**Tactic: Ground Rules**

*Establish shared expectations for how the group will work together—creating a foundation for inclusion of all voices, accountability, and respectful participation.*

**When to Use It:**

Use at the start of any convening or gathering to establish shared expectations and group norms that support inclusion, trust, and meaningful participation. Especially important when participants come from diverse backgrounds or will be engaging in vulnerable, complex, or strategic dialogue, ground rules create a common language for how the group will show up together.

**How it Works:**

### **Step 1 (5–10 minutes) | Introduce the purpose and offer a few sample norms** Share why ground rules matter: not to control, but to create safety and shared understanding. Display 3–4 starter norms on a flipchart, slide, or board (e.g., “Use ‘I’ statements,” “Everyone is an expert”). Keep the tone invitational and explain that these are a starting point, not a mandate.

### **Step 2 (10–15 minutes) | Co-create additional norms with the group** Ask: *“What else would you like to see on this list to help us work well together?”* Capture responses in real time—on a poster, digital doc, or shared screen—and invite verbal or silent agreement from the group. You can also use the *Inside/Outside the Circle* method: draw a circle on a flipchart and invite participants to name what behaviors or values they want *inside* or *outside* that circle for the convening.

### **Step 3 (Ongoing, throughout the convening) | Refer back and keep them alive** Revisit the ground rules at the start of each day and use them as a compass if tensions or disruptions arise. Keep the list visible—on a wall, slide, or printed handout—so it remains a living agreement, not a forgotten list.

**Helpful Tips:**

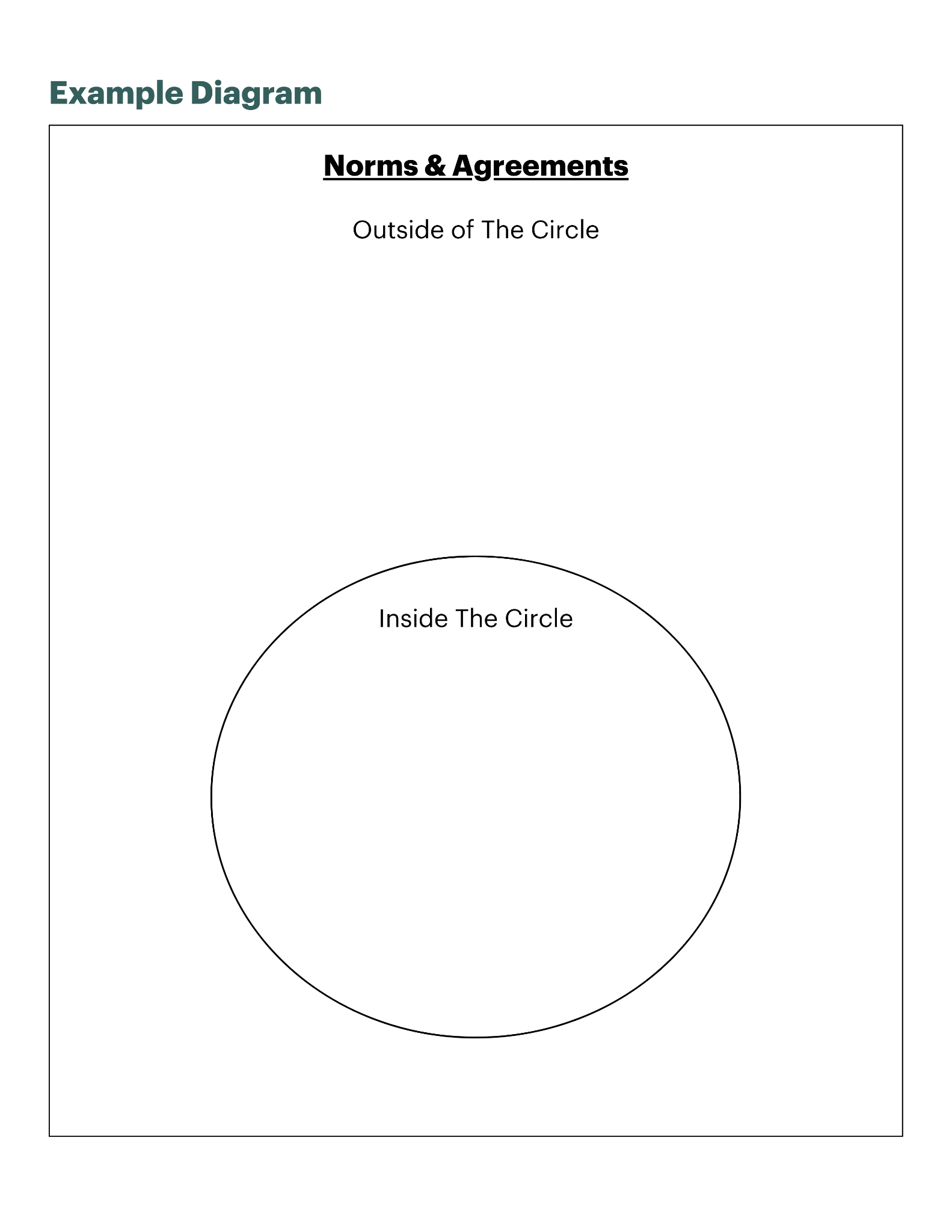
### **Invite personal commitment.** As a daily practice, ask each participant to silently choose one ground rule they want to focus on. Encourage them to write it somewhere visible—like a name card, notebook, or even the background of their device.

### **Lean on rules to diffuse tension:** If tensions arise, use the norms as a neutral reference point to gently navigate conflict or disruption.

### **Reinforce, don’t police.** Frame ground rules as shared agreements, not rigid rules. Facilitators can model and gently reinforce them with warmth and curiosity, not correction.

### **Reflect and adapt.** Check in mid-way through the convening to see if the group wants to add, remove, or revise any norms. This builds shared ownership and keeps the agreements responsive.

**Facilitator Guide**

We recommend a facilitation tactic called **Inside the Circle / Outside the Circle** to align on norms and agreements. The facilitator draws a circle on a flipchart, and introduces the exercise to participants. Participants share, in plenary, the rules, norms, or conditions needed for this convening to be successful, around the framing of: 

* What are we inviting into the circle for this convening? (i.e. Chatham House Rule, I statements)
* What are we leaving outside of the circle for this convening? (i.e. Cellphones, cynicism, jargon)

**Example Norms:**

* **Connect as people before professionals:** Human relationships fuel collective work. Trust begins with seeing one another fully.
* **Everyone here is an expert**: We value the unique perspective, lived experience, and insight each person brings.
* **Use “I” statements** Speak from personal experience: “I’ve noticed…” / “My perspective is…”. This keeps dialogue grounded and reduces defensiveness.
* **Device-free zone:** We agree to keep our phones and devices tucked away during our time together. If something urgent arises and you need to check your phone, please step outside to avoid disrupting the space. This helps us all stay present, respectful, and engaged with one another.
* **Make space, take space** If your contribution limits others’ ability to participate, the facilitator may gently redirect to open up the floor.
* **Instead of saying “no,” try “yes, and” or “what if…”**: Support a generative, possibility-oriented conversation.