

Creating the Container for Good Meetings

Before focusing on the contents of a meeting or retreat you are facilitating, it helps to **ask the participants to co-create 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. Below are some options to consider drawing on. Sometimes I offer some suggestions up front and then invite participants to edit, remove, and add others. Sometimes I invite the group to generate agreements without providing suggestions first. Providing suggestions is usually faster, but models a top-down, “expert-led” approach. I prefer when possible to start with input from the group and then add suggestions as needed to **move a group beyond their existing assumptions about what is needed to create a brave and inclusive space.**

Once you have established the agreements, **write them on a wall sheet** and post them for the duration of the meeting. If these agreements will be used for multiple meetings, post them again at each meeting.

Agreements You Might Suggest

Below is **language I have often offered as suggested agreements.** (The bold is what I write on the wall sheet, and the rest is a version of what I share verbally.)

I am starting with these because they (a) are likely familiar to many of you, (b) are a not unreasonable basic frame for cultivating participatory decision-making, and (c) I have many years of experience using them. Below these agreements, you will find some agreements proposed by two groups deeply experienced in centering equity and inclusion practices in their work. **These days, I draw on all of these and what participants propose, to craft a set of agreements for creating a brave space where good work can happen.**

1. Practice Active Listening.

Rather than staying focused on what is happening 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 everyone’s ideas have value.

2. 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 inner critic on your shoulder who will tell you that you shouldn't say (or ask) that because you might be wrong, or foolish, or irrelevant, or whatever other criticisms your inner critic likes to make. Let go of the impulse to judge yourself and others. 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.

3. **Assume Good Intentions and Be Aware that Impact and Intent are Not the Same.**

We need to balance the very useful open-mindedness that comes when we assume all of us are intending to be useful and create a good outcome even when we don't agree, with the recognition that our words and actions can have unintended impacts. If we are going to shift existing privilege-patterns and create equitable and inclusive environments where we can actually "successfully integrate divergent points of view into creativity and wisdom" (Sam Kaner), it is critical that we deepen our understanding of how the systems of white supremacy, the patriarchy, and other related structures shape our assumptions and experiences, and show up in how we express ourselves. This requires that those of us in the privileged positions be genuinely open to feedback about the limitations of our assumptive frameworks and any unintentional impacts of our language and actions.

4. **Lean In and Lean 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 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 I ask a question and nobody answers in the first 10 seconds – so I invite you to be comfortable with that too. I 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 feel not quite ready, odds are good other people have similar ideas or questions and it will be great to have them out where we can see them.

5. **Maintain 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.

6. **Anything Else?**

What other agreements do you need to feel good and safe doing this work together?

Centering Equity and Inclusion

As I work toward centering equity and inclusion in my own work, I am exploring **alternative or additional agreements that support the creation of brave spaces**, where people will be more willing and able to take risks, accept feedback, and work toward understanding of our very different experiences inside this culture that is rooted in the values and norms of white supremacy, the patriarchy, and late-stage capitalism. Below are two sets of agreements developed by groups focused on this work.

Agreements Discussed in [From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces](#).

1. **Controversy with Civility** (as opposed to “agree to disagree”)

“...different views are expected and honored with a group commitment to understanding the sources of disagreement and to work cooperatively toward common solutions.”
2. **Own Your Intentions and Your Impact** (as opposed to “don’t take it personally”)

“(Both) intention and impact matter... (T)he impact of our actions is not always congruent with our intentions, and... positive or neutral intentions do not trump negative impact.”
3. **Challenge by Choice** AND “consider what factors might be keeping you from challenging yourself” or a particular dynamic in the group.
4. **Respect**

Agree to be respectful AND discuss as part of setting this agreement that “respect” looks different in different cultures and to different people, that we want to find ways to “firmly and respectfully challenge others and ...respond (respectfully) when firmly and respectfully challenged.” This discussion will link back to the Controversy with Civility agreement.
5. **No Attacks**

As part of inviting this agreement, discuss the difference between personal attacks (i.e. “You’re a jerk”) and challenges to ideas or assertions (i.e. “I find that idea to be heterosexist”). “(Help) participants remember that pointed challenges are not necessarily attacks, but the uncomfortable that may result can sometimes lead to a defensive reaction. The attention can then be turned away from the distraction of the non-attack and toward the roots of the defensive response—more often than not, a sense of threat to...privilege...”

Agreements from [CEFS CORE Racial Equity Toolkit](#)

Create a sense of mutual understanding, shared power, relationship and expectation by offering a few "agreements". These are simply a set of general norms that will guide the conversation and hold everyone involved accountable for their actions and contributions.

1. **Be Brave. Take Risks.**
(Nothing can substitute for experience.)
2. **Be Here Now.**
(Be present and aware of yourself and those around you.)
3. **Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway.**
(Take this opportunity to embrace the discomfort and see it as a curve for further learning and engagement.)

4. **Nothing About Us, Without Us.**

(Try to ensure that all ideas and experiences are represented. Plan ahead so that those who are most impacted are included and leading the conversations.)

5. **Perfect is the Enemy of Good.**

(Be open to an imperfect, possibly even messy process. For this reason, we encourage sound facilitation, particularly to help navigate challenging conversations. Keep in mind that the journey to racial equity is a critical and necessary part of the process.)

6. **Speak Your Truth.**

(Use "I" statements. Try hard to refrain from speaking for other people or an entire community. Your experience is valuable and although it may be similar, it is likely different from that of others.)

Other Agreements That Are Sometimes Helpful

1. **We are All Peers in Here.**

In some cases, you may want to create an agreement that *we are all peers in here*. This is especially helpful if participants include people at very different levels of an internal organizational hierarchy and they are saying they want to “hear everyone’s voice” in this setting.

It is important to note that this is an *aspirational goal*; the hierarchy doesn’t disappear because we want it to—different people in the room still have different amounts of power, and therefore take different risks in speaking their minds. However, setting up this aspiration, and then grounding it in a strongly facilitated, consensus-based participatory decision-making process, creates a support for more collaboration and a willingness to take risks.

2. **Agree About the Use of Devices.**

You may also want to create clear agreements about the use of devices (cell phones, computers, etc.) in the meeting. Different people have very different relationships with devices and you may need to do some negotiating to try to accommodate varying needs. For instance, some people absorb info better if they can take notes, and the computer is their tool of choice for that, while others may find the screen and typing noise highly distracting. Sometimes it’s possible to create physical space solutions to such conflicts.

I always ensure that the agreements about cell phones are not absolute; there are cases in which it truly is more important for a person to be reachable than to be totally focused on the meeting (participating while on-call, mother in the hospital, child home alone, work crisis or just urgent work that will be bottlenecked if they can’t respond quickly, etc.). I usually ask that if people need to leave their phones on, they let us know that they are doing so, and get up and take the call or respond to the text outside of the room, so it is not disruptive to the meeting.