application out there in the real world, than if the group agreements result in polite correctness and head-nodding proprieties.”

I want people to be authentic. Ground rules can create some sense of safety; or they may shatter it, by creating a culture of political correctness that makes people worried they might be breaking a "rule." I would prefer that someone break a rule and learn about how their behavior hurts others than to internalize a rule without understanding. It makes it more likely that they will understand and choose to change their behavior outside the training room.

Rather than teaching the skills to prevent hurtful behaviors, ground rules appears to me to increase guilt while giving people no meaningful practice in handling hurts when they happen. At the macro-level, I think this has a real danger to how activists interact. Rather than learning to work with people as they are, many activists try to apply rules and impose values, without relationship, without a sense of where other people are coming from. Ground rules, to me, reflect a mistaken activist belief: that we can and should legislate out oppressive behaviors.

Work Safety Requires More than Rules Safety

Safety is a complex issue, taking a deeper look into this singular tool highlights that. Clearly, ground rules can be a part of safety, or they can diminish it. I highlight several ways ground rules, as led, reduce the quality of the group. Legislating oppressive behavior rather than dealing with it when it arises can reduce safety. Rules without enforcement support a culture of non- accountability – which reduces safety. And unconsciously mainstream rules marginalize others – which reduces safety.

At Training for Change we regularly teach many options besides ground rules for creating safety in a group: from setting up workshops as learning laboratories to creating safety through “noticings” to emphasizing self-responsibility in conflict. But whatever tools we use, we should be conscious of how we are doing it and its impact on marginal cultures. When doing ground rules, we can see that ritualistically leading a tool will not create safety. In fact, poorly done, it will isolate and reduce safety. We should lead tools, always paying attention to the impact on margins and overall safety in a group. Now that’s a rule worth enforcing.