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# Ground Rules for Effective Groups

THIRD EDITION



Roger Schwarz





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**W**hy can some groups come together, tackle difficult issues, and produce excellent results, while others can't? Even when people are talented, motivated, and have clear goals, groups can still be ineffective.

One reason is that many people — whether in one-on-one conversations or in teams — don't use ground rules. Yet, many groups are effective because they have explicit ground rules to guide their communication and behavior. When used consistently, ground rules can help people make better decisions and stick to them, decrease the time needed to effectively implement those decisions, improve working relationships, and increase group member satisfaction.

In this article, I describe a set of nine ground rules that you and others can use to work more effectively. These rules apply to a variety of scenarios: one-on-one conversations, small informal groups, executive teams, boards, networks, work teams, committees or task forces, union-management teams, and groups with

members from more than one organization. You can use these ground rules whether you are a formal or informal leader, consultant, facilitator, coach, or trainer.<sup>1</sup>

## The Core Values and Assumptions

The ground rules are tools to enact a set of core values and assumptions. Although the ground rules are used to guide behavior, they only work well when the intention behind them is to learn with others while working consistently from the explicit set of values and assumptions.

The core values are:

- Transparency
- Curiosity
- Accountability
- Informed choice
- Compassion

When you are **transparent**, you share all relevant information, including your thoughts, feelings, and intentions. When you are **curious**, you are genuinely interested in others' views and seek them out so that you and others can learn. When you are **accountable**, you take responsibility for your actions and the short- and long-term consequences of them. When you value **informed choice**, you act in ways that maximize others' and your own abilities to make decisions based on relevant information. Finally, when you are **compassionate**, you temporarily suspend judgment so that you can appreciate your own and other people's situations. You have a genuine concern for others' needs as well as your own. When you act with compassion, you infuse the other core values with your intent to understand, empathize with, and help others.



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facilitation. Roger helps teams improve their effectiveness and deal with high-stakes challenging conversations. He is the author of *The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches*, New and Revised Edition (Jossey-Bass, 2002), co-author of *The Skilled Facilitator Fieldbook* (Jossey-Bass, 2005), and author of the forthcoming *The Facilitative Leader*. To learn more about Roger Schwarz & Associates, you can visit [www.schwarzassociates.com](http://www.schwarzassociates.com) or call 919.932.3343.

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1. To learn more about the ground rules see *The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches*, New and Revised Edition, by Roger Schwarz (2002). In general, the ground rules are based on the work of Chris Argyris and Don Schön.

The Assumptions that generate the ground rules are:

- I have some information; so do other people.
- Each of us may see things that others don't.
- I may be contributing to the problem.
- Differences are opportunities for learning.
- People may disagree with me and have pure motives.

With these assumptions, you become curious about what others know that you don't, open to exploring and learning from conflicts instead of trying to control and win them, and more generous in thinking about what motivates others to act differently from you.

Many of us use some of these ground rules, core values, and assumptions when we work with people who share our views and with whom we have strong working relationships. Unfortunately, we often don't use them when we need them most — with people who hold differing views and with whom we want to improve our relationship. By making the ground rules explicit, you encourage groups to use them consistently. If you use the ground rules without the underlying core values and assumptions, the ground rules become just another technique or method, destined to become the “fad of the month.” But when used with the core values and assumptions, the ground rules are a powerful, values-based approach for fundamentally increasing effectiveness by building relationships and getting results.

## Ground Rules for Effective Groups

- 1** State views and ask genuine questions.
- 2** Share all relevant information.
- 3** Use specific examples and agree on what important words mean.
- 4** Explain reasoning and intent.
- 5** Test assumptions and inferences.
- 6** Jointly design next steps.
- 7** Focus on interests, not positions.
- 8** Discuss undiscussable issues.
- 9** Use a decision-making rule that generates the level of commitment needed.

## The Ground Rules

The ground rules for effective groups describe specific behaviors that improve how people work together. They provide more guidance than procedural ground rules such as “Put your cell phones on vibrate” and “Start on time, end on time” or relatively abstract ground rules such as “Treat everyone with respect” and “Be constructive.” For each ground rule, I describe what it means, how to use it, and what results it will help you achieve.

### Ground Rule One: State Views and Ask Genuine Questions

**S**tating your views and asking genuine questions means sharing your thinking, including your reasoning and intent, and inviting others to comment. For example, you might say, “I think it would be helpful if we initially limited the program to about 20 people so that we can see how it works and eliminate any problems before scaling up. What are your thoughts about starting with a small group?”

For this ground rule to work, your questions need to be genuine. A genuine question is one that stems from curiosity; you ask to learn something you do not already know. A rhetorical or leading question is one you ask to make your point of view known without having to actually state it. For example, the question “Do you really think that will work?” is not a genuine question because embedded in your question is your own view that you don't think it will work. However, you can easily convert this to a genuine question by first stating your views. You might say, “I'm not seeing how this will work because we only have three staff members. What are you seeing that leads you to think it will work?”

Stating your views and asking genuine questions accomplishes several goals. First, it changes a meeting from a series of unconnected monologues in which people try to persuade one another to a focused conversation that generates increased understanding. When you follow your statements with genuine questions, you also increase the chance that the next speaker will address your questions. If each person in the group follows this same format, the conversation should flow more easily. As a result, relevant information is presented, issues are addressed more thoroughly, and better decisions are made.

Second, you learn. When you express your views,

including how you arrived at your conclusions, your thinking process is transparent. This helps other people understand what you think and enables them to make a more informed choice about how to proceed. By asking questions, you also reveal your curiosity and you learn what others are thinking. As you learn others' reasoning, you may reach agreement on an issue that you had previously disagreed about. When you don't agree, you quickly identify where your reasoning differs from others. This awareness gives the group more time and information to generate solutions that resolve any differences.

Third, this ground rule is especially helpful when you are concerned that expressing your views or asking questions may shut down conversation or be seen as confrontational. Suppose you are talking with your employees and you are concerned that the team's plans do not respond to customer demands. Rather than ease into the conversation by saying, "How do you think your new plan is responding to customer needs?" you could start by stating your view: "I'd like to talk with you about the plan. I'm concerned that it doesn't address our customers' changing needs. Let me give you a couple of examples of what I mean and get your reactions." Then ask a genuine question, such as, "What, if anything, do you see differently or think that I've missed?" By posing this question, you increase the chance that other people will share different views, if they have them.

However, if you only share your view without inviting differing opinions, others will likely only push their own views. Such a cycle creates a discussion in which participants spend all of their time trying to persuade each other, ultimately resulting in a stalemate or winners and losers – with losers who are not committed to following through with the decision. If you only ask questions, you don't help others understand your reasoning and they may become suspicious. Privately they may wonder, "*Why is he asking me these questions? Where is he going in this conversation?*" As a result, they may be unwilling to give you complete or accurate answers.

This ground rule is the foundation on which all the other ground rules are based because all the other ground rules require that you state your views and ask genuine questions. What information do you share when you are expressing your views? The next few ground rules answer that question.

## Ground Rule Two: Share All Relevant Information

This ground rule means that you present all information that might affect how people solve a problem or make a decision. It ensures that all group members have a common pool of knowledge from which to make informed choices. When people help make decisions and later learn that you have withheld relevant information from them, they feel deprived of having made an informed choice. They may then fail to follow through on the decision, may implement the decision half-heartedly, or may even withdraw their support.

Sharing relevant information includes presenting details that do not support your preferred solution. Such transparency and accountability enables others to make an informed choice. Suppose that you are a member of a leadership team deciding how to restructure your organization and move into a new facility. You are the leader of one manufacturing process and want to maintain your position. Yet, you also know that in the new facility, the different manufacturing processes can be easily merged for greater efficiency. Here, sharing all relevant information requires telling the group about the increased efficiencies, even though doing so may hurt your chances of obtaining the position you want.

In challenging conversations, there is usually a significant gap between what you say and what you think and feel. The following example shows how people withhold relevant information. The right column shows a conversation between Paula and Ted; the left column shows Paula's thoughts and feelings as she talks with Ted. Paula does not share with Ted all the relevant information she is thinking and feeling. For example, she does not say that others had concerns or that she believes the directors did not get answers to some basic questions. At the end of the conversation, Paula thinks to herself, "*I've got to get you to understand what you've done.*" Yet, by withholding her concerns, Paula contributed to Ted's not understanding and increased her own frustration.

The point of this example is not that Paula should share her thoughts and feelings exactly as they appear in the left column. To be effective, Paula would also need to shift her thinking so that she is more transparent, more curious, and more accountable. Then, she can share the relevant information (and also use the other ground rules). She might begin by saying, "Ted, I am really concerned about the presentation you did yesterday. I'd like to give you some specific examples about what concerned me and get your reactions. How does that sound?"

### Withholding Relevant Information

#### Paula's Thoughts and Feelings

*I thought the presentation was a disaster and so did three others I spoke with.*

*Do you really believe it went OK, or are you just trying to put a good face on it? Nit-picky! You couldn't answer some basic cost questions.*

*I don't understand why you didn't emphasize why we wanted to do the project. The directors won't approve a project like this if they can't get answers to some basic questions.*

*I don't want to wait while this project dies on the vine. Besides, my reputation is at stake here too.*

*I hope the directors don't think I'm responsible for your not having the answers to those questions. Why didn't you use the information I gave you? I've got to get you to understand what you've done.*

#### The Conversation

**Paula:** How do you think your presentation to the directors went yesterday?

**Ted:** I think it went OK, although there were some rough spots. Some of the directors can really get nitpicky.

**Paula:** We've got some really important reasons for doing it. Do you think they will OK the project now, or do we need to give them more answers?

**Ted:** I think we're in OK shape. A couple of them came up to me after the meeting and said they appreciated the presentation. I think we should just wait and see.

**Paula:** Maybe, but I think we might want to give the members some more information.

agree with you. You haven't stated who "some of us" are or described what behaviors you have seen that lead you to believe that others aren't "following through." As a result, the people you are referring to may incorrectly infer that you are not talking about them, and the people you are not talking about may incorrectly infer that you are talking about them and feel resentful or unfairly judged.

In contrast, if you say, "Jay and Lily, I didn't receive your sections of the project report. Did you complete and email them to everyone in the group?" Jay and Lily can say whether they did the work. If Jay and Lily agree that they did not complete their work, then they and the group can talk about what led this to happen, its impact on the group, and what people will do differently in the future.

You may be concerned that by identifying specific people in the group, others may feel that you're putting them on the spot (or you may feel that way). This is another example of how the ground rules involve changing how you think. Instead of thinking that by identifying people, they are being put on the spot, you could view this step as being transparent, accountable, curious, and compassionate. With this new mindset you are giving people an opportunity to address your concerns, including whether they view the situation in the same way.

Using specific examples also helps you agree on what important words mean. Often, team members can use the same word in different ways and still assume that they agree when they really don't or vice versa. For example, suppose your team agrees to treat each member with respect, which initially seems pretty straightforward and helpful. Now consider the following situation: You are in a meeting with several team members and members from other parts of your organization. During the meeting, Alan doesn't say much. Afterwards, he comes to you and says, "Out of respect, I didn't want to say anything to you in front of the other divisions, but I don't think your proposal will work." You respond, "I think it would have been respectful to tell me that my proposal had problems. Now, if you're right, I may have to call another meeting and take more of my own time and the group's time. To me, one sign of respect is that you are willing to tell me when you see a problem and assume I am more interested in serving the organization well than in trying to look good. How are you thinking about respect in this situation?" One way to determine whether all

### Ground Rule Three: Use Specific Examples and Agree On What Important Words Mean

**W**hen you state your views, it is essential to use specific examples and agree on what important words mean. When you give specific examples, you name people, places, things, events, and what people said and did. This enables others to independently determine whether they agree with your information and reasoning.

For example, if you make the general statement "I think some of us are not following through on our project commitments," other group members do not have enough information to determine whether they



group members are using a word or phrase to mean the same thing is to state your view and ask a genuine question (ground rule one). You can say, “You used the word respect. If we are in situation X, and I’m acting with respect toward you, I would do Y. How is your definition of respect different from mine, if at all?”

#### **Ground Rule Four: Explain Reasoning and Intent**

**T**hink about the last time your manager’s boss asked you to come to his or her office and didn’t explain why. You probably wondered what the meeting was about and then thought up some possible explanations for why he or she wanted to talk with you. As human beings, we are hard-wired to make meaning out of events. If people don’t tell us what they are thinking, we make up our own stories and often those stories are wrong.

Explaining your reasoning and intent is another part of effectively stating your view. When sharing your reasoning and intent, you reduce the chance that others will make up stories about why you are doing what you’re doing. Let’s assume that your team works relatively well together, but you think they can do even better. If you simply say to your team, “I’d like to introduce a set of ground rules that I think will make us more effective,” team members may quickly start to think that you are dissatisfied with the team’s performance and that they are dysfunctional. You reduce the chance of this occurring if you also say, “I want to be clear about why I’m suggesting this. I don’t think we’re dysfunctional. I think we perform well and that we can be more efficient and generate even better ideas with more support. I’m happy to give you examples of what I mean.”

Reasoning and intent are similar but different. Your intent is your purpose for doing something. Your reasoning is the logical process you use to reach conclusions based on information, values, and assumptions. For example, your intent may be to get commitment to a decision. Your reasoning may be that you value different views and you know people have different opinions on this topic. You assume that if everyone participates, the decision will be better and people will be more committed to it.

When you share your reasoning and intent, you make your private reasoning public. This helps people to understand what led you to make the comments you made, ask the questions you asked, or take the

actions you took. When you share your reasoning and intent, others can ask you questions also and explain how their views differ from yours. And you can do the same with them. This is exactly the conversation that teams must have to understand members’ differing views and to move forward as one. If you are trying to control the conversation so that your point of view will triumph, then fully explaining your reasoning is a problem. It enables others to identify potential flaws in your reasoning, which reduces the chance that you will prevail. But if you are using this ground rule to genuinely learn, explaining your reasoning and intent also provides opportunities to learn where others have different views and where you may have missed something that others see.

#### **Ground Rule Five: Test Assumptions and Inferences**

**R**emember I said that we are all hard-wired to make meaning out of events? That includes you. For example, if your manager says, “You’re doing a great job, but the analyses have been slowing your group down. I’m going to give Brenda’s group the analyses to handle,” your mind immediately jumps into action. You may wonder, “What does he really mean when he says that? Why is he saying that?” Then you attempt to answer your own questions by telling yourself a story. You might tell yourself that your manager is concerned about your group’s performance and is not telling you the truth. Or you may think that your manager is shifting the work because he won’t confront Brenda about the bad data she is providing for the analysis, which is why your group is behind. You’re also probably not aware that you’re asking and answering these questions in your mind. Then you decide how to respond, based on the story you tell yourself. You might sarcastically say to your manager, “Thanks a lot,” or simply say, “That’s not fair.”

When you draw a conclusion about things you don’t know based on things you do know, you are making an inference. When you simply take something for granted, without any information, you are making an assumption. We naturally make inferences and assumptions all the time. You have to make inferences to get through the day. Also, you can’t test out every inference you make; if you did, you would drive people crazy and you wouldn’t get anything accomplished. Still, the problem is that when you make inferences, you don’t know whether your inferences are correct.

And if you act on your inferences as if they are true when they are false, then you create problems for yourself and others. The only way you can determine if your inference is accurate is to test it with the person about whom you have made the inference. That's what this ground rule does.

To test your inference, you first need to be aware that you're making one. Then identify what the other person(s) said or did that led you to make your inference. Now you're ready to test it. "I think you said that you were taking away the analysis from my group. Did I understand you correctly?" If your manager says yes, you continue, "I'm thinking that you're concerned about my group's performance on this. Am I mistaken?"

When you use this ground rule, you apply transparency and accountability to your thinking and reveal a curiosity about what others think. Demonstrating such transparency, accountability, and curiosity can also encourage others to do the same.

### Ground Rule Six: Jointly Design Next Steps

**J**ointly designing next steps means making decisions with others rather than deciding privately and unilaterally what to do next. This process is also another way to be transparent, curious, and enable others to make informed choices. Using this ground rule increases the likelihood that people will commit to the discussion or solution. In practice, it involves applying the first ground rule, "State views and ask genuine questions," to specific situations. Those situations include deciding with others what topics to discuss, when and how to discuss them, and when to switch topics, as well as how to resolve certain kinds of disagreements.

Want to know what it feels like when you don't get to jointly design next steps? Think about a meeting you attended that was really important to you when the person running the meeting set the agenda, decided who talked and for how long, and determined what information members could share and what information was not relevant. If your views differed from the meeting leader's views, you probably quickly realized that you wouldn't influence the outcome because you couldn't influence the unilateral process. You probably felt that decisions were not as good as they could have been because everyone didn't get to share their relevant information. As a result, there

was little commitment to follow through with these decisions. Now imagine how others react when you unilaterally control a meeting or conversation.

You can jointly design next steps throughout a conversation. For example, when developing the agenda for a meeting, you might write a draft, explain your reasoning for the topics you included, and then ask others if they want to add relevant items. At the beginning of the meeting you would ask, "What changes, if any, do you think we need to make to the agenda?" This ensures that participants believe that the meeting will cover all the relevant related topics.

Next, when deciding how to discuss a particular agenda item, you might say, "For this next item, I suggest we first agree on the problem, then identify criteria for solving it, and then generate possible solutions before evaluating them. Does anyone have any questions or concerns about doing it this way?"

Then, before moving to the next agenda item, you might check in with your group members to make sure that everyone else is ready to go forward. Instead of simply announcing the next topic, you might say, "I think we're ready to move to the next item. Is anyone not ready to move on?"

If you think that Roy is off track in the conversation, rather than unilaterally controlling the conversation by stating, "Let's get back on track" or "That's not what we're talking about today," try being more curious. Consider saying something like, "I don't see how your point about outsourcing is related to the topic of our planning process. Am I missing something? Can you help me understand how you see them related?"

When Roy responds, you and other group members might learn about a connection between the two topics that you had not previously seen. For example, Roy might say that outsourcing will free up internal resources so that the group can complete the planning process in less time. If there is a connection, the group can decide whether it makes more sense to explore Roy's idea now or later. If it turns out that Roy's comment is not related, you can ask him to place it on a future agenda.

In all of these examples, when the process is jointly designed, people have a larger common pool of information that can help them make better decisions, and they are more likely to commit to any decision made.

You can also use this ground rule when you disagree with others. Usually, when group members find themselves disagreeing, each member tries to convince



the others that his or her own position is correct. The disagreement escalates as each person offers evidence to support his or her position and no one offers information that might weaken his or her own position. In the end, the “losers” still believe they are right.

How is it different when you jointly design a way to test a disagreement? Consider a conversation in which you and your team members disagree about whether proposed changes to your customer service will lead to increased or decreased costs. Together, you and the group would develop a way to figure out how the proposed changes could both potentially increase and decrease costs and if so, by how much. Jointly designing the test includes agreeing on what data to collect and what process to use in collecting it. Group members decide together who to speak with, what questions to ask, what sources to use, and what statistical data to consider relevant. Whatever method you use, it is critical that the team members involved agree to it and agree about how to use the information that comes from it.

Again, to use the ground rule effectively, you also need to change your mindset. This means shifting from thinking that you are right and others who disagree are wrong to assuming that each of you may be missing something that the other sees. By jointly resolving disagreements, members make more informed choices, and they are more likely to commit to the outcome because they helped design the test and agreed to abide by its results.

### Ground Rule Seven: Focus on Interests, Not Positions

**H**ave you ever been in a meeting where people try unsuccessfully to get buy-in to their solutions? The first person shares his solution and people tell him why it won't work. Then the second person speaks and her idea is shot down. When it's your turn, the same thing happens. The group either reaches an impasse, agrees on a compromise that pleases no one, or the leader takes the decision away from the team.

Why does this happen? First, people are natural problem-solvers. Give team members a problem, and they will quickly generate solutions for it. Often they come to the meeting with solutions already in hand, or they quickly propose them. Second, when people have strong feelings about the topic, they often think of the meeting as a contest where their view — which they see

as the correct one — should prevail. That leads them to try to convince others that their solution is the right one. But that doesn't explain why one person's solution is often unacceptable to others. To understand this, we need to understand how we arrive at our preferred solutions. Basically, we generate a solution that meets our needs, because those are the needs we know about. When our solutions don't take into account stakeholders' needs, they reject them.

Positions are like solutions that people identify to address an issue. Interests are the underlying needs that people use to generate their solutions or positions.<sup>2</sup> To illustrate, if you and I are sitting in a conference room, and I want the window open and you want it closed, those are our positions. If I asked you, “What leads you to want the window closed?” you might say that the wind is blowing your papers around and you want them together. If you asked what leads me to want the window open, I might say that I'm warm and I want to be cooler. These are our interests. My solution to open the window and your solution to shut it are simply ways for each of us to meet our interests. The problem here is that the window can't be open and closed at the same time. But, if we focus on our interests, we can find a solution that meets both of our interests.

The difficulty with solving problems by focusing first on positions is that people's positions are often in conflict, even when their interests are compatible. This happens because people tend to offer positions that meet their own interests but do not take into account other people's interests. In the conference room example, you would probably reject my solution, and I would probably reject yours because neither met the other's interests. Often managers unknowingly encourage people to focus on positions when they say to a group, “Don't come with a problem unless you have a solution.” It's presumptuous to expect that your solution will work for others unless you know their interests.

If instead we focused on interests, we could identify them and then ask the question, “How can we solve this problem in a way that meets both of our interests?” With a little thought and creativity, we might decide to open the top part of the window so that your papers were not being blown by the wind and I still got the benefit of cool air. Or we could switch places so that I was closer to the open window and you were away from it. When we focus on interests, we are being transparent

2. This ground rule is from Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton's book *Getting to Yes* (1991). The idea was developed originally by Mary Parker Follett in the early 1900s.

by explaining our reasoning and intent underlying our preferences, and we are being curious by learning about others' interests.

These are the key steps for focusing on interests:

- 1. Identify interests.** Ask team members to complete this or a similar sentence as many times as possible: "No matter what the specifics of the solution are, we need to do this in a way that . . ." If people keep identifying positions, ask them, "What is it about your solution that's important to you?" This helps identify their underlying interests.
- 2. Clarify and agree on interests.** Make sure each person understands what the interest means (agree on what important words mean) and that they consider it an interest that should be taken into account in the solution. This doesn't mean that the interest is one that they hold; it means only that they consider it relevant.
- 3. Generate potential solutions that meet the interests.** If you can't find a solution that meets the agreed-upon interests, consider whether all of the proposed solutions have a common unnecessary assumption embedded in them. For example, if all of the proposed solutions assume that the work has to be performed only by full-time employees, try relaxing that assumption and see if the group can generate other solutions that will meet all the interests. If this does not help, then the group can prioritize or weight the different interests to find a solution that addresses the most important ones.
- 4. Select a solution and implement it.** Using this approach does not guarantee that the group will reach a decision that meets everyone's interests. It does, however, increase the chance that you will find a solution that everyone can support.

### Ground Rule Eight: Discuss Undiscussable Issues

Think about the last time you were walking to a meeting, complaining with a co-worker about how the meeting was going to be a waste of time. You might be complaining that one team member is never prepared, or that one member (perhaps, your manager?) dominates the conversation or that everyone in the meeting acts as if they will meet the project deadline when privately everyone says they won't. In the meeting, the situation unfolds just as you predicted, but

no one says anything, including you. Walking back to your office with your co-worker, you again express your frustration about the team.

Does this sound familiar? If so, you are facing an undiscussable issue. Undiscussable issues are topics that are relevant to the group's work but that group members don't address in the group, the one place where they can be resolved. Undiscussable issues are discussed many other places, such as one-on-one with people you trust and who agree with you.

People usually don't raise undiscussable issues because they are concerned that doing so will make some group members feel embarrassed or defensive. They try to save face for the group members and for themselves as well. In short, they see discussing undiscussable issues as not being very compassionate. Another reason people don't like to raise undiscussable issues is that they think it will generate conflict, and they don't like conflict.

Unfortunately, many people overestimate the risk of raising an undiscussable issue and underestimate the risk of not raising it. Specifically, they overlook the negative systemic — and cruel — consequences that they create by not raising undiscussable issues. Consider three team members — Heather, Carlos, and Stan — who are concerned about the poor performance of two other team members — Lynn and Jim — and how Lynn and Jim's performance affects the ability of the rest of the team to excel. If Heather, Carlos, and Stan don't raise this issue directly with Lynn and Jim, they will likely continue to talk about Lynn and Jim behind their backs. Lynn and Jim won't know what the others' concerns are and so will be unable to make an informed choice about whether to change their behavior. Because Lynn and Jim are not changing their behavior, Heather, Carlos, and Stan will continue to privately complain about them while simultaneously withholding the very information that could change the situation. Further, Heather, Carlos, and Stan will probably be unaware that they, too, are contributing to the problem by not telling Jim and Lynn that their work is ineffective. They also miss the opportunity to learn whether there are valid reasons Jim and Lynn behave as they do. Over time, the team's working relationships and possibly its performance are likely to suffer. This does not strike me as particularly effective or compassionate.

You might be thinking, "Why do I have to raise it in the group? Why can't I just talk with Lynn or Jim

alone?” Because when you raise the issue one-on-one with Lynn, you assume that your view about Lynn’s behavior is accurate and that all the group members agree with you. If Lynn thinks that others might see it differently, you are unilaterally imposing a solution by not taking the issue to the group. In addition, Lynn may likely believe that her behavior results, in part, from other group members not following through on their tasks.

In addition, if you and Lynn arrive at a solution, and Lynn changes her behavior, other members will wonder what has happened. Now you have created another undiscussable issue — the solution — on top of the original one.

Although undiscussable issues that involve the group ultimately need to be addressed in the group, you can start outside the group. You might approach Lynn and Jim, saying that you have concerns about how their work is affecting you and the group in general. You can also state that you didn’t want to raise this issue initially in the group because you didn’t want them to feel defensive. Instead, you want to jointly develop with them a way to raise the issue in the group that meets their needs and yours.

Although this ground rule is emotionally more difficult to use than the others, mechanically speaking, there is nothing new in this ground rule. To discuss undiscussable issues, you use all the previous ground rules. You state your views and ask genuine questions, share relevant information and give specific examples, test assumptions and inferences, jointly design next steps, and so on. Perhaps the most important element of discussing undiscussable issues is to approach them with compassion and avoid making premature negative judgments about how others acted or why they acted that way.

### **Ground Rule Nine: Use a Decision-Making Rule that Generates the Level of Commitment Needed**

**G**roups want to make sound decisions that people will support. This ground rule increases the likelihood that your group will have the level of commitment needed to implement decisions it makes.

Groups have different ways of making decisions: 1) the formal leader can make the decision alone for the group, without involving the group at all; 2) the leader or a subgroup can make the decision after consulting with the group; 3) the full group can make the decision, either by voting or by reaching a consensus; or 4) the

leader can delegate the decision to the group or to a subgroup.

Different kinds of decisions require different levels of commitment for effective implementation. Some decisions do not require the same level of commitment from everyone in the group to implement effectively. Other decisions need full commitment from all members. When you need greater commitment to ensure that a decision is implemented effectively, it makes sense to have greater involvement in the decision-making process. This greater involvement increases the chance that all relevant information is shared, including the different interests and assumptions, that people understand each other’s thinking, and that solutions are crafted that create the commitment needed. Consensus decision-making means that everyone can fully support a decision given his or her role. It ensures that a decision is not reached until each group member can commit to the decision. It equalizes the distribution of power in the group because every member’s concerns must be addressed and every member’s consent is required to reach a decision. It can take more time to make a decision by consensus than by another process, but because people are internally committed to the decisions, consensus decisions usually take less time to implement effectively.

Let group members know at the beginning of the conversation what decision-making rule will be used and what your reasoning is for using that rule. This is an example of being transparent and accountable. For instance, you might tell the group, “I want us to make this decision by consensus because this has a significant impact on each of you and each of you will need to be fully committed to implementing the decision. By consensus I mean that each of you can support and implement the decision given your roles.” Groups often have limited time to make decisions, so you might say, “I’d like for us to make this decision by consensus, but we need to get a decision to the VP by the end of the day. So, if we can reach consensus in an hour, great. If we can’t, I’ll reserve the right to make the decision based on our discussion. I’ll let you know what I decided and why. Is there anyone who can’t support proceeding this way?”

These examples raise two important points. First, no matter what the decision-making rule, group members need to know what it is so they can participate appropriately. It is frustrating to enter a conversation thinking that you will be part of the decision only to

have someone say, “Thanks for your thoughts.” Second, which decision-making rule to use ultimately lies with the group leader. This prevents the group from getting into an infinite conversation about who gets to decide and so on.

### Putting the Ground Rules in Use

**Y**ou can use these ground rules even if other people do not. And you can use the ground rules in group or one-on-one conversations. Still, the ground rules are most powerful when everyone understands them, agrees on their meanings, and commits to using them. When you introduce the ground rules to others, it is important that you do it in a manner consistent with the core values and the ground rules. This means explaining how you believe the ground rules can help, giving specific examples of times when you and others might have used a ground rule to improve a conversation or decision. It also means inviting others to share their views, including questions and concerns they have about using the ground rules. Above all, people need to make an informed choice to use the ground rules. The ground rules are not the group’s ground rules until all members have agreed to use them.

People often ask me whether they can use a subset of the ground rules. Each of the nine ground rules helps the group in a different way, and together they support each other; removing one ground rule reduces your ability to use the power of the set. Still, it is more effective to use some ground rules than none. Ground rules one, five, and six are the foundational ground rules; ground rules two through four and seven through nine provide specific ways of using the previous ground rules to help you create better understanding, make decisions or resolve conflicts.

When deciding whether to use the ground rules, do not assume that individuals or groups you have worked with will still respond in the same way that they always have. Because behavior is interactive and systemic, if you have acted in ways that are inconsistent with the ground rules, you may have contributed to others

reacting ineffectively and attributed their ineffective behaviors solely to them, without recognizing that you also played a part. If this has happened, your data about the group is flawed. For example, if you think that group members respond defensively, you may unwittingly be acting in ways that contribute to their defensiveness—for example, by making assumptions about them without testing them or by stating your views without asking genuine questions.

Your group will more quickly increase its skill and effectiveness if it consistently uses these ground rules. To remind members of the ground rules, it helps to place a poster of the ground rules in the group meeting space and provide each member with a pocket-sized card of the ground rules (both of these are available from Roger Schwarz & Associates at [www.schwarzassociates.com](http://www.schwarzassociates.com)). To get the most value from the ground rules, it is important to regularly reflect on how you and your group have been using them and how you can continue to improve.

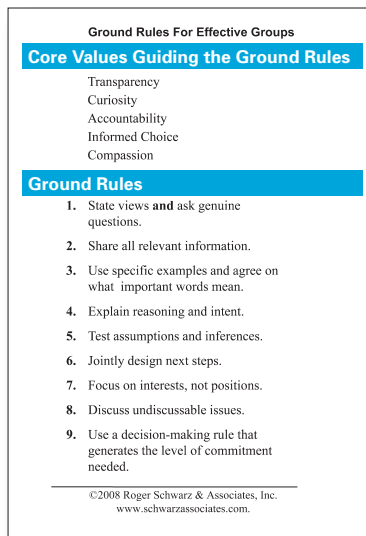
Using the ground rules yields many benefits. Used together, the ground rules will help your group improve the quality of their decisions and increase their commitment to implementing them effectively and efficiently, improve working relationships, and improve group member satisfaction.

## EXAMPLES OF THE GROUND RULES

Ground Rules	Example
<b>1</b> <i>State views and ask genuine questions.</i>	"I think we should start the project with a small number of people so that we can identify the problems and fix them before we scale up the program. What concerns, if any, do you have with starting small?"
<b>2</b> <i>Share all relevant information.</i>	"Although I think we should delay the project until January because it will balance our workload, Maureen says that our costs will increase by 4 percent if we wait."
<b>3</b> <i>Use specific examples and agree on what important words mean.</i>	<p>"Let me give you an example of what I mean by taking initiative. Yesterday in the team meeting, when I asked if the project figures had been updated since last week, you said no. I think if you had taken initiative, you would be updating them regularly without my asking. How do you see this?"</p> <p>"When I say consensus, I mean that everyone on this team can say they will support and implement the decision, given their roles and responsibilities. Does anyone have a different definition?"</p>
<b>4</b> <i>Explain reasoning and intent.</i>	<p>"The reason I am asking is . . ."</p> <p>"Here's how I reached my decision: . . ."</p> <p>"Here's what led me to do this: . . ."</p>
<b>5</b> <i>Test assumptions and inferences.</i>	"I think you said that you were taking away the analysis from my group. Did I understand you correctly?" If the answer is yes, continue, "I'm thinking that you're concerned about my group's performance on this. Am I mistaken?"
<b>6</b> <i>Jointly design next steps.</i>	<p>To jointly design the purpose of a meeting: "My understanding is that the purpose of this meeting is to agree on criteria for selection, but not to select candidates. Does anyone have a different understanding of the purpose?"</p> <p>To jointly design the process: "For this next item, I suggest we first agree on the problem, then identify criteria for solving it, and then generate possible solutions before evaluating them. Does anyone have any questions or concerns about doing it this way?"</p> <p>To move to the next agenda item: "I think we're ready to move to the next item. Anyone not ready to move on?"</p> <p>When you think someone is off the topic: "I don't see how your point about outsourcing is related to the topic of our planning process. Can you help me understand how you think they are related? Or if it isn't related, can we decide whether and when to address outsourcing?"</p>
<b>7</b> <i>Focus on interests, not positions.</i>	<p>To identify interests: "No matter what the specifics of the solution are, the solution needs to be one that . . ."</p> <p>To craft a solution: "Given the interests we've agreed on, what are some potential solutions that meet these interests?"</p> <p>When someone is focused on a position: "What is it about that solution that's important to you? I'm asking because if we can identify this, we can help meet your needs."</p>
<b>8</b> <i>Discuss undiscussable issues.</i>	<p>"I want to raise what might be a difficult issue and get your reactions. I'm not trying to put anyone on the spot, but instead trying for us to work better as a team. Here is what I've seen and what I think the issue is. [State your relevant information.]</p> <p>How do others see this?"</p>
<b>9</b> <i>Use a decision-making rule that generates the level of commitment needed.</i>	"I'd like us to make a decision by consensus because . . . Is anyone not willing to use this as our decision rule?"



# Putting the Ground Rules for Effective Groups into Practice...



## GROUND RULES FOR EFFECTIVE GROUPS PRODUCTS

If you would like to integrate these ground rules into your organization or consulting practice, we offer numerous products to assist you, including posters, pocket cards and mugs. You may also consider:

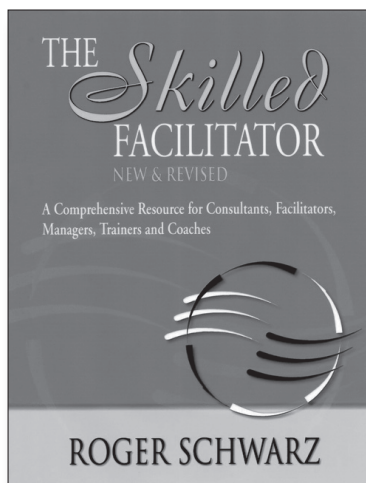
## FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE – OUR FREE ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTER

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## THE SKILLED FACILITATOR

### A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers and Coaches

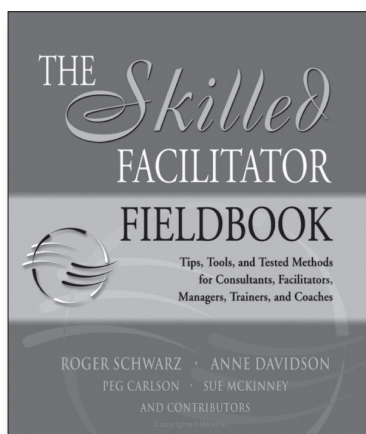
Readers have regarded *The Skilled Facilitator* as a critical resource for helping groups and organizations function more effectively since the book's first publication in 1994. This edition is expanded and completely revised.



## THE SKILLED FACILITATOR FIELDBOOK

### Tips, Tools, and Tested Methods for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches

Based on the same proven principles in *The Skilled Facilitator*, *The Skilled Facilitator Fieldbook* provides tools, exercises, models, and stories that will help you develop sound responses to a wide range of challenging situations. It includes information on how to introduce the ground rules and how to integrate them in your organization.



## PUBLIC AND ON-SITE WORKSHOPS

For these ground rules to be effective, they must be used with a mindset based on the core values listed in this article. Developing this mindset takes intensive work. Our workshops will help you make significant progress in this direction in a short amount of time. We offer the Skilled Facilitator Intensive workshop for facilitators, consultants and trainers; the Facilitative Leader workshop for formal and informal leaders; and the Facilitative Coach workshop for formal and informal coaches



## **About Roger Schwarz & Associates**

**Roger Schwarz & Associates** is a leadership and organization development consulting firm. We are dedicated to helping people think and act differently so they can sustainably improve their business results and relationships. We help organizations achieve results in all of these situations through a customized blend of facilitation, training, coaching, and consulting.

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