

Creating the Container for Good Meetings

Before we get focused on the contents of a meeting or retreat you are facilitating, it helps to ask the participants to co-create with you a safe container in which that work can happen. (Some people talk about this as setting “ground rules,” but to me that feels more like a set of demands, rather than something you are creating together.) There is no one set of agreements that works for every group or meeting, but I always offer a few that I find helpful, and also ask participants to state what they need. I always write these up on a wall sheet and post them for the duration of the meeting.

Here is some of the language I usually offer in **suggesting agreements**:

Active Listening – Rather than staying focused on what is going on in our own heads (normal, but not so useful sometimes), I invite you to focus your attention on what is being said, to stay in the present, and to trust that everybody’s ideas have value.

Stand in Curiosity, Not Judgment – Following from the last request, I invite you to stand in curiosity for the next X hours, to let go of the monkey mind on your shoulder who will tell you that you shouldn’t say (or ask) that because you might be wrong (or look foolish, or be saying something irrelevant, or whatever that voice says in your ear), or whatever other criticisms your inner critic likes to make. Let go of the impulse to judge yourself and others – this is a very low- stakes environment (I’m not your boss or the person interviewing you for a job, nor am I going to grade your performance). Just let yourself stay curious about what comes up for you, and what sort of experiences other people might be having that are different from yours.

Stepping Up and Stepping Back – If you are one of those people for whom participating in large groups is easy (extroverted types, or those with lots of practice), please do participate, but do also leave room for the more introverted types who don’t leap in so quickly (the people who prefer to bake the idea first and then present it once it’s “done”). I am very comfortable with silence – I won’t be anxious if we ask a question and nobody answers in the first 10 seconds, so we invite you to be comfortable with that too. We also invite those of you who find it harder to speak, who prefer to bake your ideas to perfection before you present them, to be brave and let some half-baked sentences out; even if they are not quite ready for prime time, if you are thinking them, odds are good other people have similar ideas or questions and it will be great to have them out where we can see them.

Confidentiality – I ask you to commit to keeping confidential what is said by participants in the room. You have permission to share any story I use, since I get permission before sharing stories, and to talk about your own experience, but please don’t share other people’s stories, even without names attached. This will make it more likely that people will bring up all the things that we need to hear in order to do good work together.

Anything Else – What other agreements you need to feel good and safe doing this work together?