

Participant Safety Exercise

Use this to determine how "safe" participants feel to participate fully in an event. Even in a group you know, the results can change over time, and might surprise everyone. Making this visible up front lets leaders and participants factor safety/lack of safety into what follows. Be warned: it might put the dead moose on the table.

There is no "right" answer. Participants honestly report their own feeling of safety by writing *1 2 3 4 or 5* on an index card. Do this as a secret ballot.

Collect and tally them on this scoresheet or a flipchart. If safety is low, visibly destroy & discard them. Or, if you do it with postits, you can stick them right on the flipchart, making a histogram.

Ask the group what they think of the results. Especially if safety is low (ex: lots of high numbers) discuss and decide together what to do before moving on. Plan for the possibility of a session to build working agreements, allowing the group to increase safety themselves. Then re-run this exercise.

Q: How free are you to say the truth here today?

1

**No problem.
I'll discuss anything.**

2

**I will discuss,
though it might be tough.**

3

I will keep some stuff to myself.

4

**I'll let other people
bring up issues.**

5

**I'll smile a lot
and agree with the managers.**

Develop Working Agreements to Increase Safety

When safety is low, it can be helpful to stop and have participants produce their own working agreements for this particular event.

Even if safety is not low, it can provide a valuable lesson in making expectations explicit, that models useful behaviour for the group.

Design agreements for this group, on this day... because safety can change from one day to the next. If the group likes the result, they may choose to continue using them.

Do remind the group:

- Working agreements are guidelines, not laws. Use common sense, and do what is best for the team at any particular time. If unsure, just ask the team what is best.
- To remain helpful this must be a “living document”. If an agreement is not being used, talk about it openly (not about the “offender”). Working agreements must serve the team, and must be changed when they no longer do so well (or well enough).

Exercise inspired by pp 111-112 of the **Retrospectives: A Handbook for Team Reviews** by Norman L. Kerth:

1. This exercise is designed for small groups.

For a large group, break into natural affinity groups. You might use an instruction like:

“This is a no-talking exercise. In a moment I will ask you go move around the room. You will move near to people with whom you have worked (or will work) closely, and away from people with whom you normally have less interaction. In addition to the no-talking rule there is one other rule: you can only move yourself! Any questions? Go!”

Encourage people to keep looking around to see whether this grouping is accurate. Wait until movement slows or stops. (Someone may still be shuttling between groups; note that this is normal and ask them to make a choice). Then ask people to look around and comment on what they see. Based on this, break into natural affinity groups of 4 to 8 people for this exercise.

2. Let each group find a space to work, with a flipchart. Different corners of the same room can work, although with lower safety, it might help to let the groups find separate places to work. Before they leave, give them instructions:

“Brainstorm a list of ground rules, or working agreements, that would help increase safety. Capture any additional ideas, too! Bring the list back, (all? or just the top ones?), to propose to the whole group.”

“For example, some ground rules might be: ‘Try not to interrupt’ or ‘We will each speak from our own perspective’ (you do not need to use these, they are just to give you an idea)”

3. After 30 minutes (or less, if the group is small and the event short), bring the group back for a final discussion that will result in a list agreed upon by all.

4. At the end, add 3 final agreements:

- All participation in this meeting is optional
- We will not make jokes about anyone in the room
- Working agreements can be amended after any break.

5. Be sure to also capture and review any “extra ideas” to increase safety that came up.

If this exercise was provoked by a “Safety Exercise”, run the exercise again and discuss the result. Then move on with your event.