

Agreements for Effective Groups



fALCARRAGH

Falcarragh Institute, Ltd.
Human & Organizational Development at the Crossroads

FALCARRAGH INSTITUTE, LTD.

Agreements for Effective Groups

By T. J. Elliott

Falcarragh Institute, Ltd.
6230 Lower Mountain Road
New Hope, PA 18938
Phone 215.862.9254
www.falcarragh.org

Acknowledgement

Dr. Martin Leahy assisted greatly in the conception and editing of this document

11 Agreements for Effective Groups

The Problem: Why agreements are important

Each month brings another article somewhere in the business press about how much people — especially in the newer dot.com precincts of the economy — detest groups with their irksome meetings. Often the article is accompanied by a sidebar with a recipe on how to unleash the magic of groups. This document doesn't claim the power of any spell or formula. Instead, it sets out some simple-to-state but very hard-to-follow principles that allow groups to be more effective in their work. However, this article also starts from the premise that groups are good, that they are not going away replaced by maverick machinations, and that groups can and should get better at what they do.

Busy people squandering time in lots of ineffective meetings

Many people find themselves in groups in contemporary life: work teams, executive committees, task forces, alliances, and partnerships. The expectation of those who form the groups in these situations is that, when combined, participants will accomplish more than they would be able to do individually. The intuition is that understanding of the issues they face is more likely to arrive in conversation than isolation. Sounds good in theory. However, observers both inside and outside of such groups protest that their gatherings are neither as effective nor as efficient as desired.

Knowledge about Effective Groups

After 20 years of popularity of *teams* in business, and decades more of studying groups, the knowledge as to what distinguishes effective groups is obtainable. J.R. Hackman, for example, discovered through observations of thousands of teams, three criteria for effective groups:

ICON KEY

Definition

Website link



Suggested author



1. They create the services or the products that the customers want in the way that the customers want them.
2. They are able to do this again and again and they can take their methods and profitably apply them to other tasks.
3. They do it in a way that satisfies — but does not necessarily completely fulfill — the needs of the members of the team. In other words, those individual needs are still subservient to the team purpose.

Action addiction

The common approach in groups — and, for that matter, in the training of leaders of such groups — is to focus on the first of these criteria: how will members give the services, how will members complete the task? The architects of work groups disregard and even disdain any approach that includes the sort of reflection that results both in the completion of a relevant task and a greater awareness of how to produce that result again and again, better and better. Someone once described this impatience with considerations of process, this need for the immediate gratification of ‘doing something concrete,’ as “action addiction.”

Arie DeGeus, the former Royal Dutch Shell strategist who is widely credited with originating the concept of the learning organization, describes this “Rambo style of management” group meeting:

“We perceive a problem. We put it on the agenda of the next meeting. Come the day of the meeting, we do everything at once: understand what this agenda item is about, think about what might happen in the future around this subject, dream up an action to be taken, and launch its implementation. We do this preferably in one meeting, with two more items to go through before the two key people in the corner have to leave in a hurry to catch their planes.”

Sam Kaner and his colleagues also wrote of this action obsession in their guide on participatory decision-making:

“Efforts at exploring complexities are discouraged in favor of pithy judgments and firm-sounding conclusions. Making action plans — no matter how unrealistic they might be — is called ‘getting something done,’ while analyzing the underlying causes of a problem is called going off on a tangent.”

These common preferences for action (e.g., “Let’s get something down on paper.” “Let’s not waste time talking this thing to death.” “Watch out for paralysis by analysis.”) are not based upon solid data as to their effectiveness. On the contrary, following these customary ways often leads to exactly the kinds of groups about which people complain: fragmented, over-edited, ineffective, and inefficient. It prevents the exchange, consideration, and transformation of information into worthy decisions and courses of action. The partiality for action at all costs leads to incompletion and even chaos — what Irish grandmothers used to call “running around like a chicken with its head cut off.” Effective groups are more than groups that deliver action plans, although they must meet that first criteria of getting the customer of the group what he, she, or they want.

Creating an Effective Group

Devising these groups is, as previously mentioned, not entirely mysterious. They depend upon several factors, some of which members can control and some that fall outside their influence. Among the most important of those factors beyond its own control is the context of a group. The most skilled and knowledgeable and well-meaning individual members, potentially an extraordinarily effective group, will be hard pressed to succeed in a company that is unclear about its own mission, let alone that of the group.

In the same vein, groups that are confused about their purpose because of political considerations cannot gain much from process agreements such as the ones that we suggest below. If some members feel that they must watch what they say because such conversations are inherently threatening to their bosses, then the group is hobbled from the start. This censorship is common in organizations. It has played roles in disasters such as the Challenger Space Shuttle and failures in such organizations as DEC, New York Central Railroad, and IBM.

Another contextual problem is that groups are often formed and set towards goals — vague *or* exact — with little in the way of infrastructure (capacity for data gathering and analysis, capital, systems, etc.) to support them. They lack the resources to be successful. Most importantly for context, groups fail when their parent organization or community has not ceded them the authority they need to carry out their work. In other words, they cannot succeed when they are not independent entities free to pursue solutions, but are instead a pretense erected by the ‘powers that be’ to make things look ‘participatory.’ (There are also occasions that cry out for individual decisions and where a group is an inappropriate mode, but that is another story.) If any or all of these elements of the ‘right’ context are not or cannot be created, much of what follows will be of little use.

Knowledge, Skills, Attitude

Knowledge, skills, and attitudes are the first place to look when creating an effective group. Members of groups can positively affect their performance through what they know about, what they can do, and how they look at an undertaking. If, as initially constituted, they lack an appropriate mix of knowledge, skills, and attitudes for their task, they can go out and get the first two elements — the know-how — to remedy the deficit. The third ingredient — attitude — is more elusive.



The attitude of a person, as someone once defined it, is the way in which he or she interprets the world. In this case, it is the mental and emotional position of each member toward the task, the process, and the other people in the group. If members do not share the same attitudes, conflict may result. This is not fatal and may even prove fruitful if the group possesses some way of exploring and eventually resolving the conflict, some scheme for looking at what the differences mean and from where they come.

Groups are made up of individuals, each of whom may bring a different temperament or set of preferences for seeing the world, for taking in information, or for making decisions. All of these differences can make the group stronger. The only essential commonalities where attitude is concerned are a commitment to doing things as a group, respecting the participation of others, and following through on agreements made.

Unless these elements — knowledge, skill, and attitude — are present, the group cannot attain its goals. However, even with them, there is a need for further ongoing coordination. Knowledge and skills require the exchange of valid information and the testing of assumptions. This need is at the heart of group agreements.

Clear Purpose, Processes, and Agreements



The founders of a group must assure that there is a clear purpose and shared understanding about how members will work with one another. While it is not necessary (and might even prove terribly harmful) for all members of a group to share a single interpretation of their ‘world,’ a common view of the group’s purpose and process is always useful, and often critical. They should at a minimum agree on what this entity is to accomplish and how that result will come to pass. Effective groups construct and follow agreements about how, why, and when they will interact with each other. (A version of these agreements with links to other related topics is found online at <http://idt.net/~tjell/guidelns.html>.)



Michael McMaster, in his study of design principles for intelligent organizations, points out that the first task of a group is to “develop social and linguistic practices . . . a way of speaking that is accepted by the whole.” Agreements such as the

ones represented here are a way of capturing those practices so that new members can see them and veteran members can use them.

Agreements for Groups

Don't groups instinctively form agreements?

This conclusion sounds obvious: people who want to collaborate need agreements on how they will do so. Yet, the ample experience of many consultants and extensive research by myriad observers demonstrates that these agreements are often lacking. (Doubters of this observation should ask anyone they know who is currently in a group whether the people in it ever take the time to talk about how they will operate, or instead plunge headlong into the supposed task. The responses heard will overwhelmingly suggest an absence of agreements.)



Some groups, such as those that draw people from a number of departments — that employ a 'matrix' structure — may experience even more problems with forging understandings. Karl Weick suggested that the problem of agreement is aggravated in these cross-functional groups because members "share a modest number of meanings" to begin with — reaching an understanding of how the group will operate only adds to the difficulty.

Participants and the people who charter their groups either ignore this facet or assume that expertise in the process of the group exists because members have belonged to other work groups. They focus on the task — the real work, the result that is supposed to be produced. They focus exclusively on the content of their problem and the details of their circumstances. They often exhibit impatience at any suggestion to step back and examine the manner in which the group approaches, frames, describes, argues, inquires, and solves its work. And they then express puzzlement at their ineffectualness.

What agreements do

Some groups may have implicit agreements, comprehensive and flexible enough that they do not need some formal 'stepping back' to look at their process. Testimony from many sources suggests that number is small. One reason for this scarcity may be that the way people normally operate, their 'theory in use' as Chris Argyris and Don Schön termed it, is to avoid taking such looks at how they operate. Those authors (to whose scholarship, along with that of Roger Schwarz, this pamphlet owes a great deal) found that members of groups are not only reluctant to talk about what is really occurring in each others' thoughts and actions, they construct unspoken agreements to prevent such exchanges. They give each other



signals, change the subject, and repress questioning so that ideas are not publicly tested, data for one's judgments is neither given nor solicited, and exploration of what others mean or how they act is not allowed. This defensiveness obstructs both the work on the task *and* reflection on the process. It keeps members from both valid information and competence.

While agreements are not some magic cure, they at least afford the group an opportunity to put such realities on the table, to get away from their normal behavior. The participants can talk about what they will do differently to try to assure the exchange of valid information and the testing of assumptions. They can try to institute processes that build and maintain the group as well as get to the task, solution, or result they seek. Agreements encourage individuals to confront those issues that no one feels can be broached, to spell out what is really going on in a situation, and to ask questions of each other. They thus increase meaningful information, an important ingredient for improved problem solving and decision-making.

A NOTE OF CAUTION: It might make perfect sense not to have this kind of open and honest exchange. In a 'shark-infested' workplace, for example, people actually show just how smart they are by being closed and guarded in meetings, but that too is another story. (For more about Chris Argyris's and Don Schön's ideas of Model I and Model II styles of operating, see our website at <http://idt.net/~tjell/actlrng6.html>.)

Learning thrives — and solutions gain — when there is a willingness to try different things, to experiment. Having specific agreements that are accepted by all group members gives them more of this freedom. Trust, after all, is not a given in groups. However, its presence is necessary to get at difficult knowledge and committed action. Trust is hard to engender. To give it to another is by definition a risk. Agreements are an attempt to make that risk tolerable.

Given the aversion to looking at how they operate, groups that want to go beyond the usual 'task only' orientation need to act in a context that includes safety. People doing this sort of collaborative work, or *action learning*, are pushing the envelope on their interpersonal abilities. Agreements provide some of that safety.

Agreements are made to be changed

The eleven agreements that follow are derived from solid, incisive research on effective groups, but they are not the final answer by any means. While a group may usefully employ these agreements as ground rules or guidelines, these hallmarks of what allows groups to be effective are to be aspired to rather than treated as inflexible laws. Groups can choose to adopt all of them or some of them depending upon their particular situation.

Agreements should draw upon both the experiences of other effective groups and the specific situated experience of the group in question. Agreements should make use of what was discovered by thousands of other teams as they tried to create results that really mattered. But they should also take advantage of the feeling that the members of a group have for their particular situation.

Agreements are made to be changed. They are the blueprints that allow members of a team or group to build conversations, arguments, inquiries, and decisions. In that practice, a group may discover that their plan of how to work and talk together warrants alteration. Practice makes perfect: by changing or discarding those parts of a group's agreements that do not serve the makeup, circumstances, and mission of that body, the group increases its competence as an inquiring and deliberative body.

The Eleven Agreements

1	Make reasoning transparent.
2	Solicit feedback, invite others to ask questions about what you say.
3	Put all your cards on the table.
4	Pay attention to what everybody needs from the solution before proposing solutions.
5	Be explicit, use as many examples as possible.
6	Work out the meaning of the words that matter most in the conversation.
7	Dissent in the room, not in the hallways.
8	Keep the discussion focused.
9	Be fully present — no slackers, no ‘vacations.’
10	Agree to the rules of the game before you roll the dice.
11	Review the above agreements on a regular basis.

AGREEMENT 1: MAKE REASONING TRANSPARENT

As Chris Argyris points out with his *Ladder of Inference*, assumptions guide us all. People accept as ‘true’ many beliefs that they never bother to verify. Inference is a ‘cousin’ to assumption as people draw conclusions about the unknown based on incomplete or missing data. (For example, one worker infers that another does not like him because she always sits by herself. He fails to realize that her isolation stems not from any dislike, but from the aftereffects of a recent illness.) Inferences and assumptions could be accurate but their holders cannot ascertain that fact until they test them.

The testing — the checking out of the underlying suppositions of group conversation — happens through asking questions. “I saw you do that or heard you say that and I am assuming that it means so and so. Am I right?” or “By your silence [or your words], I am inferring that you think this is all hogwash. Is that the case?”

(Those familiar with Argyris's *Ladder of Inference* will recognize this as walking back down that ladder from conclusions and assumptions to the data that led to those conceptions.)

This agreement is to 'check things out,' to discover what is really occurring. This leads to a related agreement to illustrate for each other the reasons behind things said and done in the group. Each person simply agrees to tell others why he or she is doing something. This eliminates 'rationales,' such as, "I just think that this is the right way to go for us." If someone's point is heard as inconsistent or illogical, this agreement gives others freedom to ask how he or she arrived at that position.

Sound simple? This freedom is sorely lacking in most groups because of the points cited earlier from Argyris and Schön about agreements not to question each other. As Argyris has written, this dominant model of interaction values keeping interactions 'win-lose' propositions, where someone comes away with the advantage (with one's own self on the win end, naturally), staying away from any potentially 'hot' or negative feelings, and saving face — your own and other people's. On this last point, the usual approach is to avoid ticking off other people in the group by calling them on their inconsistencies. That tacit truce assures that no one will call anyone else on his or her discrepancies.

This agreement to tell people how you arrived at your conclusions is the heart of a fact-based organization. It is also likely to prove the most difficult agreement to follow at first; everyone will nod their heads to it and then immediately forget about its implications.

Therefore, this agreement that members will tell each other how they arrived at their conclusions is both the direct opposite of the way people normally operate and the quintessence of a fact-based organization. Unsurprisingly, it is also likely to prove the most difficult agreement to follow at first; everyone will nod their heads to it and then immediately forget about its implications. Participants' resistance will surface in complaints of the agreement's insistence on explicating reasoning: nobody can tell what 'the market' is going to do, human affairs are uncertain, 'gut feelings' deserve more credence. Gut feeling, or intuition, is a potent source of knowledge *when* it is examined and explored with others.

Agreeing to share the reasons behind one's statements does not deny any of these above limitations to human knowing. It simply says that so much is possible that the participants agree to have conversations and deliberations based upon directly observable data. If they need to hedge their bets or make estimates, then they do so. They just shun the copouts that "you can't know" or "you can't quantify in any way"; they agree to base their work together on the best available data.

While the above facets explored regarding this agreement can seem complex, its execution can prove fundamental. This agreement might simply sound like this in action: "Here's how I came to this conclusion . . ."

**AGREEMENT 2: SOLICIT FEEDBACK FROM FELLOW GROUP MEMBERS –
INVITE OTHERS TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT YOU SAY**

If the group is going to reach eventual strong commitment on a course of action, then members must question and even challenge each other's reasoning. One way to make that questioning more likely to happen is for each member to always ask others to examine his or her statements. The member should make it clear that he or she is looking for agreement *and/or* disagreement.

The rationale for this agreement is encountered again in the research of Argyris and Schön, who found that people would make statements in such a way as to forestall any scrutiny of the premises within them. They make speeches, or assert 'truths,' in such a way that others are dissuaded from seeking to take a 'peek under the hood' of their thinking. They display signs of upset in body or other language when someone does ask how they reached a particular conclusion, thereby effectively chilling group inquiry.

If everyone is trying to get at the overall truth of a situation rather than simply advancing his or her position, then everyone will seek to have others ask, "How do you know that?"

This counter-intuitive agreement to *seek* disagreement actually increases productivity by getting the group to connect statements and supporting data. It avoids people 'speechifying' at each other. This agreement is intimately connected to AGREEMENT #4: Identify concerns before advocating solutions.

If everyone is trying to get at the overall truth of a situation rather than simply advancing his or her position, then everyone will seek to have others ask: "How do you know that?"

**AGREEMENT 3: PUT ALL YOUR CARDS ON THE TABLE INSIDE
AND OUTSIDE THE GROUP**

Testing assumptions requires that all the relevant information be out 'on the table' in a group. What one person is thinking as they tiptoe around another may prove to be some of that most relevant information. This includes the first person's fears that if he/she revealed their thinking, others would use such utterances against them in some way. (The political reality of groups and organizations must not be underestimated.) Since the group is about getting to the truth — finding valid information — on some specific subject, it is very important that people share their pertinent reactions.

When following this agreement, members give all the information — not just the part that is safe or that makes them look good. Each participant discloses all the information (for example, doubts or resistance) that he or she has that will affect how the group will solve a dilemma or make a choice. Their willingness to disclose

depends in part upon the anticipated reactions of those others — peers in the group, bosses, customers — who may not like hearing that information. If this circulating of pertinent facts triggers another member (or even a connected outsider) ‘going ballistic’ or smoldering with resentment or seeming to be plotting revenge, people are not going to be willing to share all their relevant information.

Everybody in the group creates the atmosphere necessary for the adherence to this guideline. They do so by constantly asking each other to say what is on their minds and guarding against any personal reaction they might have that would contradict that invitation.

**AGREEMENT 4: PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT EVERYBODY NEEDS
FROM THE SOLUTION BEFORE PROPOSING SOLUTIONS**

Groups in work organizations are about effectiveness, about getting something done. These agreements reflect Hackman’s point that the best groups are also after learning: the double benefit of getting this thing done *while* getting better at being able to get things done!

The group is *not* about winning individually or keeping the status quo. The agreement does *not* say, “Keep everybody happy,” or “Make sure that things stay comfy.” Therefore, participants should start dealing with a problem by *first* identifying their own concerns and what they imagine the concerns of the enterprise to be before advocating solutions.

Members should avoid rushing in with answers or taking a stand as to what the outcome must be. Beginning by having each person talk about his/her needs, aspirations, and worries — what criteria must be met in order for that person to accept a solution — is more practical.

They might do so by answering the question, “What interests — *in your opinion* — must be covered in order for a solution to this problem to be successful?” This serves to identify the agendas of the individuals on the subject in question. Pursuit of individual agendas exclusively or covertly renders group work ineffective. Disclosure of individual agendas and digging beneath for the real needs and assessments of participants enriches the group decision-making process.

Therefore, members should avoid rushing in with answers (“Here’s how I think we should attack this . . .”) or taking a stand as to what the outcome must be (“There’s no way we should negotiate in this situation.”) Beginning by having each person talk about his/her needs, aspirations, and worries is more practical. Ask each member of the group in turn to tell what criteria must be met in order for that person to accept a solution (“I want to make sure this is covered.” “I’m concerned that we might not remember so and so.”)

Groups that identify needs and concerns first (“Here is what I see any solution needs to include . . .”) are more effective than those that begin assembling a solu-

tion right away. (This is an agreement that may require monitoring by a facilitator or designated member of the group since it is so foreign to the usual advocacy of work group operations.)

**AGREEMENT 5: BE EXPLICIT – EMPLOY AS MANY
EXAMPLES AS POSSIBLE**

- “There are times when . . .”
- “Some people think . . .”
- “This sort of thing happens all the time . . .”

Such general, unspecific statements (and other instances are likely to easily spring up in the minds of readers) only become useful for the group if they are illustrated by specific examples of the point that the speaker is trying to make.

Being specific is often hard to do. Not because members cannot think of examples — they probably can. Giving an example, however, opens up their reasoning to questions. One of their colleagues can say, “How is that an example of what we are talking about?”

If a member thinks some behavior is getting in the way of the group, or some idea is not being sufficiently questioned, they have to say just that — not mumble some vague complaint or caution.

This is, however, why being specific is one of the suggested agreements for effectiveness. Being specific also means members have to speak truth to friends, strangers, and the powers that be. Generalizations that members think might save time or someone’s feelings are not acceptable under this guideline. For example, saying that a particular initiative has not worked is general. Pointing out the people within that initiative who did not perform competently is much more specific and more difficult. However, never bringing those realities up (or at least one’s assessment of them as realities) means that the group is fated to repeat the same mistakes over and over again. Failing to give examples also means that flaws in various members’ assumptions and theories remain undiscovered; there is no way of properly examining them.

If a member thinks some behavior is getting in the way of the group, or some idea is not being sufficiently questioned, they have to say just that — not mumble some vague complaint or caution. They simply ask for a specific example.

**AGREEMENT 6: WORK OUT THE MEANING OF THE WORDS
THAT MATTER MOST IN THE CONVERSATION**

Specificity in language is also consequential for groups, especially with those words that are at the center of the decision, those words that members of the group might

prefer to leave vague in order to avoid discomfort. For example, if two people invoke the term ‘business model,’ do they both include social considerations? Environmental? Are they committed to certain measurements in the definition they are employing? The same is true of many other general words: leadership, management, change, consensus, re-engineering, results, dialogue. It is especially true of specialized words.

Those willing to say they don't know what someone means, even about what appears to be obvious, often are experienced as the smartest people in the group.

When the group does not take the time to pierce jargon to understand what people are really trying to say, the thinking behind statements and proposals remains obscured. Members can help by asking for clarification when they hear people using the same term in different ways. There is an irony here. Those willing to say they don't know what someone means, even about what appears to be obvious, often are eventually experienced as the smartest people in groups.

AGREEMENT 7: DISSENT IN THE ROOM, NOT IN THE HALLWAYS

The group cannot get valid information if members are afraid to differ. What makes people hesitant? Perhaps it is the presence of a senior leader in the room. Perhaps they do not like the feeling of standing up and contradicting or questioning another's reasoning. They may prefer indirect disagreement where they communicate to someone else their opposition so as to avoid confrontation. Or it may be an innate, central block. Research shows that human beings need connection with other people as much as oxygen. The fear here is of severing ties and being left separated and isolated.

In an effective group, each member has to be willing to speak up — at the time, in the place — and constructively go against the grain of statements or proposals that they find inconsistent or inaccurate. Those who are hearing that disagreement have a responsibility to take the occasion as an opportunity for learning, *not* as a defeat. Each must accept the possibility of inaccuracy. That disagreement is another form of the knowledge that groups need to be effective.

In fact, both people in a disagreement have to take it as an opportunity for an experiment, an investigation to discover who has captured reality best for the group. This is true whether the reality is the future of online auto selling, the market for titanium golf clubs, the allure of a tuition reimbursement policy for new hires, or the efficacy of assigning parking spaces based upon length of service. Since the two members in contention are, under these agreements, concerned with finding the truth for the group, it is not a contest of intelligence or competence. It is a way of figuring out which statement is correct.

It may turn out that *both* parties are partially correct and that reality is a hybrid of their positions. That is a good thing for the group to know. At other times, the group will discover *both/and*: *both* are partially correct *and* something completely new has been discovered in exploring the contention, something that is greater than the sum of the two. Whether in this ‘on-the-fly research’ they discover that both are only seeing part of the problem or that they define the problem differently, the process covered by this agreement works to the advantage of the group. The group ends up with more complete and accurate information, and sometimes the quantum leap of the *both/and*.



In this testing of perceptions, participants might usefully recall the advice of Stephen Covey regarding disagreement:

*“Whenever you face an important negotiation, an interpersonal conflict, or a relationship breakdown, if you apply three skills — **Facilitation**, getting the parties together; **Empathy**, seeking first to understand and then to be understood; and **Synergy**, arriving at a creative third alternative — you can resolve most conflicts without extended battles and expensive legal fees.”*

While groups don’t generally have to worry about the latter consequence, they are often beset by protracted and persnickety feuds that boil below the surface of work, frequently erupting into other important interactions. The second skill cited of Covey’s advice is critical here: constrain players in the disagreement from making their own case until they have satisfactorily restated the opposing point of view. Aping the other or reciting his or her words is insufficient; the person must demonstrate to their counterpart’s satisfaction an understanding of the reasoning behind their conclusion.



The weakness in this agreement is that many groups have issues that are taboo; no one is supposed to even acknowledge that they exist. These are certain topics that everyone has silently agreed not to bring up, thus assuring incomplete information. (Roger Schwarz calls these ‘undiscussibles.’) If members are sitting, looking at each other or nervously laughing, then the group may have run into an issue that people are afraid to raise. This is *The Emperor’s New Clothes* concept: something that everybody sees, but no one will say. For example, the CEO’s purchase of the new company was a disaster. The two new VPs hate each other and are trying to destroy each other. The IT guru is spreading misinformation to weaken the COO.

This unwillingness to speak may occur because the members are afraid of the consequences from higher-ups inside or outside the room. Such consequences are real and this agreement should be made knowingly and soberly. If the group does accept

and adhere to this agreement, however, in such situations they will say to each other, “This may be hard for you to hear but . . .” and raise the previously undiscussible topic.

AGREEMENT 8: KEEP THE DISCUSSION FOCUSED

Beware the person who says, “This is off the topic but . . .” The group decides what is relevant but they must monitor whether they get ‘off track.’ Sometimes members will simultaneously start to discuss different issues. To be effective, the group will discuss one thing at a time and build from one aspect to the next in an orderly fashion. This is very difficult for groups that come together infrequently; they are trying to do all sorts of catching up at once. Failure, however, to pursue the conversation in a disciplined fashion results in ineffectiveness and inefficiency.

Experience as facilitators tells us that this simple agreement is breached often. Simply charting the comments of members of a group will show that participants fail to follow each other’s comments or that they flit from one issue to another or that they do not finish off a discussion with some clear resolution. (This is not even counting the number of times that members will simply start speaking to each other without regard to the main conversation that is occurring. This is not multitasking, as some would have it. This spawning of impromptu conversations and remarks is both rudeness and a failure to maintain concentration. The lack of substance in the current conversation may drive such splitting. If that is the case, it is time for the group to break into smaller units. However, the group members should make that a conscious decision.)

Does this mean that all conversations have to possess that characteristic hated by gurus of creative thinking: linearity? No, there is room for some discursiveness, plenty of looping back or recursion, and forays into related topics. The group can figure out its own tolerance and monitor itself accordingly. Paradoxically, the existence of the guideline may allow it to do so more freely. Knowing that one can point out the agreement, that it is there, makes it more likely that members will stay within some useful boundaries.

Not everyone in the room needs to participate in every aspect of every meeting. Members should agree to have offline conversations on issues that do not pertain to the specific topic. People need to be able to ask their peers if a particular example or digression is necessary for the work that the group needs to accomplish together or whether it might better fit in another meeting, in an email, or in a private conversation.

This agreement is arguably the least threatening of all that are proposed here. It is an easy one to follow if members have the discipline to call each other on it and the thick skin not to be embarrassed or angry when they turn out to be the culprit.

AGREEMENT 9: NO SLACKERS, NO ‘VACATIONS’

If you want valid information, then all members have to be fully present, i.e., listening and offering their experiences and views. Members cannot take "time off" in the sessions; each person must contribute.

To gain valid information, all members have to be fully present in the group’s meetings, i.e., listening and offering their experiences and views. Members cannot take ‘time off’ in the sessions; each person must contribute. No excuses are allowed here that others did not want to hear your opinions; if people have agreed to the suggested agreements then this is not an issue.

This does presume that the group is to be a collaborative problem-solving, decision-making body. If the group is merely a body that listens to a ‘chief’ explain what he or she has already decided to do, then lack of spoken participation is no sin and may even save time. Participation in this situation means attentive listening, yet another counter-intuitive practice. For most groups, participation means getting lots of airtime.

So this agreement is about members forcing themselves to be in the room and participating with the right mix of speaking and listening. If a member finds it difficult to be in the room, then those underlying feelings need to be explored, preferably with the other members.

AGREEMENT 10: AGREE TO THE RULES OF THE GAME BEFORE YOU ROLL THE DICE

In Scrabble™ games and collaborative groups, review of how things are to progress is a good idea before the start of play. (In the former case, it avoids those sticky moments when someone tries to use an obscure seven letter Dutch word.) At the formation of the group, the members should agree on how they will make decisions.

Effective groups often make decisions by *consensus*, unanimous support — everyone in a group must fully support a decision for it to go forward. Or they could choose *Quaker consensus* (named after the Society of Friends practice), which means that every member of the group holds a veto, any one person can say no and block the proposed decision. If no one does that, a decision goes forward, even without unanimous support, because no one felt so strongly that they used their veto. However, members may choose other methods, such as *majority rule*, despite its potential for lessened commitment to the decision by dissenting group members.

Or, they could have different rules depending on the kind of decision, e.g., majority rule for most decisions and consensus for key or strategic matters.

Whatever the method, the group is well served by getting it squared away up front and then adhering to it. When the group is about to make a decision, ask: "How is it that we are going to decide this?"

AGREEMENT 11: REVIEW THE ABOVE AGREEMENTS REGULARLY

Groups learn from their successes and mistakes in their process. These suggested agreements for effective groups represent a framework for looking at process. In this way, the group can reflect on what is working and what is getting in the way of sharing valid information. This is just as important as their reflection on the results of their specific task; perhaps more so in that it allows them to do a better job as a group next time.

Participants should force themselves to stop at certain moments (e.g., the end of the day) and ask how they are doing in following these principles: "What agreements did we use well or poorly?"

For more on action learning itself, groups can find additional resources, such as the website and links at <http://idt.net/~tjell/actlrng7.html>.

Conclusion

Earlier in this document, the point was made that agreements are made to be changed, if not broken. Agreements are a starting point when given in a generic form, such as those found in this document. They valuably raise the issues of assumptions and valid information and attitude. They cannot cover all the possibilities that a group holds. What is important is that a group discuss the sorts of agreements that they want to have, that they must have, in order to not only accomplish the task before them but to become better as a group in handling the tasks that are to come.

Such agreements are in tune with Eric Trist's and Wilfred Bion's findings about the effectiveness of groups that are self-managed, that work out their own way of operating. Therefore, groups might choose to alter their agreements as time goes on. The point of the agreement is not in itself but as a means of group members getting to what Abraham Maslow called "the full use and exploitation of talents, capacities, potentialities . . . developing to the full stature of which they are capable." The point of this pamphlet is to assist those groups (and the organizations to which they belong) to fully exploit all of their possibilities while assuring their immediate productivity.

References

- Argyris, C. (1982). Reasoning, learning, and action: Individual and organizational. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Argyris, C., Putnam, R., Smith, D. M. (1985). Action science. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Argyris, C. (1990). Overcoming organizational defenses. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Argyris, C., & Schön, D. (1974). Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Argyris, C., & Schön, D. (1978). Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Covey, S. (1989). The seven habits of highly successful people. New York, NY: Fireside.
- DeGeus, A. (1997). The Living Company. Boston: Harvard Business Press.
- Hackman, J.R. (1989). Work teams in organizations: An orienting framework. In J.R. Hackman (Ed.), *Groups that work (and those that don't): Creating conditions for effective teamwork*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hackman, J.R. (1990). *Groups that work (and those that don't): Creating conditions for effective teamwork*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kaner, S. (1996). Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making. New Society Publishers/Canada.
- McMaster, Michael D. (1997). The Praxis Equation: Design Principles for Intelligent Organization. Douglas, Isle of Man: Knowledge Based Development.
- Schön, D. (1983). The reflective practitioner. Basic Books, Inc.
- Schwarz, R.M. (1994). The skilled facilitator. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Weick, K. (1995). Sensemaking in organizations. SAGE Publications.
- Weisbord, Marvin R. & Janoff, Sandra. (1995). Future Search: An action guide to finding common ground in organizations and communities. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.