



How Meeting Agreements Support Equity and Inclusion

We've all been there. The consultant or meeting leader whips out a flipchart page and cheerfully writes the heading "Ground Rules" or "Group Agreements." They use colorful markers to write the same things at every meeting: *Speak one at a time. Listen with an open mind. Attack the problem not the person.* You stifle a yawn.

That yawn is one of the reasons your organization is struggling with racial and gender equity and inclusion! Problem-solving meetings are places where your organization really shows its values and its power dynamics/hierarchy. Setting the rules about how to work together is a key opportunity to disrupt inequity and foster inclusion. Why?

- 1. Explicit rules disrupt inequity.** Often, we invite a diverse group of people to meet, and we assume we're all using the same rules of engagement – and we're frequently wrong. Sometimes there is one set of "rules" spelled out for "everyone," yet in practice those rules are enforced very flexibly for white people or men, but rigidly for people of color or women. Writing down group "rules" (or better yet - Agreements) explicitly – and holding each other to them – is one way to practice setting equitable, transparent standards for participation and engagement.
- 2. Inclusion requires power-shifting agreements:** The way in which we "participate" is directly connected to our identity and how we have been socialized in that identity to believe that our "voice" (thought, feeling, opinion) matters, is important or not, expert or not, right or not. In conversations where some people's voices (most often white, male, cis, able-bodied, and Christian in the U.S.) are usually at the center and other people's perspectives and voices are often decentered or marginalized, we need to shift the power dynamics in the room so that we can work together equitably. Agreements that work toward that end might include:
 - Assess your participation "style": move back/listen more or move in/share more.
 - Ensure everyone in the room gets to speak without debate, reaction or response.
 - Ensure everyone has had the chance to speak at least once, before anyone speaks twice.
 - Name power dynamics and differences explicitly.
 - Ask for what you need. ("Can you speak louder, I can't hear" or "Can we caucus")
 - While listening, assume best intentions. Attend first and foremost to impacts.
 - Ask clarifying questions to better understand, before advocating solutions.
 - Clearly state any decision we are making, and how it is being made.



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- 3. Inclusion is about mutual accountability.** Building Working Agreements is different from imposing a set of Group Rules. Co-creating a list of behaviors you need so that we can work well together is a chance to practice inclusion instead of demanding assimilation. Holding each other accountable to those agreements in real time – *“I have just heard five comments from senior managers with decision-making power. I’d like to hear more from my colleagues on the front line”* – is how we live up to our beliefs that we are smarter together, and that diverse voices really matter.

<http://www.msmithconsulting.net/blog/2018/9/13/how-meeting-agreements-support-equity-and-inclusion>

Leading Courageous Conversations on Isms and Equity

This information is based on the workshop presented at NPCC in October 2018 by Luz Rodriguez of Visionary Allies and Janvieve Williams of Aligned Strategies Consulting.

More and more organizations are beginning the important work of evaluating their internal culture and putting a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace and, in doing so, finding that “uncomfortable” conversations are a critical component of this work. It is increasingly important to establish not just what needs to be discussed, but also how it is discussed.

“We’re all learners, we’re all teachers.”

No matter how much work has been done before, there is opportunity for everyone to continue learning and growing, especially as the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion touches on sensitive topics and individual experiences. Having regular, open conversations is an important part of beginning diversity, equity, and inclusion work, and it is important for whomever is leading or facilitating these discussions to start by building trust within the group.

Creating, sharing, and affirming Community Agreements is a way to work on building trust. A Community Agreement is a set of guidelines for conversation that the full group agrees to in advance. Having an Agreement in place encourages exchange and discussion in a respectful way; when discussing matters that require sensitivity, it can be helpful to establish ground rules before the conversation starts in order to assure that people enter feeling safe and with the expectation of being heard. Examples of agreements include:

- Be Present



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- Listen with Respect
- Trust Intent
- Acknowledge Impact
- Stay the Whole Time
- There is No Quick Fix

Create a Brave Space

We hear often about the need to create a safe space when discussing diversity or equity, however conflicts and disagreements may still arise. Emphasizing bravery encourages individuals not to flee from discomfort, but rather to take the opportunity to engage meaningfully. It can be difficult not to turn away from a tense situation, but brave conversations are the only way to move through an uncomfortable space in order to achieve desired outcomes. Being brave means being authentic, being open, being able to point out areas for growth and being open to change.

“Tension & conflict = opportunities for growth & expansion”

If people are encouraged to be brave while operating within the Community Agreements, there is the possibility of genuine exchange and better understanding, which can only serve to strengthen relationships and ultimately strengthen the organization as a whole.

How do you engage in a courageous conversation?

Some ways to start:

- Establish a shared vocabulary to ensure that the whole organization is grounded in a shared understanding of what terms like [race equity, social justice, or structural racism](#) mean.
- Use a courageous vocabulary: using abbreviations like “DEI” can start to strip words of their meaning. Call things what they are and use the full words: diversity, equity, inclusion, access, privilege, etc.
- Ask the full organization to engage in periodic values alignment sessions. Teams will regularly regroup to assess progress on a strategic plan, but don’t often make the same effort to ensure that the day-to-day operations of the organization are reflective of the organization’s [values statement](#).
- Organizational values guide both the mission work of an organization and the internal dynamics: *what* we do and *how* we do it. Take the time to regularly check in with the whole organization



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and see if all practices are aligned with the values statement and if there are areas for improvement.

Understanding and Acknowledging Dominant Culture

An example of an uncomfortable conversation that can be turned into a courageous one is facilitating a discussion around dominant culture and how it manifests in our daily lives. In order to move forward with any type of equity work, it is important to acknowledge the dominant culture, understand what it is, what it values, and what our relationship to it is both as individuals and as an organization. [Awake to Woke to Work](#) defines the dominant culture as “the established language, religion, values, rituals, and social customs on which the society was built. It has the most power, is widespread, and influential within a social entity, such as an organization, in which multiple cultures are present.” Take some time with the entire organization to discuss your collective understanding of the dominant culture and dissect how it manifests and influences our experiences so that the team can work together to foster the kind of organizational culture that supports everyone. Some examples of questions to ask the team are:

- How would you describe our dominant culture?
- How would you describe the values of the dominant culture?
- How would you describe our organizational culture?
- In what ways does the dominant culture influence our organizational culture?

“Equity is not a program.”

Diversity, equity, and inclusion work cannot happen in a vacuum; it must be woven into daily practices at every level of the organization. To ensure that an organization is truly working towards equity and inclusion, all operations, policies, and programs must be viewed through this lens. Equity work means that the whole organization, especially the board of directors, must be bought into the concept of introspection, self-evaluation, and making changes to better align the organization with these values. Task forces and committees can only do so much: in order to truly change organizational culture, the whole organization has to participate in courageous conversations.

<https://thecommunity.nonprofitnewyork.org/s/article/Leading-Courageous-Conversations-on-Race-Equity>



Some Recommended Working Agreements

Put Relationships First – *Work to build community and trust with an awareness of power dynamics.*

This is about trust building, connecting on a personal level, and helping us humanize each other, especially during conversations that are deeply personal, uncomfortable, and fraught with racialized mistrust. We also remind people trust is built over time so the meeting or training you are in is only the start and people should do the harder work of connecting outside of the meeting as well.

Keep Focused on Our Common Goal – *We volunteer for this cause because we care deeply about [insert your mission]; We are all here to achieve the same goal of [blank]...*

Emphasize this principle repeatedly, because this is the glue that holds us together when we disagree about how to get there. You can personalize it to your organization's mission or goal. It is important for everyone, even the facilitator to know that you are all there in pursuit of a common goal. When sharing it remind people we are all on the same team. Diversity, Inclusion and Antiracist work is about reaching the common goal of Equity and Justice. It is not about calling out wrongdoing, blaming or shaming others, or exposing bad people. It is about the work of getting to equitable and just outcomes for all.

Notice Power Dynamics in the Room – *Be aware of how you use your privilege: From taking up too much emotional and airtime, space, or stunting the space by disengaging.*

We emphasize this one because power shows up in many different ways that people may not be conscious of. There are the obvious forms of power, who talks a lot, who uses their title, age or gender to dominate the conversation. As the facilitator or chair remind yourself and others of that power dynamic "I am standing in the front of the room/chairing this space, I have a lot of power in this moment." Power isn't always bad, but it needs to be acknowledged and kept in check.

Some of the ways power shows up that are less obvious are things like who disengages or focuses all of the attention on them when things get uncomfortable. This person is the one who maybe keeps leaving the room to take a call or picks up their phone and plays with it during the middle of the meeting or argues or tells long personal stories to defend their ways of thinking. These are forms of using power which do not advance the group agenda and are obstacles to the common goal.

An example of unrecognized power is the use of 'academic English' as a cultural norm. If English is your first and primary language you will be able to participate quicker, more comfortably, and with deeper



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nuance. Remind yourselves that this is a privilege for the native English speakers in the room and intentionally ensure that accommodations are made to help all Language Speakers participate fully. Language = Power.

Create Spaces for Multiple Truths and Norms – *Speak your truth, and seek understanding of truths that differ from yours, with awareness of power dynamics.*

Our brains are wired to be constantly judging and evaluating (Jiddu Krishnamurti said “the ability to observe without evaluation is the highest form of intelligence.”). The key is to use our conscious mind to resist immediate judgement, stay open to the ‘unknown’, and to hear others’ truths as simply that – true. To listen to understand another, means there is no debate or dialogue about another person’s truth. It must be accepted and held in the same space as someone else’s truth, no matter how contradicting those truths may seem. It requires a **“both/and”** instead of an “either/or” mindset.

Sometimes when things get emotional or heated a person with power/authority may dismiss another person’s story by saying “Well, I know from my own experience that that is not true,” or “I really need some more evidence to believe what you are saying.” We need consciously to create space that allows people to share differing multiple perspectives and commit to doing the hard work of creating systems that honor and hold those perspectives equally.

Be Kind and Brave – *Remember relationships first. But do not let politeness or “political correctness” get in the way of honest dialogue. Be courageous and forgiving. Work to be explicit with your language about race, class, gender, immigration, etc.*

One of the greatest disservices we have done to conversations about systemic racism, sexism, classism, ableism is to use coded and ambiguous language like ‘diversity, culture, inclusion, or equity.’ Or to be too “polite” to be honest.

Be clear in your language — when you say equity are you talking about racial equity or gender equity? When you say “inclusion” what do you mean? (who is including who?) Vague language actually prevents us from having an effective conversation. And the words we use become the actions we achieve. So let’s work to be specific with our language and ask for clarification from others when we hear terms like diversity, culture, or equity. Along with being kind and brave, remember we need to build relationships for the long haul so use your language in ways that builds bridges.

Practice Examining Biased Systems and Processes – *Individual actions are important, interpersonal covenants binding and institutional systems are what are left after all the people in this room leave.*



Most of these processes and systems in place are ones we've inherited. Policies are simply practices and procedures that over time have been codified into "law". These have been handed down sometimes through generations and left unexamined for their disparate impact. They existed before us and will continue to exist after we are gone if we do not intentionally examine and redesign them. It is important to remember that while this work is systemic, WE make up the system. We need to collectively think at a systems level while all of us individually examine our roles within that system. So, while the work at the individual level is required, it isn't about you as an individual; it is about undoing interpersonal, institutional, ideological, and therefore systemic, oppression.

Look for Learning – *Show what you're learning, not what you already know. Do not come to the conversation as an "expert". Avoid playing devil's advocate - devils don't need help.*

Educators call this having a growth mindset. We all have things to learn about dismantling racist, sexist, classist, gendered systems. We all have to unlearn the internalized ideology of dominance and superiority that has created the inequitable institutions within which we operate. The best way to create a safe and brave learning community is to show each other what we are learning, not what we already know. Playing the "devil's advocate" is a (mis)use of power to control and deflect the conversation and only serves to devalue and diminish other people's truths.