

The background of the cover is a blurred photograph of several people in a group setting, possibly a meeting or a discussion. The people are out of focus, with their forms appearing as soft, dark shapes against a lighter, hazy background. The overall color palette is muted, with shades of blue, grey, and white.

GUIDELINES  
FOR A GOOD  
DISCUSSION

HOW TO LEAD A PEACEFUL CONVERSATION  
ABOUT POWERFUL THINGS

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# Guidelines for Productive Discussions

AMOS 3:3

*"You can't have a congregational meeting here. It always gets out of hand."*

*"I'd be afraid to address these things with the church. You can never tell what people may say in a group."*

And so we do not communicate. People are already frustrated because we haven't communicated. We decide not to communicate because people are frustrated. Then they get more frustrated because we are not communicating.

Many discussions, classes, and especially meetings where there is conflict break up and/or become unproductive. It may be that the leader(s) did not know the value of guidelines.

Amos asked, "Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" (Amos 3:3). We don't have to agree on everything. But if we are going to travel together from Nashville, Tennessee, to St. Louis, Missouri, we must agree on some things: What time will we leave? What kind of transportation will we take? Who will drive? The clothes we wear and the food we eat along the way can be individual choice, but we must agree on the basics of the trip.

Often "family rules" are unconscious, unspoken, but understood.

That means we rarely think about the rules, usually don't discuss them, but people pay a price when they disobey them. It is my observation that it is better to have our rules conscious, spoken, and understood. Then we can evaluate them and change them if that would be helpful to the group: family, congregation, work group, or sports team.

I use a form of these guidelines any time I am leading a group: counseling, workshop, auditorium Bible class, preachers' workshop stress session,

Can two walk  
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they are agreed?

AMOS 3:3

congregational "Family Meeting," or conflict resolution. Many conflicts arise because we are playing by different rules.

I will discuss the ideas behind the guidelines. James Jones introduced these concepts to me. I watched him in counseling sessions, classes, and leadership workshops. It was amazing how stress went down when I knew the boundaries. It was safe when I played by the rules and believed that others would do the same or be held accountable for not doing so.

These guidelines need to be negotiated – not commanded. Simply reading them to a group will not get a buy-in. I like to discuss them and talk about why they contribute to group health. I take about ten minutes with a group where most of the people are familiar. I take about an hour and a half to negotiate these guidelines when doing a Saturday church meeting during a conflict intervention workshop.

## **1 May I be the leader of this group?**

I need the group's permission because I only lead those who give me permission to be the leader. I may have the authority. My name may be on the brochure or church letterhead as preacher, elder, or Bible class teacher. But if the group doesn't give me permission to be the leader, I will not lead. How much authority does Jesus have (Matthew 28:18)? How many people is He leading? Jesus is only leading those who give Him permission to be their leader. Many are invited, but only those who desire take the water of life follow Him (Revelation 22:17). He wanted Jerusalem to follow Him and enjoy His protection. But they were not willing (Matthew 22:37). I don't have the authority of Jesus. I will not be the leader if the group doesn't give me permission.

## **2 Will we start on time?**

We penalize those who come on time when we wait for late-comers.

## **3 Will we quit on time?**

Especially in a workshop setting, this helps the group learn to operate within limits, boundaries. That is the way the world operates. It is a good practice since it respects everyone's time.

#### **4 Will we speak one at a time? 1 Corinthians 14:27-33**

If we are working as a group, I show disrespect to the group in general and to the person speaking in particular when I begin a private conversation with my neighbor. If it relates to the group, it should be shared with the group. If it doesn't relate to the group, it can be held until a break.

This has been the most difficult rule for me to enforce as a leader. I have been leading the Third Monday Workshop stress session made up of preachers, elders, youth ministers, and other interested Christians in the Nashville, Tennessee, area since the fall of 1988. Three times I have come to the group to suggest that we agree to dispense with this guideline because it is violated so often. It is embarrassing for me to call to account preachers and elders who are older than I am and have more education than I have for talking when they have agreed not to talk. But each time the group has assured me that it is important to the group process. We still have the guideline and it seems that it has been observed better for several months.

#### **5 Will we talk where others can hear or will we speak softly and in small groups where others will not know what is being said?**

This is a follow-up on the previous guideline. Unauthorized sub-grouping will destroy the group. It drains energy and attention when some obviously do not think the person who is speaking has anything as valuable to say as what they are saying.

#### **6 Will each person speak for himself or herself or will we speak for others such as "they," "them," "everybody," and for God as well?**

How many times have you heard, "A lot of people are upset," "Several are unhappy with the preacher"? When asked for names, the reply often is, "Well I can't tell you who they are, but there's a bunch." I like to have the guideline, "I'll speak for me, you speak for you, and let God speak for God. Unless you have been elected to the House of Representatives or the Senate, you do not have permission to represent anyone in this group except yourself." I don't know who the "several" are. I don't know how many are in a "bunch." I would be interested in knowing what you think. I will value what you say.

#### **7 Will we have a right to all our feelings: the painful as well as the pleasant?**

Some people are convinced that there are good feelings and bad feelings. I think there are pleasant feelings and painful feelings. But it is my understanding that all

our emotions are given to us by God and are good for us. I need to be responsible how I act on my emotions, but they are all helpful. I usually mention the four "feeling groups": mad, sad, glad, scared.

We can be sad. We have tissues. If Jesus can cry (John 11:35), I can cry. We can be scared and talk about that. We have a right to be angry. Jesus was angry (Mark 3:5). Therefore, it must not be sinful. Paul said to be angry and not sin (Ephesians 4:26). You have a right to be angry. You have a right to be angry with me. You can talk about being angry with me. However, you do not have a right to hit me or tear up the furniture. There is a difference in what we feel and what we do with out feelings. We can be glad and laugh. There is a qualification on that which is included in the next guideline.

## **8 Do you want to have a rule that we will not make fun of what people say in this group?**

We can laugh with people but not at people. How can we know if we are laughing with or laughing at? The first test is to see if the other person is laughing. I cannot laugh with someone who is not laughing. But I may need to ask the person being discussed if it feels like we are laughing with him or at him. Solomon said, "Sorrow may hide behind laughter, and happiness may end in sorrow (Proverbs 14:13, The Contemporary English Version). This brings us to the next rule.

## **9 May I, as a leader, have a right to interrupt?**

If I have any question, I will ask the person who is the focus of the laughter, "Does it feel like we are laughing with you or at you?". Several years ago, I was leading a group. After an elder's wife had made a comment, someone said, "That's the way Yankees are." The group laughed. I asked her, "Does it feel like we are laughing with you or at you?". She replied: "We have been living here fourteen years and worshipping with this congregation. We have taught Bible classes. We have been involved in the work. It would really feel good to be just a Christian, a member of this church and not a 'Yankee Christian.' " We learned a lesson that night.

## **10 Will we have a right to disagree with each other?**

In several decades of leading groups, I have always gained permission for disagreement in the group. I've always said that if I ever get a group where we can't disagree, I want to talk first because I like my opinions better than those of anyone else. But I wouldn't learn very much.

### **11 Will we settle group business in the group or will we get in small groups afterwards and talk about each other?**

Polarizing begins to take place when we start talking about each other instead of to each other. If it is group business, it needs to be addressed in the group.

### **12 Do we want to have a rule of confidentiality: what we say here stays here?**

This is essential if we are to develop a trusting group. Many people assume that elders, preachers, and other leaders will keep confidences. This is where people are often hurt. Assuming is not good communication. Too often Christians don't keep personal matters confidential. I like to talk about it. What does it mean "What we say here stays here"? What if we discuss the weather or read John 3:16 in the group? Can we not take that out of the group? In our staff meetings at Berry's Chapel, we developed the "church bulletin rule": if we talk about something in a staff meeting that we would print in the church bulletin, we can talk about it out of the group. If we wouldn't print it in the bulletin, we won't carry it out of the meeting. If there is any question, it is best to check with the person or people to whom the information belongs.

### **13 Will I take care of myself, telling the group only what I trust them to keep?**

After we have established this rule, I encourage new members to doubt that as long as they need to doubt it. Anyone can say what we have just said, "What we say here stays here." I believe that faith grows through "creative doubt." Creative doubt is doubt that asks questions and sincerely wants to know the truth. It is my observation that it took about two years in our Third Monday Workshop to establish trust in the group where we could talk about serious, personal issues. After establishing that trust in the core group, new members do not seem to diminish the readiness of group members bring up what they need to discuss. Since August of 1988, I don't know of a matter getting out of the group. That's powerful! That's encouraging to have that kind of support group.

**14 If what I say offends or hurts you, will you tell me or will you talk about me to others?**

This is a powerful commitment! Think how assuring it would be if we didn't have to wonder how we were coming across to others.

**15 If, after a group session is over, you realize that you didn't get finished, will you bring the matter back to the group and work it out?**

This reminds us that we deal with group business in the group.

**16 May we be humble instead of arrogant? That is, if we don't know what someone is thinking or feeling, will we ask or will we assume that we know what they are thinking or feeling?**

[Matthew 5:3; 1 Corinthians 2:11]

One of my mistakes in communication is attempting to mind-read. I think I know what you are thinking and act on that assumption. The only problem is that I don't know what you are thinking unless you tell me. The best policy is to ask.

**17 May others respond to what we say?**

Do I have to have the last word or would it be helpful to get feedback?

**18 When we ask a question, will we be willing to tell why we want to know the answer?**

I may want to know why someone is asking questions. What are you going to do with the information? Why are you interested?

**19 May a person decide to quit talking when they choose?**

In most groups, I do not require people to talk. Some people learn better with their mouths open and others learn better with their mouths closed. Each person can decide which works best for them without pressure.

## **20 Will we attend all sessions? If we must be absent, will we tell the group why?**

It is a matter of courtesy to be responsible to a group (class, elder's meeting, committee meeting). It takes energy away from group process when a member is late or absent without explanation. "I wonder if they are sick, had an accident, forgot, or don't care about our work?" This can be eliminated by a call, text, or e-mail: "I will be fifteen minutes late," or "I am sick and will be unable attend tonight's meeting."

## **21 Will we agree not to talk about group business during breaks?**

This guideline is especially helpful in groups that are learning experiences in how groups work. If we talk about group business during breaks, we deprive the rest of the group from our thoughts and ourselves of the wisdom of the rest of the group. If the meeting is dealing with conflict, it is easier to choose sides and plot destruction by subdividing and talking about others during breaks of ten minutes or two days.

## **22 While in the discussion and exploration of new ideas, will the group allow any title, position, seniority, family relationship, age, actual or perceived net worth, chain of command, level of management, inhibit or repress any comment or idea from being shared and seriously considered?**

When this principle is ignored, many times a "head elder" will result. This may be a toxic head elder or a benevolent head elder. I think both are hurtful to the long term leadership of the church or any group.

## **23 Are we aware that some of these rules will probably be broken?**

What will we learn about ourselves and leadership when they are broken?

A. By us?

B. By others?

Can we ask and will we answer the question, "What did you learn from that"? These guidelines form boundaries that are sometimes difficult to remember and/or difficult to keep. When we hold ourselves and others accountable to do what we agreed to do, it can be helpful. If a guideline is not helpful, it can be changed. Self-



reporting is especially commendable and an opportunity to teach and give others permission to analyze themselves in the group process.

**24 Will we agree to try to apply these Biblical principles to ourselves before we try to "fix" other people who are in this group or people who are not here?**

[Psalm 139:23, 24; 1 Corinthians 9:27; 2 Corinthians 13:5, 10:12]

It is hard to keep everyone in the room during a class or group session. I want to jump out the window and bring in a friend or an enemy who needs to hear this more than I do. "I wish John and Mary were here. They really need to hear this. Those folks down the street need this." I call this the "me first" principle of Bible study. The first question I need to ask when studying God's word or implementing principles that I am learning is, "How does this apply to me?".

**25 May we bring up "old business" if we need to clarify or discuss something further?**

Sometimes a comment is countered by, "We've already talked about that." If a person isn't finished with an issue, it may need to be discussed again.

**26 May we have permission to make additional rules, if needed, to help this group be more effective?**

This list is not exhaustive. Some discussions need fewer guidelines, some more.

In some meetings that involved anticipated conflict, we had the "no shouting" rule. As the facilitator I have been told that previous meetings had ended in a shouting match which was hurtful. It was suggested that I call people to account when they were getting too loud. I decided not to get into the middle of that group's conflict. What we negotiated was that when three people held up their hands when a person was getting louder and louder, I would report to the speaker, "Three people in the group think you getting louder than is helpful for this discussion." That helps the group be responsible for itself and keeps me out of the middle of a conflict that doesn't belong to me.

In some meetings, we have had the "Why are you leaving?" rule. When I was informed that this group's meetings often end in people leaving mad, we worked out the agreement that if people left, they would tell why. This kept people from

assuming that people were leaving angry or letting them know that they were angry and possibly why.

In one preachers' meeting, the group requested the guideline, "We will not talk despairingly about any person not present." This came out of painful experience of previous preachers' luncheons that developed into a discussion of who was doing or saying the wrong things since our last meeting. This spirit killed that meeting.

**27 Would you be willing to tell what you like about this group process, what is helpful and what is not helpful, and in this way give suggestions for improving future discussions?**

This can be one of the most helpful guidelines for the leader as well as for the rest of the group. If the leader is serious and honest, he or she can model a learning attitude that encourages growth. I like criticism! When anyone loves me enough to tell me how I can improve, that person is doing me a favor. If you find salmonella in my refrigerator and tell me about it, you are not hurting me. You are helping me.

When I am leading a meeting, I have the choice of the Amos rule, "Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" (Amos 3:3), or the Judges rule, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Which rule I choose can make a great difference in the effectiveness of the discussion.

## Discussion Guidelines

Amos 3:3

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3. Will we quit on time?
4. Will we speak one at a time? 1 Corinthians 14:27-33
5. Will we talk where others can hear or will we speak softly and in small groups where others will not know what is being said?
6. Will each person speak for himself or herself or will we speak for others such as "they," "them," "everybody," and for God as well?
7. Will we have a right to all our feelings: the painful as well as the pleasant?
8. Do you want to have a rule that we will not make fun of what people say in this group?
9. May I, as a leader, have a right to interrupt?
10. Will we have a right to disagree with each other?
11. Will we settle group business in the group or will we get in small groups afterwards and talk about each other?
12. Do we want to have a rule of confidentiality: What we say here stays here?
13. Will I take care of myself, telling the group only what I trust them to keep?
14. If what I say offends or hurts you, will you tell me or will you talk about me to others?
15. If, after a group session is over, you realize that you didn't get finished, will you bring the matter back to the group and work it out?
16. May we be humble instead of arrogant? That is, if we don't know what someone is thinking or feeling, will we ask or will we assume that we know what they are thinking or feeling? Matthew 5:3; 1 Corinthians 2:11
17. May others respond to what we say?
18. When we ask a question, will we be willing to tell why we want to know the answer?
19. May a person decide to quit talking when they choose?
20. Will we attend all sessions? If we must be absent, will we tell the group why?
21. Will we agree not to talk about group business during breaks?
22. While in the discussion and exploration of new ideas, will the group allow any title, position, seniority, family relationship, age, actual or perceived net worth, chain of command, level of management, inhibit or repress any comment or idea from being shared and seriously considered?

23. Are we aware that some of these rules will probably be broken? What will we learn about ourselves and leadership when they are broken?

A. By us?

B. By others?

24. Will we agree to try to apply these Biblical principles to ourselves before we try to "fix" other people who are in this group or people who are not here? Psalm 139:23,24; 1 Corinthians 9:27; 2 Corinthians 13:5, 10:12

25. May we bring up "old business" if we need to clarify or discuss something further?

26. May we have permission to make additional rules, if needed, to help this group be more effective?

27. Would you be willing to tell what you like about this group process, what is helpful and what is not helpful, and in this way give suggestions for improving future discussions?

I read Seth Godin's blog every day — that's right, he blogs every day. This is a classic post, dealing with agreeing to a process before we begin the discussion. You can subscribe to his blog: <http://www.sethgodin.com/sg/>

### Can we talk about process first?

It's so tempting to get straight to the issue, especially since you're certain that you're right.

The challenge is that organizations and relationships that thrive are built to go beyond this one discussion. They are built for the long haul, and this particular issue, while important, isn't as vital as our ability to work together on the next hundred issues.

So yes, you're probably right, and yes, it's urgent, but if we can't agree on a process to talk about this, we're not going to get anywhere, not for long.

If the process we've used in the past is broken, let's fix it, because, in fact, getting that process right is actually more urgent than the problem we've got right now. Our meta-conversation pays significant dividends. At the very least, it gets us working together on the same side of a problem before we have to be on opposite sides of the issue of the day.

Seth Godin, June 21, 2014: [http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths\\_blog/2014/06/can-we-talk-about-process-first.html](http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2014/06/can-we-talk-about-process-first.html)

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this eBook to James Jones. He was a preacher, counselor, and a friend to thousands. When I met him, James was in private practice in Atlanta, Georgia. He also taught at Southeastern Biblical Institute at the Chestnut Drive Church of Christ, in Doraville, Georgia. James came to our building at the Central Church of Christ, in Dalton, Georgia, on Mondays. He conducted counseling sessions in our library. For three years, 1982-1985, he taught classes in our building on counseling principles for Christian leaders, grief, and how to manage conflict.

When I first got to know him and started talking with him, he would get a far-away look in his eyes and say, "I dream of a place, time, and circumstance where Christians can get together and tell the truth." At first, I didn't know what he was talking about but I learned. From 1986 until his death in 1995, James and I led a workshop, *Leadership Dynamics for Dynamic Leaders*. He had and continues to have a positive impact on me, my family, and my ministry.

I think by having accountable groups where it is safe to talk we can be better equipped to deal with difficult human issues. When I learn by experience that I can grow by being more comfortable being uncomfortable, I can increase my leadership effectiveness. These guidelines are boundaries that make it easier to lead and participate in that process.

I would be interested in your response and evaluation of these guidelines. Tell me what worked and what didn't. Also, if you have questions, feel free to contact me: [jerrie@barberclippings.com](mailto:jerrie@barberclippings.com)

