

Developing Relational Ground Rules For Small Group Ministry Groups

Rev. M'ellen Kennedy, Bristol, VT

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One of the foundations of Small Group Ministry is that each group abides by a set of relational ground rules. **The point of the ground rules is to help the group accomplish its goals of building friendships and deeper spiritual exploration or intimacy and ultimacy.** Wherever you find groups -- in the congregation, at work, or in the community -- it's a given that groups have rules. **Quite often, the rules are unstated or implicit, but they still exist and influence the dynamics of the group.** In Small Group Ministry we aim for explicit and overt ground rules. There are many problems that result from implicit and covert rules.

Implicit or Covert Rules Lead To:

- * An "in group" versus an "out group"
- * Anxiety for those in the "out group"
- * An unwelcoming environment especially for newcomers
- * Control of the group by the "in group", usually unintentional
- * Lower level of comfort, participation and risk taking
- * Lower level of shared leadership
- * Less likelihood of accomplishing the purposes of intimacy and ultimacy

By contrast, explicit and overt ground rules create a more open, relaxed and friendly environment.

The Benefit and Value of Explicit and Overt Ground Rules

- * Everyone is in the know
- * Increases comfort level
- * Creates safe environment for deeper sharing
- * Newcomers integrate more easily and quickly
- * Shared leadership is encouraged
- * Higher level of participation
- * More dynamic and vital groups
- * We learn how to create community together
- * More likelihood of accomplishing the purposes of intimacy and ultimacy

One approach to developing ground rules is to have each group come up with its own ground rules. **Members are much more involved and have a sense of ownership when they do this important work themselves.** The process helps to build shared leadership and dynamic groups. Members are much more likely to understand and thus abide by the ground rules if they develop them themselves. Engaging in this process also helps members learn the art of community building.

When a new group is formed, you can develop ground rules together with the other members by spending time on the task in the first meeting or an early meeting. You can ask the group something like, "What understandings or ground rules do you need to feel comfortable enough to accomplish our goals of intimacy and ultimacy in this group?" Then you write on a flip chart the items that are suggested as ground rules by members (including your own items). Discuss each item and clarify or refine as needed. It's crucial that everyone understands each item and that everyone is on board. **Keep it as simple as possible.** If the list that the group members generate goes beyond one page, that may be too much for folks to recall and abide by with ease. Try also to be concrete. For example a ground rule to "be polite" may be too vague. On the other hand, "One person speak at a time" is concrete.

Below is a list of items that are likely to come up when you do the exercise of developing ground rules together. When you do this exercise in your group, if something important is omitted, you can suggest adding it.

Sample List of Ground Rules

To accomplish our goals of intimacy and ultimacy, we'll do our best to:

- * Respect the right to pass. (That is you can opt not to speak or participate in any part of the meeting).
- * Listen deeply and respectfully.
- * Have one person speak at a time.
- * Don't interrupt, unless it's for a process comment (i.e. "I can't hear you." or "Please explain that term.").
- * Start and end on time.
- * Share the privilege and responsibility of helping the group to function well.
- * Share the time fairly.
- * Respect confidentiality: What is said in the group stays in the group. You can talk about your own stuff out of the group.
- * Speak from your own experience (use "I" statements).
- * Don't giving advice. We're not here to "fix" others.
- * Make our best effort to attend each meeting, (Or other clear understanding about attendance).
- * If something doesn't suit you, speak up.

It's crucial that the ground rules are a living document and not just something tucked away somewhere in the archives. Once the group is finished with the exercise of drawing up the ground rules, you may say something like, "Let's try these for several meetings and see how it feels. Let's revisit them in a few months."

The ground rules need to change as the needs of the group change. It's helpful to write up the list of items recorded on the flipchart and provide a copy for each member at the next meeting. Go over the list again at the next meeting. At the next few meetings after that, review the ground rules again briefly. **Review the ground rules ANY TIME THERE IS A NEW MEMBER.** Revise them as needed to accommodate new members and to get the real support and consent of each new member.

After the ground rules have been established, in order to maintain a healthy group, **it's a good idea to review the ground rules periodically – in about three months for a new group or about every six months for an ongoing group.**

