

ADR Skill of the Month

Have Ground Rules at Meetings

One of the first goals at my training sessions is for attendees to gain a greater understanding and acceptance of something that – like it or not – we are going to frequently encounter: Conflict. My background is management, not therapy, but over the years I have learned the importance of setting healthy procedural and behavioral boundaries, so that we can professionally and safely work through whatever conflicts arise. It's why a successful meeting begins with agreement on the ground rules.

Through studying workplace tensions, we have learned that working with and through conflict allows an opportunity for growth and improvement of the relationship. We have all suffered through meetings where there have been disparate perspectives, contradictory opinions, and even entirely different agendas. Consider an IEP team meeting. To be productive it requires that all participants have a clear understanding and agreement of the agenda; that there is an atmosphere of respect and clear communication; and that each member strives to listen and understand. Most of all, everyone must stay focused on the needs of the student being discussed.

At the start of an IEP meeting (again, this works for all kinds of meetings), the facilitator should get agreement on basic procedures and norms. Ideally that includes asking participants if there are any ground rules that should be added. Even if you are not the person running the meeting, it is okay to request that the team reach such agreements. If you receive opposition from people not wanting to use ground rules, you may want to respond with something like, "I don't anticipate us needing these, but I do find it helpful to remember that we expect nothing less than what we want from our students, so this will be a simple reminder."

Marc Purchin
Coordinator of Alternative Dispute Resolution Services

SAMPLE GROUND RULES

- **MAINTAIN CONFIDENTIALITY**
- **ONE PERSON SPEAKS AT A TIME**
- **USE "I" STATEMENTS**
- **NO PERSONAL ATTACKS**
- **ALLOW EVERYONE TO SPEAK**

Suggested Tips on Practicing the Skill

1. *Develop Meeting Ground Rules that work for your team. Get together with your colleagues, armed with a large poster board and some markers. Discuss and establish the ground rules that you all would like everyone to use at meetings. Maybe the sample above works for your team, but you want the added bullet point of **No Cell Phones**. Suggestion: Once your poster board is set, laminate it and post it in every meeting room. It helps to have visual reminders.*

2. *Have a mock meeting with your colleagues and take turns being the facilitator, in order to practice setting the meeting rules and reaching agreement on*

these protocols at the outset. Otherwise there is no way to enforce them later. Also don't forget the value of each team member feeling a sense of ownership, so always ask if anyone has additions.

3. *Help make the ground rules comfortable. For instance, you could conspicuously take out and turn off your own cell phone as the meeting begins. And, to support a "One Person Speaks at a Time" rule, simply distribute extra paper and pens at a meeting. That way, when someone is talking (such as a School Psychologist giving her report at an IEP meeting and stirring up some emotions in the parents), notes can be easily taken*