

COMMON AGREEMENT — A FIELD GUIDE

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Overview

The Common Agreement is a consciously designed working relationship between members of a team or organization and makes “the implicit explicit”. Often when we begin a new project, and/or a new team is formed, we focus on the what of the work – what needs to happen, what success looks like, who will do what by when, etc. Little to no time is spent discussing how a team will actually work together to best complete the goal. The Common Agreement sets forth the ‘how’ of the working relationship that will increase communication and effectiveness, and is deliberately co-created by all parties.

As we become increasingly distributed across the globe and teams no longer sit together in shared office environments, it is critical to build trust early and quickly in a working relationship. By designing for and focusing on the relationship, as well as the job to be done, projects will have a higher potential of success, and will be a positive experience for all concerned. The Common Agreement cannot prevent issues from occurring, however, it will create a strong foundation of understanding between people so they can be prepared to tackle challenges, and work together to resolve issues quickly.

The agreement is structured as a social contract with the goal of having everyone bring their highest level of expertise and contribution to the project whilst minimizing tension and misunderstanding. Further, by taking time upfront to define the working relationship, one will ensure clarity around what is to be achieved, determine a mutual understanding of how to keep on track, and define what will happen if the project hits a roadblock.

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How to Design The Common Agreement

At the very beginning of a new relationship, project kick-off, or team collaboration, take time to bring all parties together to discuss and define The Common Agreement. This can be done in person, and equally as well on a video call. The meeting requires a minimum of 30 minutes and ideally 60 minutes to complete the Common Agreement.

Assign two roles – (1) a person to facilitate The Common Agreement session and (2) a person recording each piece of the Common Agreement being made. Record and date the agreement in a shared document which all participants can view.

There are many ways to conduct The Common Agreement session. However you proceed, asking open-ended questions and listening will be essential skills in creating strong and inclusive agreements. The facilitated conversation you are having together as a group is designed to unearth some of the assumptions and expectations you might hold of the project, of one another, and of how the project will work.

This session provides a forum to create the terms of the working relationship, and it allows certain norms and ways of being together to be clearly defined and adopted. Starting a relationship with open communication in this way quickly invites trust and authentic connection.

The role of the facilitator invites all parties to share what they need from the working relationship to create the project's desired success. The facilitator ensures that all voices are heard and asks for clarification and agreement from all participants as needed.

Sample Common Agreement session questions for the facilitator are listed below.

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A critical component of The Common Agreement is understanding how we will work together if something should fail, or when a problem inevitably arises. A team's willingness to experiment and fail is crucial to innovation. Therefore, creating openness around what will happen when we fail can dispel fear. Reaching clarity on what those steps will be, and how we will treat each other at that point, creates a generative mindset to resolving and moving through challenges that might rise.

Whilst one person is the session facilitator, everyone involved must take responsibility for their contributions to the relationship and to the outcome of the project.

Help prepare participants for the session by asking them to consider beforehand:

- What conditions do you need to do your best work?
- What is likely to cause you concern and push you to be reactive?
- What are your boundaries?
- What is motivating to you?
- How do you like to celebrate success?

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Sample Facilitation Session Questions

Use these questions as a starting point to open up the conversation in your Common Agreement facilitated session:

- What needs to be in place for us to work together effectively?
- Who will be responsible for what? Define roles and responsibilities.
- What do we expect from each other? What do we each want from this relationship?
- What are a few conditions that really matter to each of us?
- What are our respective deal-breakers? These are activities or requests you simply won't and cannot agree to (e.g., I cannot work evenings).
- What requests do we have for each other?
- What do we need to be able to do our best work together?
- What are the potential roadblocks to the success of this project?
- How will we create accountability?
- What will we do when things get tough, or when one of us makes a mistake?
- How will we handle feedback from each other -- positive and constructive?
- How will we celebrate our successes and completion of this project?

It is important to note that The Common Agreement is a living and breathing document. Periodically, it helps to revisit the agreements you made together and redesign them as necessary. As the project and working relationship continues there will be ongoing questions to address, for example:

- What has been working well? What is not working?
- What would make working together better or easier?
- What do we need to change in order to make the relationship more effective, productive, or positive?
- What do I need to do differently?

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Example – Common Agreement from be radical

Common Agreement – First made Nov 15 2018

- Efficient + kind (Don't be an asshole - GyShiDo Rule #7)
- Have Fun
- No one gets to be wrong / no "stupid" questions
- Bring our whole selves
- Ask for what you need
- Extreme ownership
- Assume positive intent
- Call bullshit (GyShiDo Rule #4) / also toward clients
- Don't die in beauty
- It is okay to push back and say no
- Set expectations quickly + clearly
- Be responsive
- Have a learning culture (and learn)
- Don't take anything personally
- Don't make assumptions
- Always do your best
- Raise flags immediately
- Question ourselves and what we are doing (always be curious)
- Hold each other - Naturally Creative, Resourceful, and Whole
- Play to our strengths
- Ruthless prioritization
- Focus on sustainable productivity

Common Agreement – Updated Jan 26 2020

- Raise flags and question things (with positive intent)
- Always be clear on the WHY
- Rigorous focus on relationship over transaction
- We care - first
- Always be curious
- Ruthless GyShiDo / Bias towards action
- Foster learning (through intention)

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More Resources.

Here at be radical, we focus on igniting and equipping leaders and their organizations with the knowledge and tools required to build the 'future organization.' Take a look at our other resources:

radical Briefing — a regular email digest that gives you brief and personal explanations of the future of business. Sign up at <https://beradicalgroup.com/briefing>

Online Mini-Courses — quick and easy access tutorials with powerful practical teaching for futures-thinking. Learn more at <https://beradicalgroup.com/learn>

Future FWD Program — a two-week live and online course designed to arm you with unique insights, frameworks and a practical toolbox for futures-thinking and leading in complex environments. Register at <https://beradicalgroup.com/futurefwd-you>