



# Tom Romito

## FACILITATOR

### FACILITATION AND GROUND RULES

I'm Tom Romito. I'm a facilitator and I work with organizations that want to improve themselves. This short paper is about how organizations can get high results in meetings that are governed by ground rules and led by a facilitator.

Ground rules govern the behavior of people in a meeting. Without having some ground rules, meetings can become chaotic. The problem with ground rules is that they are sometimes too numerous and artificial to inspire people to actually abide by them. For instance, one of the first ground rules people ignore is to not interrupt each other. While it's an important ground rule, people in a high-energy group have the tendency to run rough-shod over one another. There are two solutions to this common problem. One is to have a skilled facilitator to police group behavior. The other is to set just a few ground rules that set the stage for group work.

When I facilitate a meeting, I ask people what ground rules they would like to have, and we list them for everyone to see. Then I set a few ground rules of my own that enable me to model the behavior I want people to emulate. Here are my basic ground rules:

- **The meeting starts on time.** I begin the meeting with whoever has shown up by the appointed hour. I have begun meetings with only one person in the room, as if the room was full of people. I integrate others into my process when they arrive, but they know they are late.
- **Everyone works.** I practice the principle of inclusion. That means I get everyone in the room involved in the discussion. I don't let anyone get away with being an "observer." If they're in the room, they're going to participate. I enforce this ground rule simply by drawing them out. Some people go into shock when they discover that I want them to offer an opinion. I help them to say what they think, and most people are gratified that I take the time to include them in the discussion. The ground rule tends to get people to come back to follow-on meetings.
- **Nothing is free.** This is a corollary to the previous ground rule. My style is to prompt people to contribute to the discussion and capture their observations on flip charts. But there is a limit to my prompting and writing. Most of my workshops lend themselves to using breakout groups. This technique gets people out of their chairs, walking to designated places, and working on some facet of the issue at hand in smaller groups. I visit the breakout groups to ensure they are on track, working, and return on time to the main meeting area with something to report to the whole group. This ground rule keeps everyone engaged, alert, and contributing to

the result. Another part of my style is that I will chastise the group if people are rude, discourteous, or disrespectful to others. I will do this collectively, but I can also chastise people individually without offending them, because they know I'm there to maintain rule and get things done on time. This ground rule acknowledges that meetings are hard work and everyone has to contribute to make meetings successful.

- **The meeting ends on time.** When the designated time comes, the meeting is over. If we are not done and we have to schedule a follow-on session, we take up at that time where we left off at the end of the last meeting. People see that this is a serious endeavor.

When we practice ground rules, people tend to see the importance of attendance, timeliness, and consideration of others. As a result, meetings are productive.