Ground Rules for Effective Teams

Fourth Edition
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Why can some teams come together, tackle challenging issues, and produce excellent results, while others can't? Even when people are talented, motivated, and have clear goals, teams can still be ineffective.

One reason is that many people—whether in team or one-on-one conversations—don't use ground rules. When used consistently, ground rules can help teams make better decisions and stick to them, decrease the time needed to effectively implement those decisions, improve working relationships, and increase team member satisfaction.

In this article, I describe a set of eight ground rules that you and others can use to work more effectively. These rules apply to a variety of situations: one-on-one conversations, small informal groups, executive teams, boards, networks, work teams, committees or task forces, union-management teams, and groups with members from more than one organization. You can use these ground rules whether you are a formal or informal leader.[1]

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Start with Your Mindset: Core Values and Assumptions

The ground rules are simply tools. As with any tool, your ability to use the ground rules depends on the mindset you bring to them. By mindset, I mean the values and assumptions you use to put the ground rules into action. Applying the ground rules successfully requires a Mutual Learning[2] mindset; your intent is to learn with and from others. The core values of the Mutual Learning approach are:

- Transparency
- Curiosity
- Informed choice
- Accountability
- Compassion

When you are **transparent,** you share all relevant information, including your thoughts, feelings, and intentions. When you are **curious**, you are genuinely interested in others' views and seek them out so that you and others can learn. When you value **informed choice**, you act in ways that maximize others' and your own abilities to make decisions based on relevant information. When you are **accountable**, you take responsibility for your actions and the short- and long-term consequences of them. Finally, when you are **compassionate,** you temporarily suspend judgment so that you can appreciate your own and other people's situations. You have a genuine concern for others' needs as well as your own. When you act with compassion, you infuse the other core values

1. To learn more about the ground rules see *The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches, New and Revised Edition*, by Roger Schwarz (2002). In general, the ground rules are based on the work of Chris Argyris and Don Schön.

2. The Mutual Learning approach draws from Chris Argyris and Don Schön's Model II work, as well as the work of Bob Putnam, Diana Smith and Phil MacArthur at Action Design, who originally used the term Mutual Learning.

with your intent to understand, empathize with, and help others.

The assumptions of the Mutual Learning approach that generate the ground rules are:

- I have some information; so do other people.
- Each of us may see things that others don't.
- I may be contributing to the problem.
- Differences are opportunities for learning.
- People may disagree with me and have pure motives.

With these assumptions, you become curious about what others know that you don't, open to exploring and learning from conflicts instead of trying to control and win them, and more generous in thinking about what motivates others to act differently from you.

Many of us use some of these ground rules, core values, and assumptions when we work with people who share our views and with whom we have strong working relationships. Unfortunately, we often don't use them when we need them most—with people who hold differing views and with whom we want to improve our relationship. If you use the ground rules without the underlying core values and assumptions, the ground rules become just another technique or method, destined to become the fad-of-the-month. But when used with the core values and assumptions, the ground rules are a powerful, values-based approach for fundamentally increasing effectiveness by building relationships and getting results.

The Ground Rules

The ground rules for effective teams describe specific behaviors that improve how people work together. They provide more guidance than procedural ground rules such as "Put your cell phones on vibrate" and "Start on time, end on time," or relatively abstract ground rules such as "Treat everyone with respect" and "Be constructive." For each ground rule, I describe what it means, how to use it, and what results it will help you achieve. By making the ground rules explicit, you encourage individuals and teams to use them consistently.

Ground Rules for Effective Teams

1 State views and ask genuine questions

2 Share all relevant information

3 Use specific examples and agree on what important words mean

4 Explain reasoning and intent

5 Focus on interests, not positions

6 Test assumptions and inferences

7 Jointly design next steps

8 Discuss undiscussable issues

Ground Rule One: State Views and Ask Genuine Questions

Stating your views and asking genuine questions means sharing your thinking, including your reasoning and intent, **and** inviting others to comment. For example, you might say, "I think it would be helpful if we initially limited the program to about 20 key customers so that we can see how it works and eliminate any problems before scaling up. What are your thoughts about starting with a small group?"

For this ground rule to work, your questions need to be genuine. A genuine question is one that stems from curiosity; you ask so that you may learn something you do not already know. In contrast, a rhetorical or leading question is one you ask to make your point of view known without having to actually state it. For example, the question, "Do you really think that will work?" is not a genuine question because embedded in your question is your own view that you don't think it will work. However, you can easily convert this to a genuine question by first stating your views. You might say, "I'm not seeing how this will work because . . . . What are you seeing that leads you to think it will work?"

Stating your views and asking genuine questions accomplishes several goals. First, it changes a meeting from a series of unconnected monologues in which

people try to persuade one another, to a focused conversation that generates increased understanding. When you follow your statements with genuine questions, you also increase the chance that the next speaker will address your questions. If each person in the team follows this same format, the conversation should flow more easily. As a result, relevant information is presented, issues are addressed more thoroughly, and better decisions are made.

Second, you learn. When you express your views, including how you arrived at your conclusions, your thinking process is transparent. This helps other people understand what you think and enables them to make a more informed choice about how to proceed. By asking questions, you also reveal your curiosity and you learn what others are thinking. As you learn others' reasoning, you may reach agreement on an issue that you had previously disagreed about. When you don't agree, you quickly identify where your reasoning differs from others. This awareness gives the team more time and information to generate solutions that resolve any differences.

Third, this ground rule is especially helpful when you are concerned that expressing your views or asking questions may shut down conversation or be seen as confrontational. Suppose you are talking with your employees and you are concerned that the team's plans do not respond to customer demands. Rather than ease into the conversation by saying, "How do you think your new plan is responding to customer needs?" you could start by stating your view: "I'd like to talk with you about the plan. I'm concerned that it doesn't address our customers' changing needs. Let me give you a couple of examples of what I mean and get your reactions." After sharing your view, then ask a genuine question, such as, "What, if anything, do you see differently or think that I've missed?" By posing this question, you increase the chance that other people will share different views, if they have them.

However, if you only share your view without inviting differing opinions, likewise others will likely push only their own views. Such a cycle creates a discussion in which participants spend all of their time trying to persuade each other, ultimately resulting in a stalemate of winners and losers—with losers who are not committed to following through

with the decision. If you only ask questions, you don't help others understand your reasoning and they may become suspicious. Privately, they may wonder, *Why is he asking me these questions? Where is he going in this conversation?* As a result, they may be unwilling to give you complete or accurate answers.

This ground rule is the foundation on which all the other ground rules are based, because all the other ground rules require that you state your views and ask genuine questions. What information do you share when you are expressing your views? The next four ground rules address that question.

Ground Rule Two: Share All Relevant Information

This ground rule means that you present all information that might affect how people solve a problem or make a decision. It ensures that all team members have a common pool of knowledge from which to make informed choices. When people help make decisions and later learn that you have withheld relevant information from them, they feel deprived of having made an informed choice. They may then fail to follow through on the decision, may implement the decision half-heartedly, or may even withdraw their support.

Sharing relevant information includes presenting details that do not support your preferred solution. Such transparency and accountability enable others to make an informed choice. Suppose that you are a member of a leadership team deciding how to restructure your organization and move into a new facility. You are the leader of one particular manufacturing process and want to maintain your position. Yet you also know that in the new facility, several manufacturing processes can easily be merged for greater efficiency. Here, sharing all relevant information requires telling the team about the increased efficiencies, even though doing so may hurt your chances of obtaining the position you want.

In challenging conversations, there is usually a significant gap between what you say and what you think and feel. The following example shows how people withhold relevant information. The right column shows a conversation between Paula and Ted; the left column shows Paula's thoughts and feelings as she talks with Ted. Paula does not share with Ted

Paula's Thoughts and Feelings	The Conversation
I thought the presentation was a disaster and so did three others I spoke with.	**Paula:** How do you think your presentation to the directors went yesterday?
Do you really believe it went OK, or are you just trying to put a good face on it? Nit-picky! You couldn't answer some basic cost questions.	**Ted:** I think it went OK, although there were some rough spots. Some of the directors can really get nit-picky.
I don't understand why you didn't emphasize why we wanted to do the project. The directors won't approve a project like this if they can't get answers to some basic questions.	**Paula:** We've got some really important reasons for doing it. Do you think they will OK the project now, or do we need to give them more answers?
I don't want to wait while this project dies on the vine. Besides, my reputation is at stake here too	**Ted:** I think we're in OK shape. A couple of them came up to me after the meeting and said they appreciated the presentation. I think we should just wait and see.
I hope the directors don't think I'm responsible for your not having the answers to those questions. Why didn't you use the information I gave you? I've got to get you to understand what you've done!	**Paula:** Maybe, but I think we might want to give the members some more information.

all the relevant information she is thinking and feeling. For example, she does not say that others had concerns or that she believes the directors did not get answers to some basic questions. At the end of the conversation, Paula thinks to herself, *I've got to get you to understand what you've done!* Yet by withholding her concerns, Paula contributed to Ted's not understanding and increased her own frustration.

The point of this example is not that Paula should share her thoughts and feelings exactly as they appear in the left column. To be effective, Paula would

also need to shift her thinking so that she is more transparent, more curious, and more accountable. Then she can share the relevant information (and also use the other ground rules). She might begin by saying, "Ted, I am really concerned about the presentation you did yesterday. I'd like to give you some specific examples about what concerned me and get your reactions. How does that sound?"

Ground Rule Three: Use Specific Examples and Agree on What Important Words Mean

When you state your views, it is essential to use specific examples and agree on what important words mean. When you give specific examples, you name people, places, things, events, and what people said and did. This enables others to independently determine whether they agree with your information and reasoning.

For example, if you make the general statement, "I think some of us are not following through on our project commitments," other team members do not have enough information to determine whether they agree with you. You haven't stated who "some of us" are or described what behaviors you have seen that led you to believe that others aren't "following through." As a result, the people you are referring to may incorrectly infer that you are not talking about them, and the people you *are not* talking about may incorrectly infer that you are talking about them and as a result feel resentful or unfairly judged.

In contrast, if you say, "Jay and Lily, I didn't receive your sections of the project report. Did you complete and email them to everyone on the team?" Jay and Lily can say whether they did the work. If Jay and Lily agree that they did not complete their work, then they and the team can talk about what led this to happen, its impact on the team, and what people will do differently in the future.

You may be concerned that by identifying specific people on the team, others may feel that you're putting them on the spot. This is another example of how the ground rules involve changing how you think. Instead of thinking that by identifying people you are putting them on the spot, you could view this step as being transparent, accountable, curious, and compassionate. With this new mindset you are giving

people an opportunity to address your concerns, including whether they view the situation in the same way.

Using specific examples also helps you agree on what important words mean. Often, team members can use the same word in different ways and still assume that they agree when they really don't, or vice versa. For example, suppose your team agrees to treat each member with respect, which initially seems pretty straightforward and helpful. Now consider the following situation: You are in a meeting with several team members and members from other parts of your organization. During the meeting, Alan doesn't say much. Afterwards, he comes to you and says, "Out of respect, I didn't want to say anything to you in front of the other divisions, but I don't think your proposal will work." You respond, "I think it would have been respectful to tell me in the meeting that my proposal had problems. Now, if you're right, I may have to call another meeting and take more of my own time and the team's time. To me, one sign of respect is that you are willing to tell me when you see a problem and assume I am more interested in serving the organization well than in trying to look good. How are you thinking about respect in this situation?" One way to determine whether all team members are using a word or phrase to mean the same thing is to state your view and ask a genuine question (ground rule one). You can say, "You used the word *respect.* If we are in situation X, and I'm acting with respect toward you, I would do Y. How is your definition of respect different from mine, if at all?"

Ground Rule Four: **Explain Reasoning and Intent**

Think about the last time your manager's boss asked you to come to his or her office and didn't explain why. You probably wondered what the meeting was about and then thought up some possible explanations for why he or she wanted to talk with you. As human beings, we are hard-wired to make meaning out of events. If people don't tell us what they are thinking, we make up our own stories, and often those stories are wrong.

Explaining your reasoning and intent is another part of effectively stating your view. When sharing your reasoning and intent, you reduce the chance

that others will make up stories about why you are doing what you're doing. Let's assume that your team works relatively well together, but you think they can do even better. If you simply say to your team, "I'd like to introduce a set of ground rules that I think will make us more effective," team members may quickly start to think that you are dissatisfied with the team's performance and that they are dysfunctional. You reduce the chance of this occurring if you also say, "I want to be clear about why I'm suggesting this. I don't think we're dysfunctional. I think we perform well and that we can be more efficient and generate even better ideas with more support. I'm happy to give you examples of what I mean."

Reasoning and intent are similar but different. Your intent is your purpose for doing something. Your reasoning is the logical process you use to reach conclusions based on information, values, and assumptions. For example, your intent may be to get commitment to a decision. Your reasoning may be that you value different views and you know people have different opinions on this topic. You assume that if everyone participates, the decision will be better and people will be more committed to it.

When you share your reasoning and intent, you make your private reasoning public. This helps people to understand what led you to make the comments you made, ask the questions you asked, or take the actions you took. When you share your reasoning and intent, others can ask you questions and explain how their views differ from yours. And you can do the same with them. This is exactly the conversation that teams must have in order to understand members' differing views and to move forward as one. If you are trying to control the conversation so that your point of view will triumph, then fully explaining your reasoning is a problem. It enables others to identify potential flaws in your reasoning, which reduces the chance that you will prevail. But if you are using the ground rules to genuinely learn, explaining your reasoning and intent also provides opportunities to learn where others have different views and where you may have missed something that others see.

Ground Rule Five: Focus on Interests, Not Positions

Have you ever been in a meeting where people try unsuccessfully to get buy-in to their solutions? The first person shares his solution and people tell him why it won't work. Then the second person speaks and her idea is shot down. When it's your turn, the same thing happens. The team either reaches an impasse, agrees on a compromise that pleases no one, or the leader takes the decision away from the team.

Why does this happen? First, people are natural problem-solvers. Give team members a problem, and they will quickly generate solutions for it. Often they come to the meeting with solutions already in hand, or they quickly propose them. Second, when people have strong feelings about the topic, they often think of the meeting as a contest where their view—which they see as the correct one—should prevail. That leads them to try to convince others that their solution is the right one. But that doesn't explain why one person's solution is often unacceptable to others. To understand this, we need to understand how we arrive at our preferred solutions. Basically, we generate a solution that meets *our* needs, because those are the needs we know about. When our solutions don't take into account stakeholders' needs, they reject them.

Positions are like solutions that people identify to address an issue. Interests are the underlying needs that people use to generate their solutions or positions.[3] To illustrate, if you and I are sitting in a conference room, and I want the window open and you want it closed, those are our positions. If I asked you, "What leads you to want the window closed?" you might say that the wind is blowing your papers around and you want them together. If you asked what leads me to want the window open, I might say that I'm warm and I want to be cooler. These are our interests. My solution to open the window and your solution to shut it are simply ways for each of us to meet our interests. The problem here is that the window can't be open and closed at the same time. But, if we focus on our interests, we can find a solution that meets both of our interests.

The difficulty with solving problems by focusing first on positions is that people's positions are often in conflict, even when their interests are compatible. This happens because people tend to offer positions that meet their own interests but do not take into account other people's interests. In the conference room example, you would probably reject my solution, and I would probably reject yours, because neither met the other's interests. Often managers unknowingly encourage people to focus on positions when they say to a team, "Don't come with a problem unless you have a solution." It's presumptuous to expect that your solution will work for others unless you know their interests.

If instead we focused on interests, we could identify these interests and then ask the question, "How can we solve this problem in a way that meets both of our interests?" With a little thought and creativity, we might decide to open the top part of the window so that your papers were not being blown by the wind and I still got the benefit of cool air. Or we could switch places so that I was closer to the open window and you were away from it. When we focus on interests, we are being transparent by explaining the reasoning and intent underlying our preferences, and we are being curious by learning about others' interests.

These are the key steps for focusing on interests:

1. **Identify interests.** Ask team members to complete this or a similar sentence as many times as possible: "No matter what the specifics of the solution are, we need to do this in a way that . . . ." If people keep identifying positions, ask them, "What is it about your solution that's important to you?" This helps identify their underlying interests.

2. **Clarify and agree on interests.** Make sure each person understands what the interest means (using the ground rule agree on what important words mean and that they consider it an interest that should be taken into account in the solution. This doesn't mean that the interest is one that they hold; it means only that they consider it relevant.

3. **Generate potential solutions that meet the interests.** If you can't find a solution that meets the agreed-upon interests, consider whether all of the proposed solutions have a common unnecessary assumption embedded in them. For example, if

3. This ground rule is from Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton's book *Getting to Yes* (1991). The idea was developed originally by Mary Parker Follett in the early 1900s.

all of the proposed solutions assume that the work has to be performed only by full-time employees, try relaxing that assumption and see if the team can generate other solutions that will meet all the interests. If this does not help, then the team can prioritize or weight the different interests to find a solution that addresses the most important ones.

4. **Select a solution and implement it.** Using this approach does not guarantee that the team will reach a decision that meets everyone's interests. It does, however, increase the chance that you will find a solution that everyone can support.

Ground Rule Six: Test Assumptions and Inferences

Remember that I said that we are all hard-wired to make meaning out of events? That includes you. For example, if your manager says, "You're doing a great job, but the analyses have been slowing your team down. I'm going to give Brenda's group the analyses to handle," your mind immediately jumps into action. You may wonder, *What does he really mean when he says that? Why is he saying that?* Then you attempt to answer your own questions by telling yourself a story. You might tell yourself that your manager is concerned about your team's performance and is not telling you the truth. Or you may think that your manager is shifting the work because he won't confront Brenda about the bad data she is providing for the analyses, which is why your team is behind. You are probably not aware that you're asking and answering these questions in your mind. However, your response to the situation will be based on the story you tell yourself. If this story is a negative one, you will likely respond in a negative way. For example, you might sarcastically say to your manager, "Thanks a lot," or simply say, "That's not fair."

When you draw a conclusion about things you don't know based on things you do know, you are making an inference. When you simply take something for granted, without any information, you are making an assumption. We naturally make inferences and assumptions all the time. You have to make inferences to get through the day. Also, you can't test out every inference you make; if you did, you would drive people crazy and you wouldn't get

anything accomplished. Still, the problem is that when you make inferences, you don't know whether your inferences are correct. And if you act on your inferences as if they are true when they are false, then you create problems for yourself and others. The only way you can determine if your inference is accurate is to test it with the person about whom you have made the inference. That's what this ground rule does.

To test your inference, you first need to be aware that you're making one. Then identify what the other person(s) said or did that led you to make your inference. Now you're ready to test it. "I think you said that you were taking away the analyses from my team. Did I understand you correctly?" If your manager says yes, you continue, "I'm thinking that you're concerned about my team's performance on this. Am I mistaken?"

When you use this ground rule, you apply transparency and accountability to your thinking and reveal a curiosity about what others think. Demonstrating such transparency, accountability, and curiosity can also encourage others to do the same.

Ground Rule Seven: Jointly Design Next Steps

When you jointly design next steps, you make decisions about what to do next by involving others rather than deciding privately and unilaterally. This process is also another way to be transparent, curious, and enable others to make informed choices. Using this ground rule increases the likelihood that people will be committed to the discussion or solution. In practice, it involves applying the first ground rule, "State views and ask genuine questions," to specific situations. Those situations include deciding with others what topics to discuss, when and how to discuss them, and when to switch topics, as well as how to resolve certain kinds of disagreements.

Want to know what it feels like when you don't get to jointly design next steps? Think about a meeting you attended that was really important to you when the person running the meeting set the agenda, decided who talked and for how long, and determined what information members could share and what information was not relevant. If your views differed from the meeting leader's views,

you probably quickly realized that you wouldn't influence the outcome because you couldn't influence the unilateral process. You probably felt that decisions were not as good as they could have been because everyone didn't get to share their relevant information. As a result, there was little commitment to follow through with these decisions. Now imagine how others react when you unilaterally control a meeting or conversation.

You can jointly design next steps throughout a conversation. For example, when developing the agenda for a meeting, you might write a draft, explain your reasoning for the topics you included, and then ask others if they want to add relevant items. At the beginning of the meeting you would ask, "What changes, if any, do you think we need to make to the agenda?" This ensures that participants believe that the meeting will cover all the relevant topics.

Next, when deciding how to discuss a particular agenda item, you might say, "For this next item, I suggest we first agree on the problem, then identify criteria for solving it, and then generate possible solutions before evaluating them. Does anyone have any questions or concerns about doing it this way?"

Then, before moving to the next agenda item, you might check in with your team members to make sure that everyone else is ready to go forward. Instead of simply announcing the next topic, you might say, "I think we're ready to move to the next item. Is anyone not ready to move on?"

If you think that Roy is off track in the conversation, rather than unilaterally controlling the conversation by stating, "Let's get back on track" or "That's not what we're talking about today," try being more curious. Consider saying something like, "I don't see how your point about outsourcing is related to the topic of our planning process. Am I missing something? Can you help me understand how you see them related?"

When Roy responds, you and other team members might learn about a connection between the two topics that you had not previously seen. For example, Roy might say that outsourcing will free up internal resources so that the team can complete the planning process in less time. If there is a connection, the team can decide whether it makes more sense to explore Roy's idea now or later. If it turns out that Roy's comment is not related, you can ask him to place it on a future agenda.

In all of these examples, when the process is jointly designed, people have a larger common pool of information that can help them make better decisions, and they are more likely to commit to any decision made.

You can also use this ground rule when you disagree with others. Usually, when team members find themselves disagreeing, each member tries to convince the others that his or her own position is correct. The disagreement escalates as each person offers evidence to support his or her position and no one offers information that might weaken his or her own position. In the end, the "losers" still believe they are right.

How is it different when you jointly design a way to test a disagreement? Consider a conversation in which you and your team members disagree about whether proposed changes to your customer service will lead to increased or decreased costs. Together, you and the team would develop a way to figure out how the proposed changes could potentially increase or decrease costs and by how much. Jointly designing the test includes agreeing on what data to collect and what process to use in collecting it. Team members decide together who to speak with, what questions to ask, what sources to use, and what statistical data to consider relevant. Whatever method you use, it is critical that the team members involved agree to it and agree about how to use the information gathered.

Again, to use this ground rule effectively, you also need to change your mindset. This means shifting from thinking that you are right and others who disagree are wrong, to assuming that each of you may be missing something that the other sees. By jointly resolving disagreements, members make more informed choices, and they are more likely to commit to the outcome because they helped design the test and agreed to abide by its results.

This ground rule does not mean that teams need to make decisions by consensus or use any other particular decision-making rule. Leaders and teams can use this ground rule—and all the other ground rules—using a range of decision-making rules.

Ground Rule Eight: Discuss Undiscussable Issues

Think about the last time you were walking to a meeting, complaining to a co-worker about how the meeting was going to be a waste of time. You might be complaining that one team member is never prepared, or that one member dominates the conversation, or that everyone in the meeting acts as if they will meet the project deadline, when privately everyone knows they won't. In the meeting, the situation unfolds just as you predicted, but no one says anything, including you. Walking back to your office with your co-worker, you again express your frustration about the team.

Does this sound familiar? If so, you are facing an undiscussable issue. Undiscussable issues are topics that are relevant to the team's work but that team members don't address in the team, the one place where they can be resolved. However, undiscussable issues are discussed in many other places, such as one-on-one with people you trust and who agree with you.

People usually don't raise undiscussable issues because they are concerned that doing so will make some team members feel embarrassed or defensive. They try to save face for these team members and for themselves as well. In short, they see discussing undiscussable issues as not being very compassionate. Another reason people don't like to raise undiscussable issues is that they think it will generate conflict, and they don't like conflict.

Unfortunately, many people overestimate the risk of raising an undiscussable issue and underestimate the risk of not raising it. Specifically, they overlook the negative systemic—and cruel—consequences that they create by not raising undiscussable issues. Consider three team members—Heather, Carlos, and Stan—who are concerned about the poor performance of two other team members—Lynn and Jim—and how Lynn and Jim's performance affects the ability of the rest of the team to excel. If Heather, Carlos, and Stan don't raise this issue directly with Lynn and Jim, they will likely continue to talk about Lynn and Jim behind their backs. Lynn and Jim won't know what the others' concerns are, and so will be unable to make an informed choice about whether to change their behavior. Because Lynn and Jim are not

changing their behavior, Heather, Carlos, and Stan will continue to privately complain about them while simultaneously withholding the very information that could change the situation. Further, Heather, Carlos, and Stan will probably be unaware that they, too, are contributing to the problem by not telling Jim and Lynn that their work is ineffective. They also miss the opportunity to learn whether there are valid reasons Jim and Lynn behave as they do. Over time, the team's working relationships, and probably its performance, are likely to suffer. This does not strike me as particularly effective or compassionate.

You might be thinking, "Why do I have to raise it with the team? Why can't I just talk with Lynn or Jim alone?" Because when you raise the issue one-on-one with Lynn, you assume that your view about Lynn's behavior is accurate and that all the team members agree with you. If Lynn thinks that others might see it differently, you are unilaterally imposing a solution by not taking the issue to the team. Also, Lynn may likely believe that her behavior results, in part, from other team members not following through on their tasks.

In addition, if you and Lynn arrive at a solution, and Lynn changes her behavior, other members will wonder what has happened. Now you have created another undiscussable issue—the solution—on top of the original one.

Although undiscussable issues that involve the team ultimately need to be addressed with the team, you can start outside the group. You might approach Lynn and Jim, saying that you have concerns about how their work is affecting you and the team in general. You can also state that you didn't want to raise this issue initially with the team because you didn't want them to feel defensive. Instead, you want to jointly develop with them a way to raise the issue with the team that meets their needs and yours.

Although this ground rule is emotionally more difficult to use than the others, mechanically speaking, there is nothing new in this ground rule. To discuss undiscussable issues, you use all the previous ground rules. You state your views and ask genuine questions, share relevant information and give specific examples, test assumptions and inferences, jointly design next steps, and so on. Perhaps the most

important element of discussing undiscussable issues is to approach them with compassion and avoid making premature negative judgments about how others acted or why they acted that way.

Putting the Ground Rules into Use

Putting the ground rules into regular practice is often harder than it looks. Because most people consider the ground rules just common sense, they mistakenly assume that the ground rules should be easy to use. But the challenge occurs when you and others are facing an important issue and have different views on the matter. That's why using the ground rules well requires a Mutual Learning mindset.

You can use these ground rules even if other people do not. And you can use the ground rules in team or one-on-one conversations. Still, the ground rules are most powerful when everyone understands them, agrees on their meanings, and commits to using them. When you introduce the ground rules to others, it is important that you do it in a manner consistent with the Mutual Learning core values. This means explaining how you believe the ground rules can help, giving specific examples of times when you and others might have used a ground rule to improve a conversation or decision. It also means inviting others to share their views, including questions and concerns they have about using the ground rules. Above all, people need to make an informed choice to use the ground rules. The ground rules are not the team's ground rules until all members have agreed to use them.

People often ask me whether they can use a subset of the ground rules. Each of the eight ground rules helps the team in a different way, and together they support each other; removing one ground rule reduces your ability to use the power of the set. Still, it is more effective to use some ground rules than none. Ground rules one, six, and seven are the foundational ground rules; ground rules two

through five and eight provide specific ways of using of the previous ground rules to help you create better understanding, make decisions, or resolve conflicts.

When deciding whether to use the ground rules, do not assume that individuals or teams you have worked with will still respond in the same way that they always have. Because behavior is interactive and systemic, if you have acted in ways that are inconsistent with the ground rules, you may have contributed to others reacting ineffectively and attributed their ineffective behaviors solely to them, without recognizing that you also played a part. If this has happened, your data about the team is flawed. For example, if you think that team members respond defensively, you may unwittingly be acting in ways that contribute to their defensiveness—for example, by making assumptions about them without testing them or by stating your views without asking genuine questions.

Your team will more quickly increase its skill and effectiveness if it consistently uses these ground rules. To remind members of the ground rules, it helps to place a poster of the ground rules in the team meeting space and provide each member with a pocket-sized card of the ground rules (both of these are available from Roger Schwarz & Associates at www.schwarzassociates.com). To get the most value from the ground rules, it is important to regularly reflect on how you and your team have been using them and how you can continue to improve.

Using the ground rules yields many benefits. Used together, the ground rules will help your team improve the quality of its decisions and increase its commitment to implementing them effectively and efficiently. The rules will also improve working relationships and team member satisfaction.

EXAMPLES OF THE GROUND RULES

Ground Rules	Example
1 *State views and ask genuine questions*	"I think we should start the project with a small number of key customers so that we can identify the problems and fix them before we scale up the program. What concerns, if any, do you have with starting small?"
2 *Share all relevant information*	"Although I think we should delay the project until January because it will balance our workload, Maureen says that our costs will increase by 4 percent if we wait."
3 *Use specific examples and agree on what important words mean*	"Let me give you an example of what I mean by taking initiative. Yesterday in the team meeting, when I asked if the project figures had been updated since last week, you said no. I think if you had taken initiative, you would be updating them regularly without my asking." "When I say consensus, I mean that everyone on this team can say they will support and implement the decision, given their roles and responsibilities."
4 *Explain reasoning and intent*	"The reason I am asking is . . . " "Here's how I reached my decision: . . ." "Here's what led me to do this: . . ."
5 *Focus on interests, not positions*	To identify interests: "No matter what the specifics of the solution are, the solution needs to be one that . . . ." To craft a solution: "Given the interests we've agreed on, what are some potential solutions that meet these interests?" When someone is focused on a position: "What is it about that solution that's important to you? I'm asking because if we can identify this, we can help meet your needs."
6 *Test assumptions and inferences*	"I think you said that you were taking away the analyses from my team. Did I understand you correctly?" [If the answer is yes, continue] "I'm thinking that you're concerned about my team's performance on this. Am I mistaken?"
7 *Jointly design next steps*	To jointly design the purpose of a meeting: "My understanding is that the purpose of this meeting is to agree on criteria for selection, but not to select candidates. Does anyone have a different understanding of the purpose?" To jointly design the process: "For this next item, I suggest we first agree on the problem, then identify criteria for solving it, and then generate possible solutions before evaluating them. Does anyone have any questions or concerns about doing it this way?" To move to the next agenda item: "I think we're ready to move to the next item. Is anyone not ready to move on?" When you think someone is off the topic: "I don't see how your point about outsourcing is related to the topic of our planning process. Can you help me understand how you think they are related? Or if it isn't related, can we decide whether and when to address outsourcing?"
8 *Discuss undiscussable issues*	"I want to raise what might be a difficult issue and get your reactions. I'm not trying to put anyone on the spot, but instead trying for us to work better as a team. Here is what I've seen and what I think the issue is. [State your relevant information]. How do others see this?"

Roger Schwarz & Associates

Get to the heart of it.