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Ground Rules for the Innovation Team

Written by

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What are the specific kinds of behavior that contribute to, or hinder an innovation team's effectiveness? Experienced innovation leaders may intuitively know some of the answers to this question. Within the pmNERDS community, we make them explicit by describing these behaviors in a set of nine rules for effective teams. These nine ground rules describe specific behaviors that improve a team's process.



I have used these nine ground rules to bring to life the core values of innovation initiatives I find myself placed on. I use them in several different ways depending on the circumstances.

For diagnosis-They enable you to quickly identify ineffective team behavior so that you can intervene on it.

As a teaching tool-for developing effective team norms. When innovation teams commit to using the ground rules, they set new expectations for how members will interact with one other. This becomes particularly important when as a product specialist, you find yourself bouncing from project to project. You can dramatically reduce 'ramp-up' times.

To guide your own behavior-maybe because I'm a Texan, but for me I need these ground rules to guide my work and increase my own effectiveness in whatever role I'm in. Also, by modeling ground rules, I demonstrate how others can do the same.

Ground Rule One: Test Assumptions and Inferences-When you assume something you take for granted that it is true without verifying it. Boy, can I tell you some stories about the messes I could have avoided if I had only heard of this ground rule. The problem isn't that we make assumptions and inferences; we must do that to get our jobs done. The problem is that if we are unaware of the inferences we're making, our only choice is to consider them as facts rather than as hypotheses and to act on them as if they are true. When you test assumptions and inferences, you ask others whether the meaning you are making of their behavior or of the situation is the meaning they make of it.

Ground Rule Two: Share all Relevant Information-This rule means that each group member shares all the relevant information she or he has that affects how the group solves a problem or makes a decision. This rule implements the core values by sharing information in a way that can be validated, which ensures that members have a common basis for making an informed choice and generating commitment. Many of the rest ground rules are about ways of sharing all relevant information.

Ground Rule Three: Use specific Examples and Agree on-What Important Words Mean- This ground rule encourages a particular way of sharing relevant information that generates valid data. Using specific examples means sharing detailed relevant information, including who said what, and when and where it happened. Unlike general statements, specific examples enable others to determine independently whether the information in them is valid. By agreeing on what important words mean, you make sure that you are using words to mean the same thing that others mean.

Ground Rule Four: Explain your Reasoning and Intent-This ground rule means explaining to others what leads you to make

a comment, ask a question, or take action. Your intent is your purpose for doing something. Your reasoning represents the logical process that you use to draw conclusions on the basis of data, values, and assumptions. This includes making your private reasoning public, so that others can see how you reached your conclusion and ask you about places where they might reason differently. A key part of explaining your reasoning is to make transparent the strategy you're using to hold the conversation. Explaining your reasoning and making your strategy transparent are opportunities to learn where others have differing views or approaches and where you may have missed something that others see.

Ground Rule Five: Focus on Interests, Not Positions-Interests are the needs, desires, and concerns that people have in regard to a given situation. Positions or solutions are how people meet their interests. In other words, people's interests lead them to advocate a particular solution or position. An effective way for teams to solve problems is to begin by sharing their individual interests. Once they agree to a set of interests for the innovation team, which may or may not include all the individual interests identified, they can begin to generate solutions or positions that take that set of interests into account.

Ground Rule Six: Combine Advocacy and Inquiry-When you combine advocacy with inquiry, you explain your point of view including the interests and reasoning you used to get there. Ask others about their point of view. Invite others to ask you questions about your point of view. Combining advocacy and inquiry accomplishes several goals. First, it can shift a series of monologues into a focused conversation. For example, in some meetings, one person speaks after another but no one's comments seem to directly address the previous person's. Without an explicit invitation to inquire about or comment on the previous person's remarks, the meeting switches focus with each person who speaks. Another goal this ground rule accomplishes is to create conditions for learning. By identifying where people's reasoning differs, you can help a group explore what has led them to reason differently: Are they using other data, making other assumptions, or assigning different priorities to certain issues?

Ground Rule Seven: Jointly Design Next Steps and Ways to Test Disagreements-This ground rule means deciding with others what topics to discuss, when to discuss them, how to discuss them, and when to switch topics rather than making such decisions privately and unilaterally. In general, jointly designing next steps means advocating your point of view about how you want to proceed, including your interests, relevant information, reasoning, and intent. Inquiring about how others may see it differently. Jointly crafting a way to proceed that takes into account group members' interests, relevant information, reasoning, and intent. Jointly designing ways to test disagreements is one specific type of next step. Jointly designing ways to test disagreements means considering such important questions as, "How might it be that we are both correct?" A useful analogy for testing disagreements this way is two scientists who must design a joint experiment to test their competing hypotheses; the research design needs to be rigorous enough to meet the standards of both.

Ground Rule Eight: Discuss Undiscussable Issues-Ask a Texan what's 'undiscussable', and he'll look at you like you've just said 'too much fun', how can it be? An undiscussable issue is one that is relevant to the team, that is reducing or may reduce, the team's effectiveness, and that people believe they can't discuss without creating defensiveness or other negative consequences. By using this ground rule with the previous rules, you can discuss these issues fruitfully and reduce the level of defensiveness. Although this ground rule is emotionally difficult to use, the process for discussing undiscussables is contained in all the other ground rules.

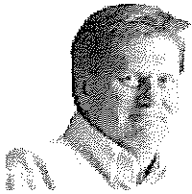
Ground Rule Nine: Use a Decision-Making Rule-That Generates the Level of Commitment Needed Here we make specific the core value of internal commitment. Its premise is that team members' commitment to a decision is in part, a function of the degree to which they make an informed free choice to support it. The more they're able to make an informed free choice, the more likely they are to be internally committed to the decision.

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