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# How To Define Your Team's Norms (And Why It's Important)



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Workplace or team norms are usually defined as how team members interact, communicate, share, collaborate and coordinate.

Every team has norms, whether it is a team in sports, business or the military. Usually these customs or standards are defined over time by individuals and alliances within the team, the influence and philosophy of the leader, and organizational culture. They can contribute to the overall success of the team and organization, or hinder it. They can be impacted by stress, success, a new leader or new team members, so what we consider team norms are rarely set in stone.

Successful leaders know that being more deliberate about defining team norms will help the team work together and hold each other accountable. Formally defining such standards should be intended to help a team achieve higher performance, not to react to a poorly performing team. This also helps create a foundation for assimilating a new team member or new hire into the existing team. Team members become accountable for self-policing each other's behaviors and actions.

Leaders ready to convene their team for an exercise in defining their norms can follow these steps.

### **Introduce The Concept To Your Team**

Clearly state that the exercise of defining your team standards will help the group hold each other accountable to a specific set of norms and behaviors that the team, not the leader, defines. Remind your team that all groups have their own customs. The attendees for this exercise should be the direct reports to the leader; in smaller teams every employee can participate. Provide a marker for each person, small sticky notes and white poster paper to hang on the wall. Set aside two to three hours for the exercise, and require that everybody attend in person.

### **Brainstorm Team Norms**

Set aside 20-30 minutes for each team member to brainstorm and write the customs they strive for or want the team to uphold on their sticky notes. Examples may include, “Admit when you make a mistake,” “Have each other’s backs,” “Be results-driven,” “Present innovative ideas,” “Give timely responses” and the like. The notes will pile up. As the leader, you must also participate in brainstorming since you are part of the team.

Next, ask the team members to place all their notes on the wall or table for everybody to review and read. Encourage team members to place their notes in random order rather than all in one section on the board. The objective is to present a diversity of ideas and thoughts versus centering around the specific ideas of one team member.

### **Identify Main Themes**

Encourage the team to get up and walk around so they can read and reflect on each note. Once everybody has walked around the room, ask the team to start grouping the ideas into general themes or topics. Though each team's will be different, examples of general themes may include communication, trust and respect or goals. The idea is to try to condense the number of themes to no more than 10. You may find that some of main themes overlap each other; for example, some standards for communication may also be applicable to teamwork. As a leader, your role is to encourage your team to work together to identify the main themes while you support the process from the sidelines.

Once the ideas have been separated into general themes, ask the team members to each add a dot to the categories/groupings that they feel are most critical. A good method for determining the number of dots is to divide the number of categories by the number of participants — for example, 20 categories divided by five

participants equals four dots for each participant. Participants may not use more than one dot for each category. This process will help the team prioritize the top themes, which will be seen by the number of dots for each category.

### **Formalize Your Team Norms**

Write the main categories on the wall or project them on a screen. Ask the team what other categories may be combined.

Next, ask the team to help define the behaviors for each category. Start each sentence with “I.” The behaviors listed under each category may look like, “I have my team members’ backs,” “I am results-driven,” “I admit when I make a mistake and recommend a solution” or “I ask for help when needed.”

Ask the team some questions: What are we missing? What is redundant? What is not a main category and should be eliminated or combined with another category?

### **Create Team Accountability**

At this point in the process, you should have one page of main categories with simple phrases under each category that define the behavior with “I” statements.

Ask the team some additional reflective questions, such as, “How does this accurately define our current and expected norms for each other?” Ask each team member to define the standard that they feel will be most difficult for them to follow and identify how the other team members can help them. Ask the team if they feel comfortable holding each other accountable in these categories and actions.

Print out copies of these newly defined team standards, and ask each person to personally sign or initial an individual copy. Don’t

make it formal with signature lines; just initial or sign in the margins. Encourage participants to display the summary in their work spaces for their personal reference.

Formalizing team norms helps you as a leader and your team members to hold each other accountable for expected behaviors. It provides a reference for individual team members to remind others what is expected in terms of working together. As a leader, it creates a responsibility to ensure that individuals and the team follow what was promised to each other.

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