

Creating Community Agreements

Overview

Developing community agreements is a powerful strategy for coalescing a group into a team. The process of constructing agreements is often more important than the product. Agreements come from a consensus-driven process to identify what every person in the group needs from each other and commits to each other to feel safe, supported, open and trusting. As such, they provide a common framework for how people aspire to work and be together as they take transformational action.

Tips for Developing Community Agreements

1. Frame the Conversation

- **Take time to define what a community agreement means.** Modify this definition if helpful:
"A consensus on what every person in our group needs from each other and commits to each other in order to feel safe, supported, open, productive and trusting... SO THAT we can serve our students (or clients) well, do our best work, and achieve our common vision."
- **Delineate agreements from "rules" and "norms".**

Agreements are an aspiration, or collective vision, for how we want to be in relationship with one another. They are explicitly developed and enforced by the group, not by an external authority, and as such must represent a consensus.

Norms are the ways in which we behave and are currently in relationship to each other, whether consciously and explicitly or not.

Rules are mandated and enforced by an authority, and do not necessarily reflect the will or buy-in of the group.

- **Explain that there are two types of community agreements:**

Relational community agreements are about how we want to be in relationship with each other (e.g. speak your truth using "I" statements; stay present; listen fully; seek out multiple perspectives).

Operational agreements identify procedures or structures we all agree to use (e.g. start & end on time; limit cell phone use; include process observations at each meeting; end with clear next steps).



- **Explain “why” community agreements matter.**
 - We can’t achieve our vision in a hostile, disrespectful, or undermining group culture.
 - Some of the most critical conversations teams need to have are emotional, painful, and uncomfortable (e.g., equity issues, examining individual teacher practice), but we won’t engage or make ourselves vulnerable without emotional safety and trust.
 - Staff relationships model for students how human relationships should be; staff culture shapes school culture.
 - Healthy staff culture is key to personal sustainability in the challenging jobs of education.

2. Engage People in the Process

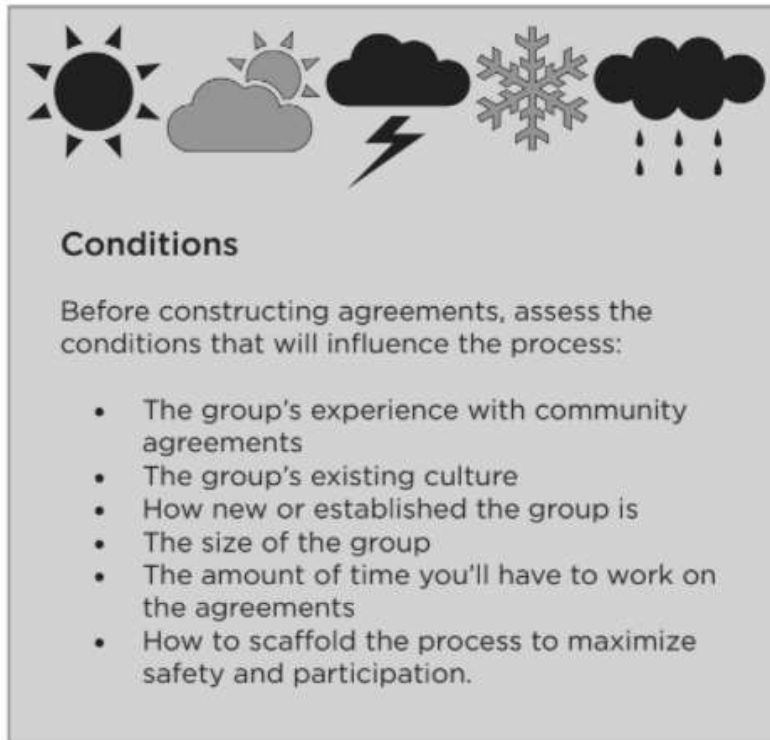
There are many pathways to engage your team in the process of developing community agreements. Take time to assess the factors to the right before designing a process that best meets your group where they are.

Here’s a suggested approach to engaging people in the process:

1. **Journal on a prompt**, e.g. “What do you need from every person in this group in order to feel safe, supported, open, productive and trusting... SO THAT we can serve our students well, do our best work, and achieve our common vision?”
2. **Pairs or trios share list.** Ask these groups to agree on their top 1 -3 agreements in priority order, and rewrite each one in a simple phrase or sentence. You will likely need to model this.
3. **Each pair or trio shares only their top agreement with the large group and explains why it is important to them.** Large group asks clarifying questions, then discuss. When time expires, test for consensus with thumbs up/down/sideways. If no consensus, set aside.
4. **Repeat process for each pair or trio.**
5. **After meeting, facilitator simplifies language and synthesizes agreements under thematic headers.**
6. **Revised list brought back to large group in subsequent meeting for final approval.**



COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS



Anytime people gather as a group we form both a community and a culture. At the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group conference, we seek a community and culture that is respectful, comfortable, open, curious, and kind. Community Agreements help us identify concrete ways to create that culture and to talk about and through conflict. Using these practices and tools we can challenge ourselves and each other while still recognizing we're all coming from different places of knowing and transforming.

All conference participants have agreed to abide by these agreements. Please be mindful of your own actions, be open to observations of your behavior and be open to sharing feedback with others regarding their actions.

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Our Community Agreements are:

- **Be Curious, Open, and Respectful** - call in not out/throw sunshine not shade
- **No one knows everything** - together we know a lot
- **We can't be articulate all the time** - give the benefit of the doubt and ask questions
- **We take care of ourselves** - stretch, eat, drink, use the restroom, rest, etc.
- **Confidentiality** - don't speak for others without explicit permission, don't share something communicated in a private or safe space.
- **One mic** - one voice at a time



COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

- **Take Space/Make Space** – if you are usually quiet challenge yourself to take more space, and if you usually talk a lot be mindful to leave room for quieter voices
- **Avoid Jargon, Acronyms, and Industry language** – use inclusive language that is accessible for people with varying inside knowledge
- **Be aware of time** – enough let's move on (ELMO) means if what you wanted to say has already been said, don't say it
- **Speak from your own experience** – Use I statements rather than generalizations. Challenge assumptions
- **Be conscious of intent vs. impact** – no matter intention you're responsible for your impact
- **Avoid using isms** without explaining what you mean by them.

Community Assumptions:

- All systems of oppression exist
- We are all here because we want and choose to be here
- We live at intersections, we all benefit and are harmed by systematic oppression
- It is not useful to argue about which system is worse
- All systems are interconnected
- Dismantling systems of oppression benefits everyone
- Confronting social injustice is painful and joyful
- Liberation is possible
- Everyone has a choice in any situation
- The body doesn't lie
- Opposing systems of oppression, building alternatives, and cultural change are all necessary

Group Agreements

- Speak personally, for yourself as an individual.
- Avoid assigning intentions, beliefs, or motives to others.
- Assume positive intent.
- Ask others questions instead of stating untested assumptions.
- Honor each person's right to "pass" his/her turn.
- Allow others to finish before you speak.
- Share "air time" – use the guideline of "you then two."
- Respect all confidentiality or anonymity requests. Stay on topic. Call people and groups by the names and pronouns they prefer.
- Honor new voices.

Proposed Guidelines for Conversations re: Equity

- **Acknowledge that racism is a problem.** This is the starting point of the conversation.
- **Assume good intentions.** Everyone is in this room because they desire to learn and to make things better.



- **Acknowledge emotions upfront, but do not let them overtake the conversation.** It is important that people be allowed to express how they feel and for people to be okay with discomfort.
- **Take care of yourself; take care of the group.**

How We Work Together

Everyone, regardless of social status has equal opportunity of participation, and all members of the steering committee/board and general membership need to ensure that in all processes of working together equal opportunity happens.

Inequality exists everywhere (whether we like it or not), even in social justice spaces. Gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, disabilities, ethnicity/ethnic heritage, age, size, class, and citizenship status are some of the more obvious examples of how people can be marginalized.

We also live in a capitalist society that measures our worth by outputs and outcomes, and quantifies our production and productivity. This is an ablest model, in which we want to move away from by setting our own agenda and do things because we want to, not because we feel pressure to.

Members agree to lessen the negative effects of as many of these oppressive ideologies as possible, because they are all interconnected and relevant to our work. This is done through commitment of learning and unlearning through workshops, policy-making, community collaborations, etc. and can be done collectively.

Members have the right to a safer space where they feel comfortable to have their own agency and their contributions have worth, assert their own boundaries, and can share their own needs.

Members shall seek meaningful and inclusive mediation to help resolve conflicts within the group. All parties involved must agree with the process. This should be done with a third-party outside the group that has no conflict of interest (unless no options are available, a third-party with experience with conflict resolution reflective of our group constitution and guidelines is highly recommended) group members are accountable to each other and the community at large, and are responsible for direct and open communication, transparency, and how we share and distribute power.

How we create, implement, and ensure safer spaces

Group guidelines/community agreements will be created by and for group members sharing any given space, i.e. steering committee/board, subcommittees, community gatherings/events.

Group guidelines/community agreements will be reviewed at the beginning of meetings each time a new person has joined group guidelines/community agreements can be elaborated on with stories for clarity and understanding.

COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

Group guidelines/community agreements are working documents in continuous development, and will be reviewed and up for modification every other meeting suggestions for group guidelines are:

- Platinum rule (treat others the way they want to be treated)
- Always have check-ins
- API - Assume Positive Intent - not everyone comes in with the same set of experiences and knowledge, so assume that people have good intent. Please have positive intent yourself, and be accountable for the impact of your actions and words as well.
- Confidentiality - share lessons learned; names and identifiers stay
- Don't yuck my yum" / "don't giggle my wiggle" -people have different tastes and preferences. avoid statements such as "i hate that" or "eww!". and we
- All have different experiences and struggles.
- No shaming and/or belittling each other and ourselves
- Use "I" statements - speak from your own experiences rather than generalizing
- Self-care: give care to ourselves, however that may be
 - Take breaks from meetings/organizing if needed
 - Pass on/delegate responsibilities if needed
 - Saying yes and no when we mean it
 - Asserting healthy boundaries
- All spaces shared by members (i.e. meetings, events) must be as physically and socially accessible as possible
 - Wheelchair accessible entrances, washrooms, seating
 - Sign language interpretation and/or live captioning
 - Hearing language interpretation
 - Childcare available onsite
 - Bus tickets for youth, students, elders, and low-income folks
 - Scent-free/scent-reduced spaces
 - Ongoing reflections of abled, anglophone, middle/upper class and other
 - Intersecting privileges and supremacist cultures etc.
- Members will do workshops and/or take trainings related to anti-oppression at least twice a year
- Create an accountability and conflict resolution process via structure
- Create resources for self-care

What self-care can look like for our meetings:

Pre-meeting:

- Have some food beforehand to avoid the "hanger" that can affect the process in a meeting.
- Do what you need to do to come into the space clear of mental clutter to be fully present.
- Check-in with yourself to see if you have the capacity to attend the meeting. Maybe you need a break, and that's a-ok.
- Take breaks from meetings/organizing if needed.



- Breathe. sometimes we're in a rush to get to meetings. Take time to breathe, slow down, and ground yourself.
- Try to come prepared. take time to gather supplies and the things you'll need for the meeting to avoid feeling flustered and stressed while in the meeting. it can be your laptop, water bottle, pen and notepad, notes you've made, etc. and if you forget something, that's ok too. Be kind to yourself.
- Repeat: be kind to yourself (because reminders never hurt).

During a meeting:

- Meet your physical needs. if you need to go to the washroom, go right ahead. Bring food if you need. there's access to water as well. Stay hydrated!
- Assert healthy boundaries.
 - Having the agency to say "yes" or "no" when you mean it.
 - Communicate with the group your needs.
 - Pass on/delegate tasks and responsibilities if needed. We're all human and can't do everything despite our want to. Feel free to ask for help.
- Take breaks if you need.
- If you need to leave the space to take time to yourself, feel free to do so.

Post - meeting:

- Go out for food after if you're hungry, and it can double up as a social event with fellow members
- Make time to care for yourself. Sometimes our meetings can be long and draining, do what you need to do to refuse and de-stress yourself.
 - Take an energizing walk or exercise
 - Take some introverted time, such as reading a book, having a bath, listening to good music
 - Have a social activity with friends planned afterwards to look forward to
 - Have a nap/go to bed, if it's an evening meeting
- Sometimes you may feel overwhelmed with action items to do. Create a list or plan out how you might be able to make the workload more manageable over time. It might help put your mind at ease and reduce anxiety over the tasks. And again, always feel free to ask for help or pass work on if you need.

Expect and Presume Welcome/Establish Brave Space

In difficult conversations our learning often comes through our own discomfort and risk taking. By avoiding conflict or keeping others "comfortable" you may miss the opportunity to authentically engage with others or further your own understanding. However, we also recognize that sometimes our words create harm despite our best intentions. We acknowledge we are here to learn in community with one another. By centering our work on our shared goals and values and approaching conversations with respect and generosity we will further our shared learning.

Move Up, Move Up

If you are someone who tends to not speak a lot, please move up into a role of speaking more. If you tend to speak a lot, please move up into a role of listening more. If you are facilitating, this is an opportunity to notice and acknowledge power dynamics in the room – who is talking first? Who is holding power because of their role (like the facilitator), status, or identity? Who is disengaging or observing instead of actively participating?

Respect and Honor Silence and Confidentiality

This is not “share or die,” but what is shared should remain confidential within the Group.

Be Present

Engage in active listening and be aware of your thoughts and feelings in the moment. What do you need to stay present and engaged? Limit technology and distractions to only that which furthers your learning.

Speak Your Truth and Let Others Speak Theirs

Different perspectives are welcome and encouraged. Speak from your own lived experience and not from experience that you do not personally have. Your normal may not be my normal.

No One Knows Everything; Together We Know a Lot

Shared learning is a practice in humility, because we have something to learn from everyone in the room. It also means we all have a responsibility to share what we know, as well as our questions, so that others may learn from us.

Honor Time Agreements

This is helpful for your facilitators and trainers as well as your fellow learners and respects the commitments we have made to one another.

No Fixing, No Saving

We are here to do our own work and to be in community with one another. Listen deeply and allow others to experience their own discomfort, which may further their own learning. If you find yourself wanting to “fix” a situation or alleviate someone else’s (or your own) discomfort, take a moment to reflect on what is coming up for you.

When Your Mind Starts to Judge, Instead Turn to Wonder

Approach problems and challenges from a place of curiosity and creative thinking rather from a point of frustration or judgment. This includes staying open to feedback and inquiry that others may offer you.

We Are Human, Not Perfect (We Can’t Be Articulate All of the Time)

As much as we’d like to be, we are human and therefore imperfect. We can’t always be articulate. Often people feel hesitant to participate for fear of “messing up” or stumbling over their words. We encourage everyone to participate, even if you can’t get it right all the time.



Expect and Accept Non-Closure

We want to solve problems and resolve conflict, but this is lifelong work. Many racial justice conversations focus on awareness-raising and the development of our own racial justice competence, not necessarily the transformation of others. Sometimes you may have to revisit conversations to reconcile differences and in other cases, things will go left unsaid, unfinished.

"What guidelines can we agree on now in order to create a learning environment in which we can ask each other anything?" (From the work of Claude Steele)

Steps for Creating Community Agreements

1. Seek to Create Active Learning (Not "Safe") Space – reserve "safe space" terminology for trauma-related healing spaces.
2. Recognize Common Pitfalls – learn from the facilitation literature and share key concepts (e.g. intent vs. impact; centering voices of marginalized people, etc.) with students.
3. Co-Create Agreements/Solicit Student Input – facilitate brainstorming, revisioning, and prioritizing processes.
4. Define Behaviors – help move student language from broad concepts (e.g., "Be respectful") to specific behaviors (e.g. what does respect look like? do we listen deeply to things that are harmful?).
5. Build Consensus – ask students to agree on each rule, and gain consensus before enacting.
6. Create a Contingency Plan – collaboratively decide how you will respond when an agreement is breached.
7. Develop Check-In Procedures – check-in regularly on how well the class is adhering to ground rules.
8. Keep the Ground Rules Visible – create a shared document or visual that keeps the ground rules visible in every class.

Resources:

- Adapted from: Jennifer Stephens & Laura Pipe, [Just Classrooms: Promoting Equity in Teaching](#)
- Aorta: http://aorta.coop/portfolio_page/tips-and-tools-for-addressing-systemic-power/
- Cultures Connecting: <http://culturesconnecting.com/products/>
- Fleur Larsen Facilitation: <http://www.fleurlarsenfacilitation.com>
- Adapted from <https://diversity.missouri.edu/education/handouts/facilitation-guide-dept-race.pdf>
- <http://www.racialequityvtnea.org/racial-justice-alliances/establishing-norms/>
- East Bay Meditation Center: Community Agreements
- University of Michigan, CRLT: [Establishing Ground Rules or Guidelines](#)
- AORTA, <http://www.aorta.coop>

