

Best Meeting™ Rules of Engagement

As facilitators, we use some “rules of engagement” that help us guide the focus, pace, and group dynamics of strategic client meetings.

There are 12 rules that we find particularly useful that can be grouped by what they contribute to the session:

- building **shared understanding** across the group,
- optimizing the **energy flow** in the room,
- supporting **openness** in the dialogue, and
- generating powerful and practical **results**.

Typically, we will use no more than six of these rules in any one session, selecting the ones that will best match the nature of the assembled group and the expected outcomes of the session or sessions.

Building Shared Understanding

Building shared understanding is – or should be – a primary goal of any strategic session and of any facilitated session for that matter. By the end of the meeting – or series of meetings – the members of the group have a shared view of what’s most important in moving the organization or project forward. The three rules in this group focus on getting people to spend more time *listening* – and listening *deeply* – than expressing their own well-established views of the world. Listening is hard work, so it needs considerable reinforcement if it’s to happen.

The rules in this group cover:

- one speaker,
- dialogue versus discussion, and
- suspend judgment.

1. One speaker at a time, please!

On the surface, this rule means only one person speaking at a time: no side conversations, and no interrupting the person who has the floor.

But the “one speaker” rule is about more than having just one person speaking at a time. The real crux of this rule is what we do while listening.

● **ONE SPEAKER**

It is about ensuring that each person in the room is actively listening to the one speaker, with the intent of fully understanding what the speaker is saying and meaning, from that person’s perspective. It is not about listening to determine what to say next, either to support or rebut a point being made by the current speaker.

As with so many Rules of Engagement, this one supports the ultimate objective of developing a shared understanding of the subject matter.

2. Concentrate on dialogue, not discussion.

With this, the facilitator encourages all present to engage in *dialogue* rather than *discussion*.

Dialogue comes from the Greek **dia** meaning “through,” and **logos** which translates to “the word” or “meaning.” In essence, a dialogue is a flow of meaning. That is, the meaning passing through the whole group, out of which may emerge some new understanding.

● **DIALOGUE versus DISCUSSION**

The object of dialogue is not to analyze things, or to win an argument, or to exchange opinions. Rather, it is to suspend your opinions and to listen to and look at everybody’s opinions, and to see what all that means. Out of this dialogue emerges new insight and understanding.

Dialogue is the collective way of opening up judgments and assumptions.

Discussion, on the other hand, comes from the same root as percussion and concussion, and literally means “heaving your ideas over to the other side.”

Once again, this is a rule that supports the generation of shared meaning and understanding.

3. Suspend judgment – favourable or unfavourable – until all views have been heard.

This rule is sometimes incorporated within the “dialogue versus discussion” rule, and sometimes introduced on its own.

In any brainstorming activity, it’s important is not to *judge* or *evaluate* ideas as they are put forward. This normally means not expressing the judgment that you are feeling inside (“Well, *that’s* a stupid idea!”). As humans, it is virtually impossible stop judging – it’s part of who we are, and we’ve had lots of practice doing it. What we *can* do, is suspend that judgment for a while – grabbing it and hanging it up on a hook off to one side – and go back to listening to the speaker to ensure full and complete understanding of what the speaker is saying and meaning.

● **SUSPEND JUDGMENT**

One does not discard judgment, ... you may need to grab it and use it later on in the evaluation stage. You have merely deferred your judgment, not lost it.

Optimizing the Energy Flow in the Room

The flow of personal, interpersonal creative energy in a strategic session is a critical success factor. The conditions in the room often work to dampen or constrain this energy flow through sitting for long periods of time in a room that has no natural light and stale air that is either too hot or too cold. Further, there is the nature of group meetings, having to listen to others expound at length about something that’s important to them, concentrating intently on challenging issues that have never been solved, having your comments negated by a colleague however unintentionally, and getting distracted thinking about urgent operational things that need to get done.

To counteract these environmental challenges, I often use these rules to stimulate quick energy boosts, eliminate blocks in the conversation, and allow participants to change their perspectives.

This second group covers:

- cherish your lightness,
- no “buts,” and
- change chairs.

4. *It's OK to have lighter moments and refreshing breaks.*

Often in group meetings, the discussion can get very serious and draining our individual and collective energy. When this happens, our energy fields compress around us, and we can often literally feel that pressure.

- *CHERISH YOUR LIGHTNESS*

With this in mind, it is important to allow the pressure to be released and expand to productively embrace the whole group. This can be done through benign humor and managed breaks, like a stretching session in the early afternoon.

On the humorous side, it can be useful to insert some 30-second video spots just prior to a refreshment break. And it's even more useful when these spots have a message, e.g., around suspending judgment.

5. *Try replacing “but” with “and.”*

The word “but” implies “mutual exclusivity.” When I hear the phrase “everything but the kitchen sink,” and look in the pile of stuff, I will see lots of things and no kitchen sink. When I look over to the kitchen sink there is nothing else around it. The two piles are mutually exclusive – they don't exist in the same space.

Now, when we use the word “but” in our normal day-to-day language, we are often using it in that “mutually exclusive” way that negates what has just been said. *“That sounds like a really good idea, but we've never been able to make that work here.”* What follows the “but” replaces that which precedes it.

- *NO “BUTS”*

It's much better to encourage people, when they feel a “but” coming on, to turn it around and let it come out as an “and.” “I sense that that is a good idea, **and** we've never been able to make it work here.” The “and” brings these two concepts into the same space, which is the way it should be. And at this point, there will be a greater tendency now to work with the good idea and see how it can be reconfigured to work in our current situation.

So the simple command is to replace the **but** with an **and** before it emerges from the mouth. Logically this can work and be more powerful in at least 95% of the cases.

6. *Don't allow participants to get too comfortable in their chairs.*

Have you ever noted how much we are all creatures of habit. We go into a meeting and select our seat at the table, we tend to return to that same seat for the rest of the meeting.

The facilitator will use this rule to shake things up a bit, instructing participants to take a different seat or sit beside a different person after refreshment or other breaks.

- *CHANGE CHAIRS*

The purpose of doing this is to give everyone an opportunity to have a different vantage point and hence a different after perspective on the dialogue.

It's also a great way of keeping the individual and collective energy flowing in the room.

Supporting Openness in the Dialogue

Without openness in the session dialogue, it is very difficult to reach complete and comprehensive shared understanding. Everyone in the room needs to feel welcome to put their ideas – however different or even crazy – on the table. To support this, we need to understand how we each approach discussion and dialogue – from those who need to reflect before contributing to those who want to jump right in, even before the question has been asked – and be able to accommodate those differences. We also need to confirm that every participant has an equal right to contribute, and that anything can be put on the table, unless it's been specifically taken *off* the table at the beginning of the meeting.

The rules in this third group cover:

- “full” participation,
- no “sacred cows,” and
- everyone is “equal.”

7. “Full” participation is our collective responsibility.

Participation styles vary. Some of us like to get our own thoughts in order, and spend some thinking time to make a few notes before putting them forward to the group.

- **“FULL” PARTICIPATION**

Others of us are more comfortable building on the ideas that others have put forward, expanding, reshaping, and using them as a springboard for creating new ideas.

Still others need to “rev their engines,” getting their mouths working well before engaging their brains.

All three are valid ways of participating and need to be honoured as well as accommodated. As a result, the facilitator, upon posing a question for the group to answer, will instruct the group to take two or three minutes to write down their thoughts before sharing them.

8. There are no “sacred cows,” ...everything is on the table.

This rule is sometimes expressed as “nothing is undiscussible.” It means that everything can be put on the table for review unless it has been specifically taken *off* the table by the executive sponsor at the beginning of the session.

- **NO “SACRED COWS”**

Referring to that, at the opening of the facilitated meeting, the executive sponsor has an opportunity to identify items around which decisions have already been made, and that are therefore no longer up for review. These are what I refer to as the “Going-in Givens” or “non-negotiables.” It may be, for example, that in a previous session the team had made some decisions around what constituted “success” over the five-year planning horizon. That being

the case, the current session could be about what are we going to put in place to get there. The executive sponsor may identify start off with, *"We've spent enough time painting our picture of the future. We know it's going to change over time, but by and large it is a future that can be ours. So let's concentrate on what we're going to do to get there, and how we're going to do that."*

Under this rule, the facilitator sometimes may need to take a strong stand when a participant puts an idea on the table that others don't want to spend any time on. It is at this point that the facilitator can open it up to the group and ask, *"Are you prepared to spend some time on this now? And if so, how much?"* This allows the group to honor the intent of the rule, while ensuring things do not go off track totally.

9. For the purpose of the dialogue, everyone is equal.

In the context of a facilitated meeting, it is usually beneficial to build an environment in which everyone in the room has the opportunity to participate fully at an equal level. During the dialogue, no one should have any more authority than anyone else. This allows for the free flow of ideas and comments with the intention of building a fully shared understanding of the subject matter and making a collective decision on it.

● **EVERYONE "EQUAL"**

When the session is over, authority reverts to its rightful owners, enabling the implementation of decisions to begin.

Generating Powerful and Practical Results

Of course, the key reason for any strategic meeting is to have the group collectively generate some specific stated outcomes. These outcomes should be important to everyone in the room, and if they're *not* important to some, we question why those individuals are in the meeting. When they're important, everyone in the room needs to be focused on making those outcomes a reality. Here are three rules that support that responsibility and help ensure there are no loose ends at the end of the meeting.

This fourth group covers:

- take responsibility for success,
- commitment/compliance, and
- no "abandoned cars."

10. The success of a meeting is everyone's responsibility.

Very often, participants who are not formally responsible for running a meeting, or parts of it, sit back and let the meeting unfold, sometimes allowing it to drift in a direction that is not useful.

In our experience, when everyone in the room assumes some responsibility for the success of the meeting, there is a much greater probability that the meeting will be productive and worthwhile.

● **TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR SUCCESS**

Taking responsibility for success means interjecting when you feel, as a participant, that something is not quite right with the process or the dialogue. It means declaring one's discomfort with the direction in which things are going. At this point, the chair of the meeting or

facilitator can manage a discussion around process and explore what might be done differently going forward. The group may decide, collectively, to continue along the same route. However, the air will have been cleared, and everyone will be able to get back to participating.

The importance of this rule is that it underscores the fact that participants will *own* the decisions and choices that are made, and so must also *own* the *way in which* those decisions are made.

11. We need to know where you're at with decisions that we make.

In many cases, it can be difficult – if not inadvisable – to ensure everybody is fully committed to the results of the session by the end of the day.

Instead, we can declare where we are on a hierarchy of commitment and self-compliance.

ENROLLMENT
COMMITMENT

GENUINE COMPLIANCE
FORMAL COMPLIANCE
GRUDGING COMPLIANCE
NON- COMPLIANCE

● COMMITMENT/COMPLIANCE

At the first level above the line we have COMMITMENT. That means that I am not only fully supportive of the decisions and choices we've made, I am emotionally engaged as well. At a higher level than that, I have reached a level of ENROLLMENT where I am not only passionately committed, I want to take a strong leadership role in the implementation or execution.

Below the line, we have several levels of COMPLIANCE. This is not the kind of compliance we think of in a regulatory sense; rather it is my own personal sense of the degree to which I support the choices and decisions being made.

At the highest level of compliance is GENUINE COMPLIANCE. This is where I declare that I believe that what we have chosen is the right way to go. I'm not necessarily emotionally attached to it, but it is still the right way to go.

At the next level, FORMAL COMPLIANCE, my feeling is that the choices are directionally valid, but I know that the *Devil's in the details* and, as we proceed to implement, we may need to alter our direction. So I'm supporting it for now, ...at least until we get into the next steps.

GRUDGING COMPLIANCE is where we begin to run into difficulty with the group's support of decisions and choices. GRUDGING COMPLIANCE is effectively saying "it's not really necessary, but I will support it as long as you're watching." At this level, the individual goes back to his or her business unit and declares something along the lines of, "this too shall pass, so just hunker down until it's over."

The final stage, NON-COMPLIANCE, is where the rest of the group is not even sure where a participant stands.

The importance of presenting this hierarchy is to note that, first, to be successful we need to have everyone in the room at least at the level of FORMAL COMPLIANCE, directionally supporting the decisions and choices made. Second, it is important for everyone in the room to *declare* where they are on the scale. There is no penalty for being at the level of GRUDGING COMPLIANCE – we just need to know. Often, when somebody is at the level of GRUDGING COMPLIANCE, he or she

has a perspective on one or more of the decisions that would be very useful to share, get out in the open, and address. That's because, if it's not addressed in this environment of dialogue, it has the chance of becoming a real problem when it gets out into the world of implementation.

12. No “abandoned cars” will be left in the Parking Lot.

This rule ensures that nothing is left hanging at the end of the session.

During the session, it is often useful to use a flip chart with the title ***Parking Lot*** on the top.

Then, as topics come up that are not part of the main dialogue, at least at that point, a note can be parked on the sheet, enabling it to be addressed either later in the session or after the session.

- **NO “ABANDONED CARS”**

At the end of the session, the chair or facilitator will review the *Parking Lot* to ensure that either the issue has been addressed in the dialogue, or someone has been identified to take responsibility for fleshing out the details before bringing it back to the team.

Thus the phrase, no “abandoned cars” left in the parking lot.