Introduction

Every group develops norms of behavior, but many emerge over time, are unspoken, undocumented, and—very often–unproductive. Establishing explicit ground rules helps a team advance positive and productive team behaviors in a relatively short time and makes accountability easy and possible.

Baseball to Board Rooms

The term "ground rule" is actually borrowed from baseball. Just as every baseball field is uniquely constructed and requires local rules to govern base running and other aspects of play, team ground rules are unique to each group and help govern how people will work together.

1. Introduce the topic of ground rules, emphasizing how they will emerge on their own unless they are developed on purpose. Consider using your own experience or employ the analogy to baseball to help illustrate the point, even offering a few examples of real ground rules from major league baseball fields. For example, Orioles Park at Camden Yards has a unique ground rule that "a fly ball hitting the grounds crew shed roof in right field and bouncing back into play is a home run," unique to this field.

2. Ask individual team members to write down a few potential ground rules that they would like to have considered by the group. Some sample topics include: confidentiality, communications, conflict resolution, decision-making, and being on time. For example, "All meetings will start and end on time (if not early), no matter who is late or unprepared."

3. Conduct a brainstorming session (or facilitate a dialogue) that surfaces and combines the ideas of all team participants into one list of norms.

4. Frame the resulting list of norms as a "work in process" so that additional norms can be added as the need arises but start abiding by them at once.

5. Use the list during team interaction by posting it in plain view, reviewing it prior to meetings, and pointing out specific ground rules when a pattern emerges that is counter to agreed upon norms.

6. Turn the list into a simple "scorecard" and have the team periodically evaluate how well it is adhering to their own rules.