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Professional Leadership Results, Inc.

Helping you align your people with your vision



Creating a Team Agreement:

Foundational Element for Success

By Libby Wagner, Founder of Professional Leadership Results

At one point in my career as a manager, I took on the task of helping instructors prepare to teach at a new employee academy. The four-week academy was designed to prepare new staff members to learn the logistics, philosophy and specifics of their new jobs. The material was intense, controversial and challenging. The participants were educated and experienced in a wide variety of disciplines and areas of expertise ranging from health care, human services, law and justice, risk management and sociology. They were all grown-ups.

One particular part of the instructor development process was ensuring that the instructors established a safe place for learning so that the participants could ask questions, wrestle with ideas, push back on old paradigms—we needed real discourse unencumbered by the posturing of position power or academic credentials. No problem, right? Think again. The academy had previously held an expectation that participants would be, at best, contrary and difficult, and at worst, surly and misbehaved. Sound like a high school classroom? For whatever reason, my most difficult sell-job at the time was to convince the instructors and academy managers that the best thing they could do was establish some classroom guidelines—ways to behave around one another so t

that the learning environment was indeed safe and supportive of the learning that needed to happen. After all, this was four weeks of pay for not doing the jobs they were hired to do—four weeks to prepare them to do the job—and that's a big investment of time and resources. People back in the workplace had expectations that the new employees would show up ready to roll up their sleeves and work. Anything that distracted them from the task at hand was a cost. Anything that distracts your team from their work is a cost to you.

We cannot take the vagaries of group dynamics for granted, whether it's in a traditional training or educational setting, as in the example above, or whether it's among our team members in our companies and organizations. Raise your hand if you've ever been in an unproductive, frustrating meeting because grown-ups were not choosing respectful ways to communicate or proceed. Your team, no matter their industry, expertise or job, can benefit from a Team Agreement, or some type of agreed-upon set of guidelines that denote how you will interact while you are working with each other and your customers or clients. Call it what you like—ground rules, guiding principles, core values—having specific criteria that helps create a common foundation can save you time and money, alleviate stress, and increase productivity.

Benefits of creating a Team Agreement:

- Makes public the expectations of the group
- Creates a foundation for building trusting relationships, which strengthens the team's infrastructure
- Allows team members to hold one another accountable for their agreement so you don't have to play referee
- Engenders buy-in for creating a commitment to shared goals or vision

There are numerous ways to create a team agreement, but my advice is to keep it simple and real. You do not need a three day retreat in the woods to do this, even though I like woodsy retreats. Any time is a good time to create a team agreement; do it! A new year, new quarter, new project might signify an especially good time.

Here are some helpful tips in creating a team agreement that have worked for my clients and for me:

- 1. Frame it:** tell your team that you're invested in their success and you know that good teams perform better when they're all "on the same page." If you frame it by telling them they're in trouble, you'll set a tone for resistance and a lack of sincerity.
- 2. Picture it:** have your team brainstorm a list of characteristics of an outstanding team-work, play, community, etc. Encourage them to come up with the specifics for a *dream team*.
- 3. Identify it:** Using the *dream team* list as the ultimate goal, ask them what 3-5 things they believe a team does to support themselves moving toward that goal. They will come up with items such as "respect" and "good communication"-encourage them to identify *specific* interpersonal behaviors, but try to keep your list short so that it's easy to remember and pragmatic. If (and they probably won't) they forget something you'd like on the list, when you reach the end of the process, tell them you'd like to add one of your favorites, and add it.
- 4. Sign it:** some teams physically sign the paper that includes their work and brainstorming; others agree to the list by demonstrating a show of hands. Either way, actually ask them if they believe these are good guidelines and ask them to promise to try their best. This creates public accountability with each other and you.

5. Use it: the quickest way to convince them that you didn't really mean this or you weren't serious is if you don't use their ideas and work. Some teams have them printed up and post them near their offices or work stations. Some teams use them as a beginning or ending of meetings and work sessions to identify how they are actively practicing the agreement, or living their values. Don't waste their time or yours by just going through the exercise, use it!

6. Talk about it: You are the ultimate role model for the agreement as the team leader. Talk about it. Refer to it. Ask about it. Use it when you must confront an action or behavior that is in violation of the agreement by reminding, "I thought we'd agreed to . . ." Make it real, and it will be.

Having a team agreement can help your team get rid of assumptions about what's expected as they interact with one another which can increase trust and impact morale and performance. A highly functioning team is the infrastructure for a successful organization, and as a leader, you can help your team set the foundation for their own success!

Interested in more ideas on leadership? Check out Million Dollar Consultant Alan Weiss' thoughts on leadership in this month's Writing on the Wall: www.summitconsulting.com. Dr. Weiss is mentor to an international community of top-notch consultants who work with great leaders and companies world-wide and the author of several books on leadership and performance management. ❖

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