

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR:

"Agree" Now or Pay Later By Michele Mattoon, NSRF National Facilitator, and Director of the NSRF, michele@nsrfharmony.org

People love to complain about the dreaded MEETING. Even the word can sap the strength of the most motivated of employees. We could fill volumes with the myriad reasons that people almost universally hate meetings, but for now, I'll restrain myself and stick to one big issue—the existence of unspoken norms in the meeting culture.

A norm can be defined as a set of assumptions held by a group's members, outlining "appropriate/good" behavior and "inappropriate/disallowed" behavior. Norms often are not stated (in verbal or written form), but everyone knows what they are—and some of them aren't pretty. Awhile back, during a meeting I was finding particularly tedious and irritating, I conducted a thought experiment. I pretended I was an alien disguised as a human being, inferring norms operating during what was billed as a "problem solving" forum. Here are some of the things I noted:

It was OK to:

- Keep yourself distracted with computers, texting, or grading papers ... provided you didn't openly distract others.
- Not participate at all.
- Talk a large percentage of the time (often repeating yourself) ... provided your demeanor was forceful, and your voice loud.
- Leave the meeting once or twice.
- Interrupt the meeting chair ... provided you were the boss.
- Take phone calls ... provided you were the boss.
- Add agenda items or decide what agenda items should be talked about ... provided you were the boss.
- Not start on time.
- Keep everyone past the stated ending time.
- Speak for others.
- State your opinions as if they were facts.
- Complain about how unproductive the meeting was with friends/colleagues ...

Big Changes Still Afoot ... But a Bit Delayed

Everything we introduced on the front page of the [November 2013 issue of Connections](#) is still in progress: new website, updated protocols and activities, new design everywhere. But schedule and staff changes with our university student website team, extra days off thanks to Mother Nature and her polar vortex, and unexpected delays over the holidays are still playing out. Your membership benefits have not changed in the meantime. More will be revealed soon!

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provided you were out of earshot of the people who might take offense.

And finally,

- Continue to meet about the same issue or problem over and over again, because nothing ever was decided.

It was not OK to:

- Point out that someone never participated.
- Point out that someone (or someones) used up 80% of the meeting's airtime.
- Suggest that people put away distracting items ... especially the boss.
- Insist that we start on time or end on time.
- Suggest that the meeting might be structured differently than prior meetings so that the outcome would be more productive.

Of course, I was one of the biggest culprits in all of this. Although the hours I have logged in meeting times are vast, I realized an uncomfortable truth about myself. Without stated norms, I simply perpetuate the culture of the “unspoken norms” along with everyone else, no matter how much they hamper meeting effectiveness. (I’m sure I’m not the only one who does this, and I invite you to conduct your own thought experiment sometime.)

Luckily, we have a powerful tool to combat the scourge of the meeting world: an activity to establish norms that will create a positive, trusting, and effective meeting atmosphere. At NSRF, we have settled on the language of “agreements,” rather than “norms” because we want to recognize from the beginning that each individual voluntarily commits to these values. We’ve learned that you can actually improve the culture of a regularly meeting group through this process: have members intentionally list what they need for effective meetings, collaboratively decide which agreements would work with the whole group, and pledge to be accountable and to hold each other accountable.

The Agreements Activity is best used with any group that meets on a regular basis. Here are some tips for setting a group's agreements:

Don't schedule the Agreements Activity as the first agenda item in the first meeting of a new group. Give people some time to work together on other tasks to see where things go well, and what behaviors arise that aren't universally appreciated. On the other hand, don't wait so long that the group creates bad habits that will be hard to change. We suggest setting agreements at the end of the first meeting or the beginning of the second meeting. If your group has already been meeting for some time, schedule an open and honest discussion about the meeting culture. What's working? What isn't? Then, if people appear to want things to improve, you can facilitate the activity.

Set aside adequate time. Yes, the Agreements Activity really does take 40-60 minutes. Some people think the second step (making sure everyone understands the meaning of each listed agreement) is a waste of time. Nothing could be further from the truth. Without ensuring a common understanding of the terms in advance, you're inviting huge discussions later when someone seems to have violated one of them. For example, someone may suggest putting “Be fully present” on the agreements list. Does this mean simply to practice active listening? Or, did the person suggesting it want people to close their computer lids, stop texting on their phones and quit grading stu-

dent work so that they may attend fully to the issue at hand? On the other hand, don't let the conversation stray into a desire to "perfectly" define an agreement because you'll

Revisit and revise your groups' agreements over time. An agreements list is a living document that should change with the changing needs of the group. We recommend that you post the document visibly so group members can refer to it during every meeting. Once the agreements are established, read them aloud during every other meeting (or so) for the first few months. This gives group members a chance to add, subtract, or modify the original agreements to better fit the group's needs. (For example, after noticing that many people arrive late to the meeting, someone may want to add "Begin and end on time" to the list.) Once things are going smoothly and the agreements seem to be working, revisiting them 2 or 3 times a year may be enough.

Require this crucial agreement for your CFG. Although setting agreements is a good idea for any group that meets regularly, every Critical Friends Group must center around one agreement, no matter how it's phrased: "maintain confidentiality." Nothing will destroy trust faster than someone sharing a difficult issue in confidence at their CFG meeting, only to hear a non-member comment on that very topic in the hallway two days later. Why would anyone ever risk sharing a dilemma again? Also, confidentiality can be defined in many ways, so make sure your group members have a common understanding of the term. In the best of all worlds, people should feel comfortable sharing great ideas, resources and practices that came up in their CFG with others, but keep any sensitive dilemmas that are shared from being discussed outside the group.

Try this short-cut for single meetings. Finally, agreements can be effective and helpful even for one-off meetings or workshops. When I am facilitating or leading these meetings, I will explain what agreements are and then post this list of four:

1. Practice being fully present
2. Listen for understanding (suspend judgment)
3. Take responsibility for your learning and support others' learning
4. Participate

These agreements or expectations help build an environment of positive collaboration no matter how long your meeting will be.

Setting agreements increases the efficiency and effectiveness of a meeting by clearly stating expectations around social behaviors. They give group members a way to address "inappropriate" behaviors with less risk of being perceived as personal attacks. Finally, agreements help create trust and reduce the stress levels of the group's members through establishing predictability. (I know what's expected of me and every member of the group and I know that if the meeting is not productive, I have a structure to address the problem.) Agreements are instrumental in shaping the culture of the group and thus defining its health and long-term prognosis for success.

Do you have any stories about group agreements you'd like to share? We'd love to hear them, so email us.



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