

Norms, Guidelines, Rules and Agreements

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Learning Goals:

- Define norms and agreements in the context of online groups.
- Explore different issues related to designing and implementing norms and agreements.
- Consider what norms and agreements might be useful for your group.

Online groups often have some type of stated group norms, guidelines or rules. Others rely on implicit agreements that are made visible through action. Sometimes there are both. The types of norms or agreements depend on the group's purpose, scope, and context.. Some places are the "wild" where the norms are... nonnorms! Others are very proscribed, with codes of conduct, legal statements,etc. Some groups gradually evolve their norms through experimentation.

The way in which norms and agreements work offline often takes advantage of non-verbal signals. We subtly let someone know they have stepped outside the normal bounds of the group by a look or tone. Online, without these cues, we may miss the boundaries. So sometimes we need to help make"visible" what is negotiated tacitly in offline situations.

We'll use the word "norms" to collectively refer to guidelines, rules, agreements and all other standards, both explicit and implicit. We should still keep in mind that they represent various forms and degrees of structure. They can mean different things in different settings. Norms, for example, can be less structured than rules. Agreements can include formal documents, or personal expressions of trust. Both agreements and rules are more likely to attach consequences to infractions.

What Norms Can Do

Norms play a number of roles. They can:

- Define legal parameters ("by clicking this tick box you agree to keep confidential everything in this forum").
- Define other boundaries or limits (content, behavior, etc. "you can't use racist language in this forum").
- Create a basic sense of safety for members (know what is or is not expected or allowed).
- Initiate and nurture initial engagement ("feeling safe to try").
- Create awareness and structure of the group's processes ("we work on a basis of non-blocking consensus").
- Provide ways to expand beyond initial limits (modes of agreement modification).
- Define what the participants can/cannot control.
- Limit or constrain what a group can do (positively/negatively).
- Define membership and give recourse to expel a member.

- Facilitate task and action for groups working to accomplish specific, interdependent tasks and goals.

What Norms Can Reflect

When you first begin designing your online group, consider the group norms, rules or procedures your self or as a group. Some things to explore include is if they:

- Are consistent with your/the overall organizational norms/rules.
- Take into account culture (national, corporate, or whatever).
- Take into account that with online interactions there is a record of all interactions (accountability).
- Are simple and easy to understand and communicate to members as possible. (Test: can you explain them in one breath?).

Different Strokes for Different Folks

Some groups thrive using very loose, minimal norms. This strategy is effective when you want to encourage creativity, innovation or really take advantage of the periphery of the group. Other groups have more stringent requirements that make be better supported with clear and specific agreements. For example, teams with interdependent tasks and timelines benefit from clear, explicit agreements about participation and communication.

It bears repeating that simplicity is key for success. Few people can remember long lists of rules and even fewer are interested in enforcing them. The trick is to have the minimal, elegant set of norms that work for your group. Find a balance between the amount of control and flexibility to provide enough structure and room for growth and emergence. There are some exceptions. For example, public communities which must adhere to any applicable laws of their host country **MUST** address those issues.

Here are some things to consider:

- Is this an open (public) or closed group? (Open, public groups tend to have different issues than private groups, particularly people who come in explicitly to disturb or “flame” a group.)
- Does the topic matter attract potential problems (culture, politics, religion, company privacy issues, etc.)?
- Are there privacy and confidentiality issues that might arise?
- Are there intellectual capital ownership issues?
- Are there any issues of libel or liability? (This is an emerging but unclear area.)
- Are there intercultural issues with different base norms that must be taken into consideration?
- When is the best time to raise the issue of norms with any given group?
- Do you want a process for the evolution or changing of the rules which allows member participation? Or are the managers strictly in charge of these issues? (Don't offer control if people can't really take it!)
- Do you want members to play a role in deciding and enforcing rules? A "voting" or other group decision-making structure? (Keep in mind that this can become a distraction from a group's primary objectives.)
- Are there competitive issues which would require certain standards? (i.e. if competitors are in the same group, what ground rules define their collaborative interactions?)

Norms before, during and ... too late!

Sam had started and managed many successful mailing lists with his friends interested in java programming. As a hobbyist programmer, Sam had learned from, and shared his ideas with other programmers for a number of years. So when he was asked to set up and moderate three mailing lists for his organization's food security programs, he thought, "no problem!" He assumed that the groups at work using the email list would know how to constructively use an email list for knowledge sharing. But just to be sure, he decided to start one first as a pilot, then start the other two.

Sam set up the all the technology, created a little "help list" for those new to the technology and subscribed all the proposed members of the first group to the list. Then as an introduction, he decided to craft a welcoming email that defined the purpose of the list. He ran the draft copy by a couple of colleagues. As the mail went round and round and got longer and longer, Sam remembered that not everyone had the practice of trimming out unnecessary text to keep a clear point of focus in the email. Wow, he thought, he had better remind the new list members. So he added three tips to the welcome message: please trim out any unnecessary text as you reply, don't forward jokes or off topic messages to the list, and finally, please limit your email signature to three lines. (He had noticed that some people get carried away with automatically attached graphics and such.) He thought those three simple things would be useful.

The first group launched and was going well, so a few weeks later Sam launched the second and third lists. All of a sudden, the second list exploded into a stream of angry emails. Someone had posted confidential organizational information on the list and it was then forwarded outside of the list, compounding the problem. The person who posted the material soon found his boss castigating him online, in front of his peers. It was ugly. Sam shut the list down for a few days to figure out what to do. He offered a revised agreement to the other two groups: don't post confidential information, or if information needs to stay within the group, please let everyone know.

When things calmed down and issues were resolved, Sam opened back up the second list, prefaced with some suggestions that the community needed to think about what agreements it wanted. He did not know them well enough to guess, but he also thought that if he had focused on agreements TOO much at the start, people would not have gotten engaged with the topics. But now they saw the need for some agreements and they had to take the leadership. Some did not want to get distracted from "the work" but eventually they developed a set of agreements. Now each time someone new joins the group, the automatically get a message reviewing the agreements. Once a year a discussion thread on those agreements is opened to offer feedback and revisions.

Norms? Rules? Agreements? Modeling?

How are the norms and agreements made visible?

- How do you decide how formal to be?
- Do you require participants to "agree" with them as a condition of participation? Sometimes this is a legal necessity, although not always conducive to the social relationship development! ("click this button if you agree to abide by these terms and conditions")
- Do you offer them up for consideration and negotiation? Sometimes this can strengthen a group. Other times it can chase people away.
- Do you roll the rules out all at once, or let them unfold as needed? Would that make them more integrated into the group, or would you be accused of springing rules on people after the fact?
- Do you role model the behaviors you want for the group. Sometimes this is the most powerful approach. Try to spread the "meme" of civil behavior!

Is there a single answer? No...as always, it all depends!! There is no one way to do norms and agreements. Just don't OVER-DO them!

- How are you going to approach rules, norms and agreements for your group?
- What is the balance of control and emergence that suits your group's purpose?