

Sample Communication Agreements for Meetings

These sample agreements discourage disrespectful behavior in meetings. They describe specific observable behaviors, rather than vague states of being such as "Be responsible" or "Act more mature." The latter are not helpful requests. It's hard to know exactly what behaviors someone else will see as "responsible" and "mature." or "jerk." Agreements about specific observable behaviors more likely to be understood — and followed.

- 1. Wait your turn to speak.** Don't start speaking in a meeting unless you're in the stack and you've been called on by the facilitator.
- 2. Listen to the person speaking,** even if you're not looking directly at them.
- 3. Don't interrupt.** Let the person speaking finish.
- 4. No verbal or body-language expressions of annoyance, dislike, disrespect, or contempt that others can see or hear:** groaning, exaggerated sighs, eye rolling, muttering under your breath, saying "Whatever" or other expressions of boredom or contempt. And of course . . . no cursing, swearing, or yelling out insults at someone.
- 5. Don't use insulting language,** including intellectually sophisticated put-downs or psychoanalysis talk: "You're just acting out of your wounds." If this is difficult not to do, get help from a friend on how to say things in more neutral, less charged ways. Good tips for using neutral language are in *Nonviolent Communication* by Marshall Rosenberg.
- 6. Don't yell out** how wrong you think someone is, or what you think is wrong with them.
Note: some groups think it's fine to yell out expressions of one's own emotional state, because it allows them to express themselves without hurting anyone else, but not to yell out put-downs. Notice the difference:

Exclamations that can hurt someone's feelings (abusive language):

"You're an asshole!" "What a stupid thing to say"
"You idiot!" "You just don't get it, do you?!"

Exclamations that are about oneself and don't hurt anyone else's feelings:

"I'm furious!" "I'm so frustrated I could scream"
"I can't stand this!" "I don't understand!"

- 7. Don't state your opinion as fact.** Show that it's your personal opinion. Own it.
"I imagine that . . ." "I'm guessing that . . ." "In my opinion . . ." "It seems to me that . . ."
- 8. Don't use the word "I" as a way to put someone down.** "I think you're an idiot," is not an "I" statement. It's an insult.
- 9. Use words that express actual feelings you can feel in your body.** "I feel angry when we . . ." "I'm upset because . . ." "I feel scared it would hurt our community if we . . ." Not: "I feel disrespected . . ." "I feel cheated" "I feel put-down" (Cheated, disrespected, and put-down are not actual feelings, but beliefs about what you think someone else has done to you.)
- 10. Don't use the words "feel" or "feeling" to put someone down.** "I feel that you're an idiot" isn't a feeling at all; it's a belief—and an insult.
- 11. Don't threaten anyone,** even vague, unspecific threats. "I'll get you!"
- 12. Don't physically hurt anyone.** (Some groups say: "No physical contact.")

The Feeling, Thinking, and Business Meetings of Ecovillage Sieben Linden

I was really intrigued when I read about Ecovillage Sieben Linden's three kinds of meetings — feeling meetings, thinking or "idea" meetings, and business meetings. Wow! I thought. All communities can benefit from valuing — and holding special meetings for — our emotional and inspirational/intellectual as well as get-the-job-done natures.

*Here's what Sieben Linden member Kosha Joubert wrote in *Beyond You and Me*, the GEN/Gaia Education book on the social aspects of ecovillages:*

We distinguish between time and space for feeling, for thinking, and for organizing. We have:

- ☉ Meetings for deep, emotional sharing, with the aim of strengthening love, compassion, and mutual trust.*
- ☉ Meetings for sharing of worldviews, spiritual paths, and political thinking, with the aim of growing in awareness and building a pool of common values.*
- ☉ Organizational meetings, with the aim of realizing our dreams together.*

When we neglect the first two, the third, organizational meetings, become very tedious.

However, it needs a strong focus to hold enough time and space for deep emotional sharing and sharing of worldviews. There is always so much to do! Taking time off for inner processes seems like luxury to many, even though we experienced again and again how it enhances our overall level of trust, joy, creativity, and effectiveness as a community!

This is exactly what I want for my own community, and for all of us. It sure makes sense to me that if you hold meetings specifically for expressing emotions — no abstractions or intellectualizing, please — you're going to develop a deeper sense of mutual understanding, trust, and connection among community members.

And if you hold meetings just to share your good ideas and what inspires you —with no getting sucked into emotions or drama — you're also going to understand your fellow communitarians better. You'll probably learn something new or even influence the future of the community.

And if you're holding both kinds of meetings, well for sure your business meetings will run better. With regularly scheduled "escape valve"-meetings to express emotions or share inspirations, your regular meetings will be far less subject to emotional drama (or emotional hijacking) and impassioned speeches (or long-winded rants). Here you are in business meetings, all just discussing and modifying proposals, coming up with workable solutions, applying your "group intelligence" and happily moving towards your goals. Imagine that!

Unfortunately — for Sieben Linden members, and for my theory that this works so well it's self-perpetuating — the community no longer regularly holds these three kinds of meetings. Sieben Linden used the "Forum" process for their feeling meetings. Developed by ZEGG, another German ecovillage, the Forum is a well-facilitated method for evoking emotional transparency that functions like a combination of psychodrama and group empathy. Each person goes into the center of the circle for whole-group attention, telling the others about a personal issue, then people in the group mirror back to that person what they're seeing and hearing.

When Sieben Linden had less than 50 people and Kosha and other Forum facilitators actively supported the weekly Forum process, the meetings were well attended. About 30 or 35 people would attend the meetings, and over several weeks' time each person would be in the center of the circle often enough that they felt seen and heard by the others, and this helped generate a great deal of mutual trust and connection in the community. But as the population grew larger than 50 it became impossible for each person to have a turn often enough, which reduced the sense of connection.

So separate, smaller weekly Forum meetings were set up so everyone in each group could have a turn. But since the community didn't meet as a whole anymore, the sense of strong, community-wide connection gradually diminished, and there was less and less energy for the feeling

meetings. Now Sieben Linden holds Forums for the whole community once in a while and three smaller groups do the Forum process together regularly, but feeling meetings are no longer as prevalent in the community.

Sieben Linden's thinking or "idea" meetings most often focused on what inspired people: good books they'd read, significant travels, political ideas, worldviews, spiritual experiences and beliefs. Holding regular idea meetings helped people stay connected to the original vision for the community, helped them understand and appreciate each other, and provided nourishment for the mind and spirit. But as people became busier and found themselves increasingly dealing with the issues of everyday life, the thinking meetings were held less often as well.

"I takes continuous care to not let the energy for feeling and thinking meetings be lost," Kosha told me. "Enough people need to care, to take the time to create and promote feeling and meetings. There seems to be a need for continual flexibility in community. If the size of a community changes, or if everyone gets busier, what the community needs can change too."

Nowadays Sieben Linden is consciously including aspects of both feeling meetings and thinking meetings in every business meeting, such as starting with a sharing circle, or people describing something that has inspired them recently.