



Bringing Order to Project Teams

By Dean A. Baker, PMP

Any group meeting together requires a set of norms to guide their conduct. At one extreme, a group may adopt a formal set of rules such as, “Roberts Rules of Order”, while at the other extreme there is no documentation. In reality even at the extreme of nothing published, each person has their own rules of behavior based on their culture, experience, and individual beliefs. In the later case, the unwritten personal norms can vary substantially among the group members. This difference in norms can cause irritation and conflict; which reduces the effectiveness of the group. Simple things such as dress code, meeting timeliness, and phone interruptions can cause issues, while other areas can cause major conflicts. Some examples of areas that have the potential to cause major conflicts are individual respect, openness, honesty, participation, and confidentiality.

Conflict Avoidance

Establishing and posting a set of norms at the beginning minimizes or avoids many issues and conflicts that normally occur within a group. When conflicts occur, referring to the posted norms can often resolve the conflict quickly and in an objective manner without the destructive and lingering effects of a perceived personal confrontation. A formal set of norms has the added benefit of enabling a new member to be a productive participant of an established group more quickly.

Like all groups, every team has a set of norms. These norms will be a combination of procedural and interpersonal issues. In a team, it is critical that everyone understands and supports every norm to insure team effectiveness. The first task in team formation after initial introduction is establishment of team norms. This uses a consensus style approach, since everyone must clearly know and support the norms, which govern the team through its life cycle. Establishing the norms in this way insures maximum commitment and creates an atmosphere that encourages the proper positive team behavior.

Establishing the Rules

The task of establishing norms is a relatively simple non-threatening assignment and accomplished with a facilitator. The facilitator, an individual from the team or a third party, first explains the need for norms to the group. Next, the facilitator solicits thoughts from the group and lists them on a chart stand easily viewed by the entire group. If no one offers an idea, the facilitator suggests an area in which to set a norm; such as timeliness or participation. The facilitator might try asking a specific person to respond. Remember, the norms exist in the minds of all the team members by virtue of their experience, culture, and beliefs. The idea is to draw these items out.

As each item is proposed, the facilitator checks the group for understanding and agreement. If anyone objects to a specific norm, the facilitator works with the group to revise the norm to the team’s satisfaction. Retain only an item that the entire group accepts. This task helps to build consensus agreements and draws various members into participation. The facilitator must avoid getting too many ideas from one person and strive to get a balanced list that represents everyone’s participation. Once norms are complete, post them on the wall as reference during the

balance of the team formation meeting. Add Norms by team consensus, and published in the minutes for use at all future meetings.

In over twenty years of team building, I have always had a positive experience with this task since everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute regardless of functional area or position within the group. It works well with machine operators to company presidents. I have employed this successfully in team building with North American, South American, European, and Asian cultures with people from such functional areas as engineering, sales, purchasing, finance, and manufacturing. The greatest obstacle usually comes from the engineers that want to go immediately to the team's main task. They believe that setting norms is a waste of time. You can keep the process on track by publishing an agenda ahead of your team formation to build an expectation in the group and effectively explaining the benefits of having norms ahead of the exercise. In the cross culture situation, a common language is the first obstacle to overcome. Applying this task with the language barriers is a good way to test the effectiveness of the tools and resources in place to address language.

Everyone Wants the Same Thing

How can you be assured the group will select norms that represent the right team behavior? In my twenty years of teambuilding that has never been a problem even when dealing with diverse cultures. It is surprising to find the commonality in the norms among all teams as well the strong correlation of the team norms to the generally accepted positive team behaviors. You must trust in the basic honesty and integrity of people. Everyone wants dignity, respect, ability to participate and express their views without fear of consequences, and association with a successful team. Remember, all norms must have the total group's support. Even if there is a negative norm proposed, it will never get the agreement of the entire group.

When lead by a good facilitator, this task of establishing the norms allows the team to model the behavior of an effective team performing consensus decision making. Thus, the actual process and the results provide value to the team. The process gives the team training in consensus decisions and the norms establish the right team behavior.

Achieving Maximum Effectiveness

Establishing team norms gives everyone an opportunity to define the environment in which they are going to work. It insures that everyone on the team has a common understanding and commitment to the team's expectations of conduct. Knowledge of the norms allows new people to fit in and contribute faster. Maintaining and reviewing norms regularly, provides a mechanism to help keep the team on track by encouraging the right behavior while avoiding misunderstandings and conflict. Team norms are a core ingredient required to help any team achieve its maximum effectiveness.

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