

# Method: Group agreement

**Brief summary:** Creating common guidelines known by all in the group, based on the expressed needs of the participants. This can contribute to a safer learning environment, and can help a group work together respectfully and effectively. This in turn enables people to interact more co-operatively and maintain respect for each other. When a conflict arises, both leaders and participants can refer to the common approaches that apply to all in the group.

**Time needed:** 15-60 minutes.

**Instruction:**

## **Part 1 → Intro**

Talk about how it may be helpful to create a common agreement for your time together (adapt to the situation, if the group is temporary, or will work together for a longer time period). Explain that you will now start a process to jointly contribute to a safer space when learning or working together.

## **Part 2 → Participants' needs**

Write the question, visible to the group: "What do I need, in order to be fully involved and have a great time in this workshop (or project/working group...)?".

Explain that by expressing our needs, we give ourselves the chance to see each other, care for each other and understand when and why something feels bad.

Then give the participants a few minutes to quietly reflect for themselves on their needs. Provide paper and pencil for those who want to write / doodle. Ask them to be as concrete as possible.

After the personal reflection, encourage participants to share their needs, but point out that it is also okay to pass. There is no upper or lower limit on how many needs a participant can share.

Write down the suggestions on a large sheet of paper as they are stated.

Check with the group for the need to clarify something, or if someone has a question.

*Comment:*

- If the suggested needs are stated with grand over-arching words, break them down by asking further: "what does it mean to you?". Be cautious about your own interpretations. If you are unsure of what the participant really meant, ask again.

### **Part 3 → Framing by the facilitator**

Prepare yourself before-hand by choosing which approaches you, the facilitator(-s), want to highlight for the group agreement.

Which needs/approaches you choose, and how to formulate them depends on you and your experiences, combined with the participants experiences. In creating a safer learning environment there are an endless number of aspects to take into consideration. As support, below is a list of aspects that frames a safer situation. Choose those that are most relevant for you in the particular situation.

Present and talk about your proposals with the participants, and explain why you choose them. Use examples to make it easier to grasp. Clarify for the group that your framing is designed based on your experience and knowledge, and has the aim to equalize power relationships and therefore contribute to a safer learning environment.

*Examples of approaches, to propose to the group by the facilitator:*

- a) That we listen to each other and let everyone speak without interruptions - as long as nothing offensive or discriminating is said.
- b) We ask if we do not understand. All questions are good questions - but - respect people's privacy.
- c) We start from ourselves and our experiences (to avoid generalizations and reasoning that could lead to the "us and them").
- d) Never take an "us" for granted. One can not by looking at someone know a person's gender identity, sexuality, economic background, health, etc.
- e) That we leave the mandate of interpretation to the most concerned, when choosing words and formulating problems or solutions. It is not up to someone else to decide what is offensive or not.
- f) That we are aware that intentions are not always the same as the effects they can have.
- g) That if we are made aware of an oppressive behavior we ourselves conduct, try not to go into a defensive position, pushing away our own responsibility. It often makes the situation worse. Instead, we challenge ourselves to dare to remain in discomfort and learn from the situation.
- h) That we do not let ourselves feel beaten down if something goes "wrong" or feels difficult. (Here, the facilitator can point to the aim of the approaches - to help and support us all together to create a more secure and trusting climate. If something goes "wrong", we can learn from it and move on.)
- i) That we reflect on our norms and positions of power in society and in this group, and what the consequences are.
- j) That we reflect on what role we usually take in groups. If one usually take much space - try to take a step back. If one tends to stand back - feel welcomed to take a step forward.
- k) We strive for an atmosphere where all are seen, feel enabled and where we take care of each other.

- l) The limits drawn are towards the actions, not the people acting.
- m) That we strive to have an understanding of the experiences and knowledge people bring or don't bring, and what they have learnt to be true. We are here to learn from each other (but not at the expense of someone's integrity).

Let participants talk a few minutes in pairs on how they relate to the proposed approaches, and if they have questions or reflections. Ask if anyone wants to share.

*Comments:*

- Be open to replacing words, adding / taking away based on participant's suggestions, if you think that it contributes to a safer place. At the same time, take the right to retain the same wordings if you do not agree. It may feel "undemocratic," but it is you, the facilitator, who have the main responsibility for creating the conditions for a safer group process. To promote democracy is not simply about paying equal attention to everyone's opinions, but rather to organize the situation (or process) based on the position in the group with the least space to act. By explaining what you do and why you choose to do so, it will be a learning experience for everyone.
- One visual way of doing this exercise is to put the approaches proposed by the facilitator as "room walls" around the needs of the participants. Thus, the participants' needs in Part 2 are written down fairly concentrated in the center. The approaches proposed by the facilitator can be written in advance on paper and are set up around the participants needs. In this way, the safer learning environment is framed both visually on the wall and abstractly in your group process.

#### **Part 4 → Summing up the agreement**

Summarize the previous steps to the group and have a look at the needs and approaches together, preferably posted on the wall. Ask if someone has a question or wants to change something.

Finally check for agreement on the common approaches, with the whole group. Close the exercise by thanking the participants.

*Comment:*

- Keep the agreement on display when working together. If the group meets frequently, take the time to check regularly so that everyone is still happy with it. If people join at a later stage, introduce them to the approaches and ask for their agreement. When there are suggestions for new parts or changes, bring the whole group together and find a new common agreement.

## Further reading on group agreements and the concept of safer spaces

- Seeds for Change's short guide on "Group Agreements for workshops and meetings" <http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/groupagree>  
*A good guide that we partly build on in our english translation of this method.*
- A group agreement can be used as a tool contributing to creating a "safer space". This is a concept used to describe a space as free as possible from oppressing power structures (for example racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, age discrimination). A safer space is created with the intention of equality, to equalize power relationships and contribute to a context (as) free from discrimination, harassment and abuse (as possible).  
It is called a "safer space" rather than a "safe space", to point out that it's a process and something we must actively create all the time. It also questions whether a space can be completely safe and free of social prejudices, and truly be safe for all at the same time.  
→ More on safer spaces at Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Safe-space>  
→ Advocates for Youth, a lesson plan for creating a group agreement, when aiming at a safer space: <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/professionals/lesson-plans-professionals/221?task=view>