

Group Agreement

Top Executive Coaching with Tony Mayo



For a group of people to work smoothly together, each member must understand what constitutes agreement. This understanding is often left in the background, unexamined, as everyone assumes their standards match those of other people. Fundamental to the success of the executive off sites I conduct is helping the group make these assumptions explicit so that everyone is playing by the same rules. If, in fact, everyone has the same standards, we finish this step quickly. If not, time invested early to clarify the ground rules saves a lot of time (and upset) later.

There are **two** essential parts: *clarity* and *verity*. First, everyone must be clear on what is being agreed. Second, the group needs a way to know if agreement has been reached.

#1) What's the deal?

- **Clarity: Details of the agreement**
 - What, how, when ,who, where.
 - Explicit standards of satisfaction.
 - Boundaries of authority, range of acceptable efforts, outcome.
 - Contingencies, “only if...” “not if...”
- **Verity: Reliable information**
 - Each party to the agreement must be able to satisfy him or her self that they have the relevant data.

Two other essential ingredients are, of course, [trust](#) and a willingness to [listen](#).

#2) How do we settle this?

My groups have defined the following methods of group agreement, in *rapidly* declining order of desirability.

- Unanimity
 - All understand and agree.
- Consensus
 - No One has a *Strong* Objection.
- Accepted Authority, in 3 Flavors:
(Notice that all three commonly reside in the owner or CEO.)
 - Power, e.g., Title, Hierarchy, Custom, Control of Resources.
 - Risk, Investment, or “Skin in the Game.”
 - Particular Relevant Expertise.
- Voting
(Vote may be one per group member, per department, or only by affected parties, etc.)
 - Super Majority, e.g., 90%, 3/4, 2/3, etc.
 - Simple Majority.
 - Plurality, i.e., option preferred by more members than any other option, though not by a majority.
- Delegate/Zealot
 - Let the person or persons most adamantly in favor take the burden of work and responsibility.
 - “We won’t stop you, but you are on your own.”

You know the group is in trouble when *Resignation, Impatience, Fatigue, and Hopelessness* lead to:

- Random Alternative to Deadlock
 - Flip a coin or toss the dice
- Accede to bully or loudest talker
- Avoid Explicit Decision
 - “Table it.” or “Let’s take this discussion offline.”
 - Allow participants to have private divergent opinions about conclusion
 - Let conversation drift onto new topic.
- Tacit agreement and passive resistance

Significant time, creativity, and generosity should be invested in clarifying the agreement and verifying the facts rather than settling for inferior methods of agreement. If you find yourself about to take a vote, work harder on clarity and verity. It will strengthen the group and improve the chances of a successful agreement.