

Facilitation Difficulty: 

 40 min.

 Up to 16. Can adapt for larger groups

 No preconference

Purpose – As any group works together and faces common problems, they gradually build unspoken norms of conduct. A norm can be defined as a set of assumptions held by a group’s members defining “appropriate/good” behavior and “inappropriate/disallowed” behavior. Some norms are never spoken but still very much empower and disempower group members, generally in favor of higher-status members, even if there are far more people with lower status in the group. Operating visibly or invisibly, norms shape the culture of the group and thus define its health and long-term prognosis for success. Within Critical Friends Group® communities, we speak of “agreements” rather than norms because we encourage groups to make agreements consciously, articulate them, and post them for later reflection rather than having “norms” imposed upon them. The purpose is to avoid the troubles that arise when unspoken norms interfere with true collaboration and trust.

Group size – In this form, the activity is good for groups up to 16. The activity can be adapted for larger groups by adding steps to go from pairs to quartets then octets, always seeking consensus on no more than four agreements.

Time – Approximately 40 minutes for a group of up to 16. When used with larger group, allow more time.

Preparation – Install two sheets of chart paper (or large paper and tape) with markers, prepare copies of Activity and Agreement Examples, ensure all participants have writing materials.

Facilitation tips – Ideally, a group commits to seven agreements, plus or minus two. Current brain research indicates that seven is the maximum number of ideas most people can keep in mind at once. If a group insists on more, all the agreements are more likely to be broken as each person will forget different things, but as facilitator, you can decide if you want to allow up to ten. Encourage the group to narrow down to the most important agreements, and let the others go, at least temporarily. After a few meetings, the posted agreements should return to the agenda again for review and some agreements may be swapped out or amended if the group chooses to do so.

Steps:

1. **Setup** – Explain the purpose of setting agreements as posted above and hand out copies of the Agreement Examples. Direct everyone to take a minute to reflect on their experiences in other groups, then split into pairs. Each pair should write down the four most important agreements they would ask the larger group to make, so they can trust the group to become a place where good, difficult work may be conducted. Each pair must agree on four suggested agreements, and prioritize them. They may select items from the Sample Agreement list, choose to reword any of those samples, or suggest something not on the list. Instruct each pair to note the two most important ideas that they agree they would need to feel safe and challenged to do their best work. (5 min.)
2. **Share** – Begin by asking each pair, in rounds, to share one agreement they feel most strongly about, and chart them. (Stop when you get to eight agreements, at most.) Once the items are charted, group discussion is initiated about the meaning of particular agreements or particular wording. If disagreement or confusion arises, check with the original pair who suggested that agreement about their intended meaning. If needed, the group should collaborate to reword that agreement. Then ask the group if there are any “burning” ideas that need to be added. If no one has mentioned confidentiality, initiate a discussion about whether a group without a shared agreement of confidentiality can ensure

enough safety for its members. Make sure that everyone is clear about what “confidentiality” means practically for your group. Remember, you should never have a list of more than ten agreements. (10 min.)

3. **Agree** – Ask the group to officially adopt the list, understanding that it will be brought back to the agenda after a couple of meetings (and, for long-term groups, periodically). (3 min.)
4. **Option** – Ask, “How will we help each other adhere to the agreements we’ve adopted? What forms of reminders will you prefer and allow?” (2-4 min.)
5. **Debrief and Reflect** – (5-8 min.)
 - *Which agreement do you think will be most challenging for you, personally?* (The coach may ask for volunteers to answer the first question aloud, noting that the decision is entirely voluntary, and that speaking a challenge aloud can be helpful.)
 - *Did you notice anything surprising/interesting while doing this activity?*
 - *Why did we do this activity at this stage of the process?*
 - *What is the impact of openly suggesting agreements that might be controversial?*
 - *What do you think this activity might accomplish?*
 - *Would you use this activity in your school? In your classroom? In other group settings?*

Please take a few minutes to write down your notes and reflections about this activity.

See Agreement Examples, next page.

You may also want to read “[Agree Now or Pay Later](#)” from the NSRF *Connections* journal about the need for and varied uses of Setting Agreements.

The following is a sampling of agreements from many different groups. Feel free to suggest your own unique agreement, or alter language. **Remember that your group will be asked to adopt no more than five to nine agreements**, and will revisit your list periodically to determine whether some need to be replaced.

- *Share air time equitably*
- *Accept non-closure*
- *Be specific*
- *Protect confidentiality*
- *Be honest and open*
- *Offer gentle reminders*
- *Participate*
- *Value differences*
- *If you wonder, ask*
- *Expect discomfort*
- *Be willing to be disturbed*
- *Respect one another*
- *Enjoy creative friction*
- *Focus on content*
- *Have fun*
- *Listen for understanding*
- *Assume good intentions*
- *Take responsibility for your own learning*
- *Support each other's learning*
- *Share responsibility for the group*
- *Speak only for yourself*
- *Be open to reflective silences*
- *Begin and end on time*
- *Practice being fully present*
- *Discuss “the undiscussable”*
- *Speak to the group agenda rather than pressing your own*
- *Question assumptions*