Ground Rules for Difficult Group Discussions

Ideally, group discussions should be calm, focused conversation in which various ideas and opinions are considered, leading to useful, productive outcomes. But in the real world, many groups just can't pull this off. When members have conflicting interests, personal agendas, or aggressive personalities, meetings often deteriorate into angry conflicts, thereby wasting time and harming relationships.

If you anticipate that your group could head down this destructive path, try to get agreement on how discussions will be conducted before leaping into an issue. Unless they just enjoy anger and hostility, group members will usually agree to a reasonable set of ground rules. Then, if things start to get out of hand, group members can remind each other of their previous agreement.

Although each group may have specific needs, the ground rules listed below are often useful.

1. **Stay focused on the purpose and goals**: The group should clearly define what they hope to accomplish at the beginning of the discussion. This makes it easier to determine when people are getting off track.
2. **Listen when others are speaking**: During difficult discussions, people often mentally rehearse their next comment while someone else is talking, with the result that no one is really listening.
3. **Be sure that all viewpoints are heard**: Since most groups have both talkative and quiet members, efforts should be made to invite the quiet people to share their thoughts and keep the talkers from dominating the discussion.
4. **Consider different points of view**: People easily get "locked in" to their own opinions and don't think about the possible merits of other ideas. Members need to be encouraged to think beyond their own point of view.
5. **Look for areas of agreement**: Argumentative group members often agree on more things than they realize. Before discussing disagreements, members should identify the things they do agree on.
6. **Discuss differences respectfully**: Hostile, insulting remarks add nothing to a group discussion and often permanently damage relationships. Members should be reminded about basic "good manners" for meetings.
7. **Remember the facts can be wrong, but opinions are just different**: Most of the time, people are not arguing about facts, but expressing differences of opinion. However, they often act as though their views are "right" and others are "wrong". It helps to recognize that they are simply different.
8. **Look for good points in new ideas**: Useful ideas may get rejected when people are too quick to find flaws. By initially exploring the benefits of an idea, the group can avoid becoming overly critical.
9. **Focus on the future, not the past**: Disagreements can easily deteriorate into finger-pointing about past mistakes and problems. Use past experience to inform your decisions, but focus discussion on future goals.
10. **Look for solutions, not someone to blame**: Any conversation focused on blaming is unproductive and should be turned into a search for solutions.
11. **Don't use group time for individual issues**: When two or three members discuss their own issues in a group meeting, it wastes everyone else's time. If this happens, the people involved should be politely asked to continue their personal discussion after the meeting.
12. **"Sidebar" any issues that are important but off-topic:** Occasionally, important matters are raised that have nothing to do with the goals of the meeting. To keep the group on task, but avoid losing the issue, create a "sidebar" where these topics can be listed and dealt with later.
13. **Agree upon specific action steps**: In most situations, members need to end the discussion with specific "next steps" that can be acted on after the meeting.

Adapted from:
McIntyre, M. G. (2011). *How to control a quarrelsome group.*Retrieved from:
http://www.yourofficecoach.com/topics/coworker_relationships/difficult_coworkers/how_to_control_a_quarrelsome_group.aspx