GROUND RULES

Why use ground rules?

- Help create a safe and productive atmosphere for the group to do its work.
- Common set of expectations reduces misunderstandings and upsets.

In order to use them effectively:

- Ground rules need to be owned by the group. If there are existing ground rules in a group, the facilitator should be aware of them. If there are not existing ground rules, the facilitator can propose a set (or can propose additional ones to an existing set) for that meeting, but they need to be taken on by the group to be valid.
- Once agreed to, the rules need to be enforced consistently in order to be fair; on the other hand, there are times when crossing a ground rule is appropriate (for example, some interruptions are supportive rather than detracting), so don't hew to the rule its own sake.
- Note that ground rules by themselves may be insufficient to "save" an otherwise bad meeting or particularly unskilled group/participants—be ready with other tools if needed.

Here are some examples of ground rules that some groups have found useful:

Assume good-faith intentions.
Be honest, be kind.
If more than one person is wanting to speak at a time, then raise hands and wait to be called on.
Do not interrupt when another participant is speaking. (The facilitator can interrupt as needed to support the process.)
All focus on one conversation—if you need to have a side conversation, take it out of the room.
We will not call on anyone twice until all those who want to have spoken once.
Test assumptions and inferences. Ask for more information.
Be specific. Beware assumptions, generalizations, or exaggerations. Use examples when needed to explain what you mean.
Take responsibility for bringing the discussion to where it most needs to be. Is there an "undiscussable" issue that's really at the heart of things? What is most important in this discussion?
Take responsibility for your own feelings and experiences. Use I-statements. (E.g.: "I felt so angry when I saw that," Not "You made me so angry when you did that.")
Emotional expression is welcome; aggression or personal attacks are not ok and will be halted as soon as recognized.
Avoid name-calling, stereotypes, cheap shots, or jokes at someone's expense.
Work toward understanding—you don't have to agree in order to paraphrase.
Be constructive.
The facilitator can use short stacks (up to 3-4 people), reserving the right to add people in an order other than that in which hands were raised in order to answer direct questions, add people in who are less vocal, or follow a thread of discussion.
The facilitator has the power to make judgment calls on process, including directing the topic to where they think it most usefully needs to go (after checking in with the group), so that the group does not spend inordinate time talking about what to talk about.
Share the air time–step up, step back.
Speak for yourself.
Common ownership of ideas, don't use names unless necessary for clarity. (We are here to debate ideas, not personalities.)
Minimize repetition.