



This guide is intended to help positional leaders create a welcoming environment for remote and returning staff, using a best practice that can help teams work better together in general.

Being on a team can be very rewarding when we feel connected within it, we know what behaviors our fellow group members expect of us, and group members share the same expectations. When this happens, we can be more productive and feel supported. But often we don’t know what those expectations are. What could your team accomplish if everyone knew these things?

Team Norms as Behavioral Guide and Support Mechanism

Our behavior in every relationship, personal or professional, is guided by a set of unwritten rules, or social norms: for example, say “please” and “thank you,” don’t interrupt, bow your head upon meeting, etc. Norms are generally understood and accepted, even though we don’t usually talk about them.

On a team, however, when multiple people work together to solve problems and make decisions, it’s important to discuss and agree on team norms. Team norms are a set of rules or operating principles that shape team members’ interactions. Team norms establish clear, agreed-upon behaviors: how the team will work together, and what team members can expect of each other.

Why are team norms important, especially now?

We are creatures of habit, reliant on patterns and practices that, once ingrained, allow us to focus our attention and efforts on other complex activities and thinking. When we are returning to a workplace that operates differently, which may include a team that is not entirely located back on site, we can’t rely on the habits we used to have. This situation often results in people feeling unsettled, or even anxious. As a manager, you can use team norms to help establish a level of certainty and to initiate helpful new patterns of interactions that support the way your new environment operates.

Further, team norms can help align behavior with what we say is important: our stated values. For example, if safety is a value, and not every team member follows safety guidelines, what does the team (manager and non-manager members) do to reinforce the guidelines? If inclusion is a value, and some members’ voices aren’t heard in team meetings, because those members are located remotely or are part of an historically marginalized group, how might that value be seen more as talk than walk?

What’s my role as a manager in creating and reinforcing norms?

We are in a time when “it goes without saying” may not work as well as it may have in the past. Team norms need be explicit. Without this step, you leave to chance whether the habits that take hold are not only positive, but also helpful to the team’s effectiveness and supportive for *all* members.

As a manager, consider the behavioral practices that exemplify your values and the values of the group. What do you care about and how do your own behaviors match what you value? Understanding your own perspective will help you think about the team’s and your own need for establishing helpful norms.

Once you’ve done your own reflection work, help the team get and stay on the same page by:

- Dedicating a team meeting to develop explicit team norms (see exercise on page 2)
 - Asking, “What’s different about our conditions that require new awareness and ways of interacting as a team?” (For example, holding meetings when only some folks are remote.)
 - Keeping the team norms front-and-center and revisit them to update and adapt as needed
 - Bringing new team members up to speed and getting their input on team norms
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10 Steps for Establishing Team Norms¹

Here is an exercise that could be completed with your team, with you as the facilitator and notetaker. Please consider holding your thoughts until you get to Step 7, letting the team do the talking, until and unless you feel that there is something essential that is missing (the behaviors you want see). Stay focused on the positive, forward-facing direction of this exercise, and leave any existing problematic behaviors to another discussion. Keep track of suggestions on a screen or large sheet of paper that all team members can view. (Approximately one hour to complete for team of five.)

1. Ask each member to think of the worst team he or she has served on. Any group counts — a work team, a volunteer group, a sports team — as long as the members were dependent on each other to produce results.
2. Have each team member spend 2 minutes writing down what made that experience so terrible. Direct them to be as specific as possible about their reasons.
3. Ask team members to share their experiences with the whole group.
4. Ask each member to think of their best team experience. As with the negative experience, each team member should spend 2 minutes writing down what made the experience so good.
5. As before, encourage team members to share their experiences with the whole team.
6. With these comments in mind, discuss as a group what makes for a good team experience and what makes for a bad one.
7. Ask team members to suggest behaviors and team norms that would contribute to the current team's success. Pay attention to the most relevant issues or actions that could affect the team's biggest challenges.
8. Discuss the suggestions as a group and decide as a group which ones the team can support and adhere to. As part of this step, flag any concerns or challenges that the team thinks they may struggle with. Even if you can't identify a solid solution, doing this keeps reality in the forefront. For example, if a challenge for your team is to have everyone present at a meeting, then simply stating "participating in team meetings" as an expectation will not help resolve the issue. The group should discuss whether this is realistic and how to help one another achieve it.
9. Discuss how to respond to a team member who doesn't follow the norms, including if you as the leader do not follow a norm. What is the mechanism for addressing behaviors that go against the norms? What would help team members feel comfortable to address behavior that goes against the norms? (e.g. creating a script together about what to say; having group members identify a person, inside or outside the group, that can "coach" them through what to say when engaging the person violating the norms; etc.)
10. Transfer the team's list of "must-do" behaviors into a document so all team members have access to it. Your team may choose to post the list of team norms electronically and/or in its regular meeting room for quick reference. It is important to establish a plan for when and how the "must-do" list will be revisited.

Additional Resources

- ["Assuming Responsibility for the New Norm"](#) (2:30 minute video, from LinkedIn Learning Course, "Managing in Difficult Times")

¹ Adapted from "[10 Steps for Establishing Team Norms \(Center for Creative Leadership\)](#)"
