

Facilitating a working agreement

When facilitating a working agreement with an individual or individuals, it is important that it is done in a friendly, upbeat manner that uses open language and shows that this is a genuine activity with meaning and purpose.

Be mindful that some learners may have had previous negative experiences of working agreements, where the agreements have been imposed, often in an authoritative manner. This can be emotionally loaded and some may disengage from the process.

To create commitment and 'buy in' in forming the working agreement:

- Explain the **motivation** and **rationale** for creating an agreement
- Be **authentic** and **transparent**
- Explain that a '**consensus**' is important
- Explain that if anyone is not happy or has concerns, it is best to **raise those concerns**
- Explain how they can raise any concerns
- Show that you are willing to **negotiate**.

As will be discussed in the 'Connecting' section, negotiating differences is a key characteristic of a healthy, strong and appropriate relationship.

Once we have established and agreed what behaviours we want, we need to have a strategy for ensuring acceptable behaviour and challenging unacceptable or harmful behaviours. Dealing with unacceptable or harmful behaviour can be draining and frustrating. When we experience these emotions, it can undermine our own ability to role model good or acceptable behaviour. This, in turn, will impact the dynamics and feelings of safety for others.



Working agreements: the why

Working agreements should be informed by your digital safeguarding policy. The policy should clearly outline what behaviours it expects from those participating in online activities offered by the organisation.

These behaviours can include factors such as: whether to have the camera on or off during a session, whether or not the chat function will be used, if files can be shared, etc. This should be informed by the organisation's risk and due diligence process policies, procedures and practices. For further guidance, see the Digital Safeguarding resource linked below in Resources.

Establishing a working agreement – the rationale

Working agreements are fundamental to creating a 'Safe Space' online for teaching and learning.

Like building a house, if you don't build strong, deep foundations, it will inevitably crumble at some point. Foundations are hard to put in once the house is built and it's the same for online delivery. If you jump straight into 'business' without addressing the need for a working agreement and establishing one, then you will have more difficulty later if issues arise. You also run the risk of causing harm or jeopardising a relationship.

Establishing a working agreement on acceptable behaviours is important for a number of reasons:

- Not everyone knows what is and isn't appropriate behaviour. A working agreement will define these, and the facilitator must also ensure that they model acceptable behaviours in line with the organisation's online conduct guidance.
- A working agreement provides a set of behavioural 'standards'. These standards are invaluable when challenging inappropriate behaviour. They enable anyone to challenge inappropriate behaviour in a fair, systematic and consistent way. We will demonstrate a model that can be used to challenge behaviour using a working agreement later in this section.
- There are many demands on our time and hence why working agreements are often overlooked or only minimal time spent on them. However, more time will be spent later dealing with concerns that could easily be prevented if an effective working agreement was in place, which was clearly understood and committed to by all.
- We want **all** individuals to also take responsibility for their behaviour so we have to be clear about what the expectations are and what the consequences will be if someone violates the agreement. Again, referring to the organisational policy, there may be a clear process for addressing what action should be taken when someone does not follow the working agreement. This should be consistently followed and openly communicated to all.

Remember: when looking to facilitate any online learning, it is also important that we recognise what we need for us, as facilitators, to feel safe and to be able to take the appropriate action to safeguard our wellbeing.

Resources



Reflective exercise 4: The negotiables and nonnegotiables in behaviour

Working agreements: the how

Now that we've looked at why working agreements are needed, let's see how we can create a working agreement that is responsive to everyone's needs and some of the challenges we might face. There are many pressures on us when delivering online and it can be difficult when we are delivering a vital activity, such as forming a working agreement, so we need to be realistic, acknowledge those challenges that may be there and see how we can overcome them.

Ways to generate a working agreement and make them work

Working agreements need to be responsive to the needs of the individuals participating in the online environment and should be reviewed when required. Indicators that the working agreement may not be working are:

- Non attendance/late arrivals to sessions
- Lower levels of engagement
- More incidents of inappropriate behaviour
- Increased time spent responding to incidents
- Participants expressing their concerns/frustrations.

When creating a working agreement, consider how an agreement can support:

- Creating a safe space
- Helping the session run smoothly
- Ensuring outcomes are achieved.

The working agreement needs to be fit for purpose and you will need to consider your circumstances and what is suitable for your context. For example, when you have a 30-minute session that is a one-off, one-to-one session, it is best to introduce a prepopulated working agreement to the learner, go through it and ask them if they understand it and if they would like to add anything further to it. This can be done in a few minutes. If, on the other hand, you have a larger group and longer course time, you should structure a session that involves all and allows ample opportunity for others to have their say. Managing a large group dynamic can be challenging but it is important to go through this process. The more care and attention that is taken, with opportunities to input into the working agreement, the more effective the working agreement will be.

Resources



Activity 4: Mentimeter



Types of working agreements

There are different types of working agreements that can be used, all with pros and cons. It is important to use a type of working agreement that is 'fit for purpose' and suits the nature of work and the environment in which you are working.

Verbal and fixed working agreements

In some cases, the individual and organisation have a pre-established working agreement and they merely inform participants of what it is.

Pros – It can be delivered quickly and consistently and ensures all key aspects are covered. It can also be less threatening and authoritarian as pitch and tone can be changed and adapted to make it more accessible and engaging.

Cons – 'Buy-In' and taking responsibility for behaviour can be reduced. It can isolate people and may not cover all needs. There is no room for negotiation.

Verbal and variable working agreements

This can be facilitator or participant lead, with a fixed working agreement being presented and then discussed and amended accordingly, or the working agreement can be formed entirely from scratch.

Pros – It is likely to be inclusive and responsive to individual needs. There is more room for negotiation, and through discussion it will likely raise awareness and educate participants on the needs and situations of others, likely increasing levels of empathetic behaviour.

Cons – This can be time consuming and varying needs may lead to disagreements.

Written and fixed working agreements

Participants are issued with a written working agreement and there is no negotiation. These can be sent out in advance of the session, displayed throughout the session, and/or placed in the chat feature for reference.

Pros – This is a consistent approach and presents a visual reminder of the working agreement.

Cons – How the information is presented may lead to accessibility issues. Participants may become disengaged.

Written and variable working agreements

This can be an agreement document that is prepopulated and then introduced to the group or it can be started from scratch, providing a starting point for creating a more needs-driven working agreement.

Pros – Presents a visual reminder of what has been agreed and can be delivered innovatively through a number of different platforms. If used for regular groups over a longer period of time, it can be reviewed as and when required to save time in future sessions.

Cons – These can require a more time in the initial set up.

Blended working agreements

These incorporate both written and verbal agreements. They can be delivered through a variety of innovative means, such as a video. Making a video could be a project that the participants could be involved in making.

Resources

 **Reflective exercise 5:** Working agreements

