

Use These “5 Rs” to Keep your Group Agreements Fresh and Meaningful

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Do you remember when your Critical Friends Group community first began and you used the **Setting Agreements Activity**? By collaborating to discuss what each of us needs to do our best work, we begin to build deep trust. Then so we can work together safely and do the deep work that is the hallmark of CFG communities, far beyond what any individual protocol can do in a given setting.

What? You haven't set agreements yet? Do that, and come back to this article later. If you need more support in convincing your colleagues to take the time for this step, read NSRF Director Michele Mattoon's article “[Agree Now or Pay Later](#)” from the January 2014 issue of *Connections*.

If you set Agreements awhile ago but may have “forgotten” them ...

Over time, groups might become blasé with the agreement chart, somehow thinking the group already “knows” this, or “we have so much to do, we will just point to the chart and say something like ‘here are our agreements, now let's get started.’”

Worse yet, maybe the agreements are listed on the agenda template, eventually becoming wallpaper on the top of the agenda, not even mentioned. And worst of all, maybe you aren't even displaying your group agreements when you meet!

We cannot underestimate how vital it is that your CFG group has done the heavy lifting of establishing agreements. If you've added new people to your group, you need to do the activity again. Remember the basic difference between “agreements” and “norms”—if rules are imposed upon you without your consent or participation, then those are norms, and the unspoken ones are the most dangerous. In contrast, if your group consciously makes agreements with one another, you can manage complex group dynamics with much more ease.

If your group has been stable but you haven't revisited long-established Agreements to see if anything needs to be changed, added, or deleted, then let's talk about fresh ways to approach them.

Five Rs to keep agreements fresh

Rather than quickly mentioning (glossing over) the agreements at each meeting, here are 5 Rs guaranteed to

freshen the attitude and encourage everyone to embrace the purpose and power of shared agreements. I suggest you use a different tip every other meeting!

1. Recommit Ask the CFG members to silently review the agreements with the intention to practice/strengthen a specific agreement during this time together. Which particular agreement do each of you need to focus on today? Place a mark on that agreement. Ask members to share with a neighbor to actualize their intention.

Tip for the coach: mark your agenda somewhere in the

middle and, at the debrief portion of that activity, check in with the group. Has everyone kept their intention in mind? How's it going?

2. Restate The agreements were co-constructed by the group during the first few meetings, and are usually written and posted on chart paper or on the paper agenda. During Restate, the facilitator reads each agreement one at a time, asking members of the group to restate in their own words what the agreements mean to them. This is very powerful since individual CFG members' per-

spectives on the agreements can inform the entire group, especially when the context is personal. This sharing helps build and renew trust in the group.

3. Refresh in a different format. The facilitator writes the words BE - LISTEN -TRUST in separate columns on chart paper. Asking the group to review the agreements with a fresh eye, then suggest single words or short phrases under each category, reflecting specific agreements, to coalesce the group today. Here are some examples, but trust that your group will state what they will need given their feelings and the work at hand today.

BE

- » present
- » aware of my own idiosyncrasies
- » compassionate in my reactions
- » open to ideas
- » “willing to be disturbed”

LISTEN

- » actively
- » for understanding, not necessarily agreement
- » from the place of possibility
- » without judgment



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TRUST

- » yourself
- » in the process
- » what is said stays, what is learned leaves
- » we have each others' back
- » enough to wonder aloud

4. Remind As you're planning your meeting agenda, make note where it would be helpful or prudent to remind the group of a specific agreement. Such as, "Remember our agreement 'Expect it to be messy?'" During this next activity, there might be some grappling of ideas and the chart paper might get scribbly, so take a breath and remember messy can result in great ideas!" Develop some verbal cues and use them in advance of an activity to avoid the need for reining someone in when they forget a challenging agreement.

5. Reflect During a debrief of a protocol or work session, ask a specific debrief question about agreements:

- » Which agreements do you believe helped the group process? How?
- » Which agreement assisted you personally during this time? Would anyone like to share aloud their experience?

Agreements need to remain 'alive'

Within the Setting Agreements Activity, we suggest that every group revisit their Agreements about two meetings after they were set. By that point, people may have "forgotten" an agreement or two (especially if you chose to set more than about seven agreements), and other experiences may already have arisen which encourage participants to ask for an edit. Reassuring everyone anytime the Agreements are discussed that this list NEEDS to remain alive for the health of the group can make this process easy, helpful, and even enjoyable.

We'd love to hear your thoughts and experiences about this activity and about this article. Please contact us and your ideas might make it into a future issue of *Connections!*



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The National School Reform Faculty and Harmony School are both part of Harmony Education Center. The school is seeking a 1st/2nd grade teacher. If you or someone you know is interested in teaching in this lovely independent school in Bloomington, Indiana, please click the logo at right for details.



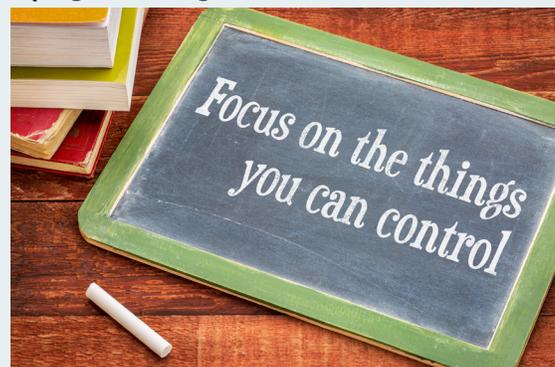
What Agreement do you think is most powerful for your group?



Which Agreements are most challenging for you personally?



What has helped your group keep your Agreements?



Please email luci@nsrfharmony.org with your ideas and we'll share the best ones!