Establishing Norms

Norms are belief statements that guide the team members' interactions and behaviors. Norms need to be short, simple statements. These codes of behavior support both quality work and each member's rights and ideas.

Consider these issues when setting norms.

1. Meeting time (beginning, ending, frequency and lengths of meetings, agendas)
   Sample norm: We will arrive on time, follow the agenda, and end on time.

2. Communication protocols (pausing, paraphrasing, asking probing questions, assuming positive intentions, interrupting, sending reminders and updates)
   Sample norm: All team members are equal and will be thoughtfully listened to.

3. Confidentiality
   Sample norm: Concerns about the team will be discussed within the team before going outside the team.

4. Decision making (what processes to use for decisions, how work is to be assigned, rubrics for quality work, how to resolve conflicts of opinions or schedule)
   Sample norm: We will make decisions by consensus with majority rules as our backup process.

5. Everyone has equal voice (monopolizing, being passive, using strategies like clock partners, numbered heads, paired reading, holding each other accountable.)
   Sample norms: Leadership will rotate based upon the type of meeting. If you commit to something, do it in a timely manner.

Teams without norms leave themselves open to potential relationship problems and misunderstandings. Here is one way to establish norms:

Activity: Rules to Live By.

Purpose: Establish norms that will increase productivity and facilitate team goals

Time: 1 hour

Materials: Sticky note, chart paper, markers

Processing Tools: Brainstorm and affinity diagram

Procedure:

1. Make certain all members are present for this exercise.

2. Without talking, brainstorm five or six ideal behaviors for an effective team. Put each idea on a separate sticky note.

3. The coordinator collects all sticky notes and clusters like ideas, providing as much anonymity as possible. Each set of ideas is read aloud, discussed, and moved to a different cluster if needed.

4. The team then creates a norm statement for each cluster.

5. Ask each member to identify any norm they cannot commit to. Openly discuss what changes can be made to a norm that does not have universal support.

6. Record agreed-upon norms on a poster.

Norms are reviewed at the beginning of every meeting by the coordinator and quickly evaluated at the end of the meeting by the summarizer. Norms can be expanded or revised as necessary. Norms should always be revisited when a new member joins the team.

High performing teams not only follow norms but also agree to confront behaviors that violate them. Many teams we interviewed identified low trust as the primary reason for people avoiding addressing violations. This eventually throws teams into dysfunction and malcontent.

Once you have this framework the team will spend more time on work and less time on resolving interpersonal problems. Now it's time to put protocols for productive meetings in place.

Establishing Meeting Protocols

Getting Started. A team of teachers from California said that they raised their meeting productivity by using a simple activity called “Jeers and Cheers:” They started each meeting by focusing on feelings, views, and opinions of members. This short but powerful strategy generated a friendly atmosphere where people-built relationships through quick personal discussions. Here is their strategy.

Activity: Jeers and Cheers

Purpose: Build rapport and create positive energy

Time: 3 minutes for both parts of the activity

Materials: None

Processing Tools: None:

Procedure:

1. The first minute of every meeting is about “moans and groans:” Anything you feel like complaining about is fair game as long as it is not an attack on any person. Complain about the workload, how the students are behaving, or that you didn't get your bathroom break. This is all fair game. Confessing the sins of bosses and others is not. Once you've stated your issue you have to let it go and get to the real work of the team. The entire team has to fit all complaints into the same 60 seconds either by talking to a partner or using round robin for the group. Team members always have the option to pass.
2. During the next two minutes, members share something about themselves (feelings, values, accomplishments, and interests) without any fear of judgment. Someone poses a sentence starter like, “Tell us something you accomplished this week that you are proud of” or “Tell your partner one thing we could do to improve our team meetings.” This can be a round-robin discussion where everyone makes a one-sentence statement for the entire team to hear, or partners can exchange information. This strategy works best when people know the question or prompt ahead of time.

Every problem you tackle and every decision you make either builds or detracts from team trust and relationships. Steven Covey says relationships between people are like “emotional bank accounts” where we constantly make deposits and withdrawals (1989). Covey describes clear expectations, small kindnesses, listening, and following through on commitments as actions that “make deposits” in emotional accounts. Conversely, things like disrespect, interrupting, ignoring, and letting people down become “withdrawals.” To make a team function well we have to intentionally make daily deposits in each other's emotional accounts and remember to apologize when we make withdrawals. This is the stuff of great families, friendships, and high-performing teams.

Timelines. Agreeing that all team members will complete assignments on time is an important norm to set. Delaying the team's work by not following through on commitment in a timely fashion is one of the "time killing" issues, according to many groups we interviewed. Ken Blanchard's research of 2,044 team leaders found that 44 per- cent cited "individuals who do not complete assignments" as one of the most frustrating things about being part of a team (2006).

Teams must keep in mind that members have other commitments running alongside of their team project work that has to be factored into timelines. If your group has little experience estimating the type of large project you are about to work on, consider using a tool called PERT (Project Evaluation and Review Technique), often applied in business settings (Gingrich, 2014).

Simply stated, this formula uses three estimates: the most likely amount of time required (Tm), the most optimistic amount of time (To) and the most pessimistic amount of time required (Tp). To come up with the estimates for your task or project simply add: 4Tm + To + Tp and divide this by 6. You now have a reasonable estimate for the amount of time this work will take.

Try applying this formula to one of the projects your team is tackling. Did you find this tool helpful?

Timed Agendas. When Margaret served on a state administrator's board, the meetings went on for hours, often because of time spent rehashing the same issues and arguments. Finally, the director came up with a technique that cut the meeting time in half. The major change was simply dividing the main agenda into two main parts: "items for discussion" and "items for action." Here are the guidelines:

Things listed under "Items for discussion" are never decided upon during that meeting. The group only explores pros, cons, and possibilities. These discussion items are then placed in the "items for action" for the following meeting.

"Items for action" are briefly reviewed by summarizing the pros and cons from the prior meeting. No rehashing of old points is allowed. Only new issues about this item are entertained for discussion. This moves decision making along because people have ample time between meetings to do extra research, talk, and think about the issues before making their commitment. This procedure makes timed agendas easier to manage.

Timed agendas work efficiently because each agenda item has a maximum time assigned to it. Because the time-keeper insists that the group move the discussion to the next item when time is up, people stop admiring problems and get to the business of solving them. Expect that deciding how many minutes to assign each item will be difficult at first, but once the procedure is used for several meetings the payoff will more than offset the initial frustrations.

Follow through is more likely when people have a clear idea of both agendas and timelines. Good preparation is dependent upon the coordinators ability to give members lead time to reflect and in some cases get together with sub-groups to plan their part of the work. Forwarding material and reminders using short e-mails, screencasts, or video clips is an efficient practice. The short and to-the-point e-mail might look like Figure 1.