



## Ground Rules for Meetings and Deplaning

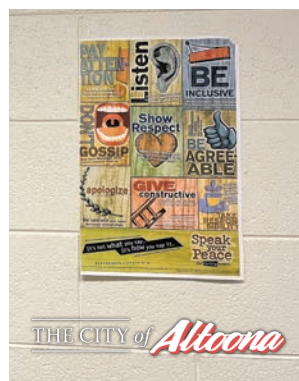
Eric Giordano, PhD, Executive Director,  
Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service, University of Wisconsin System

I am always fascinated by the unspoken compact among airline passengers about the rules for deplaning. We all seem to know to exit row by row from front to back. Occasionally there is the selfish individual who decides to jump the queue. Although I have perfected my “disappointed dad” head shake and sigh of disapproval, it is difficult to punish cheaters. Given the lack of consequences, it is surprising that we all don’t scramble to get out of the plane before others. So, why don’t we?

Every day we engage in situations and social settings that elicit expectations of how we should behave. These rules, formal and informal, exist to help us govern behavior, manage expectations, improve efficiency, and keep us safe. Whether tacit or explicit, these rules connect us in a temporary social contract bounded by place and time. And for reasons we shall not discuss here, people are remarkably self-conforming.

However, rules for productive dialogue is an area that needs attention. We lack a set of agreed guidelines for how to do this well.<sup>1</sup> I have come to appreciate the value of one particular tool, commonly referred to as Ground Rules, that can improve process-oriented meetings such as public dialogues, conferences, or virtual events. Simply defined, Ground Rules are principles that define a code of conduct and outline expectations of behavior. They can be created quickly and adapted to any situation and are an especially effective social deterrent against disruptors.

The power of Ground Rules has surprisingly little to do with their actual content. Instead, it is the process of creating them, along with the social expectations they generate, which make them so valuable. Introducing a brief set of behavioral



*Like many municipalities, the City of Altoona encourages productive dialog at their meetings. In 2015, the Altoona City Council adopted the nine tools of civility, drafted by “Speak Your Peace: The Civility Project.” They provide increased opportunity for civil discourse to find positive resolutions to the many issues we face as a municipality. To learn more: <http://www.dsaspeakyourpeace.org/about.html>*

guidelines to which all participants have creative input and veto power generates a common bond among group members. At the same time, this process sets boundaries, clarifies expectations, and sets the stage for managing behavior – including disruptors.

The following is one well-established process for creating Ground Rules:

- Share a set of 6-8 Ground Rules that are likely to be meaningful to the group.<sup>2</sup>
- Display the Ground Rules prominently for all to see.
- Ask the group to add, subtract, or modify the rules using a consensus-building approach.
- Address concerns as they arise (err on the side of accommodating new rules).

► p.24

1. Roberts Rules of Order is a notable exception, but this highly formalistic approach remains difficult for people to grasp (the current 12th edition is 816 pages!); does not encourage creativity; does not address how to seek consensus; and ignores inclusive facilitative skills and processes that are often effective.

2. There are many examples of Ground Rules to choose from. I recommend doing a simple internet search for “meeting ground rules” to find those that are most meaningful to you.

- Ask participants to accept the rules and confirm by raising their hand, giving a thumb's up, or another mechanism.<sup>3</sup>

The creation and approval of Ground Rules does not guarantee behavioral conformity. Ground Rules cannot prevent very determined disruptors, or well-planned attacks. But the very act of co-creating and/or agreeing to them, binds participants together in a social contract in which they are all nominally invested. To violate that contract means to upend the group. Social pressure alone makes it harder for bad actors to violate the rules and sabotage the conversation.<sup>4</sup> On the flipside, participants are incentivized to follow Ground Rules because they have committed themselves to be a part of something larger than themselves.

If the Ground Rules need to be invoked, those who agreed to them are automatically co-equal arbiters of rule-minding and equally empowered to ensure compliance. Practically speaking, it often falls to whoever is leading or facilitating the meeting to initiate action when someone violates the rules. In serious cases, the best strategy is to temporarily stop the meeting or activity, turn to the group and ask them what they think should

In Waukesha, the "Council Rules" are reviewed and voted on by the Council at the beginning of each term. To learn more: <https://waukesha-wi.gov/158/Common-Council>



be done. If contingency plans are not already in place, the group can decide on any number of consequences together.

In my experience of facilitating meetings, moderating difficult conversations, and assisting in de-escalating conflicts, I have discovered that Ground Rules are a highly valuable tool. They help create and define a temporary social contract and lay out a few, simple expectations for behavior that can be adapted to any situation.

You can read all of Eric Giordano's Conflict Management columns on the League's website: <http://www.lwm-info.org/1592/Conflict-Management>

3. For larger groups you can say, "We will proceed with the assumption that all agree to the rules unless someone specifically objects."

4. In a future article I will outline specific strategies for dealing with disruptors.



### PUBLIC/PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS (P3)

Unique project delivery solutions to accomplish projects that may not otherwise be possible

920.751.4200

NEENAH WI MACHESNEY PARK IL VALPARAISO IN



IPR-P3.COM

A MCMAHON AFFILIATE COMPANY