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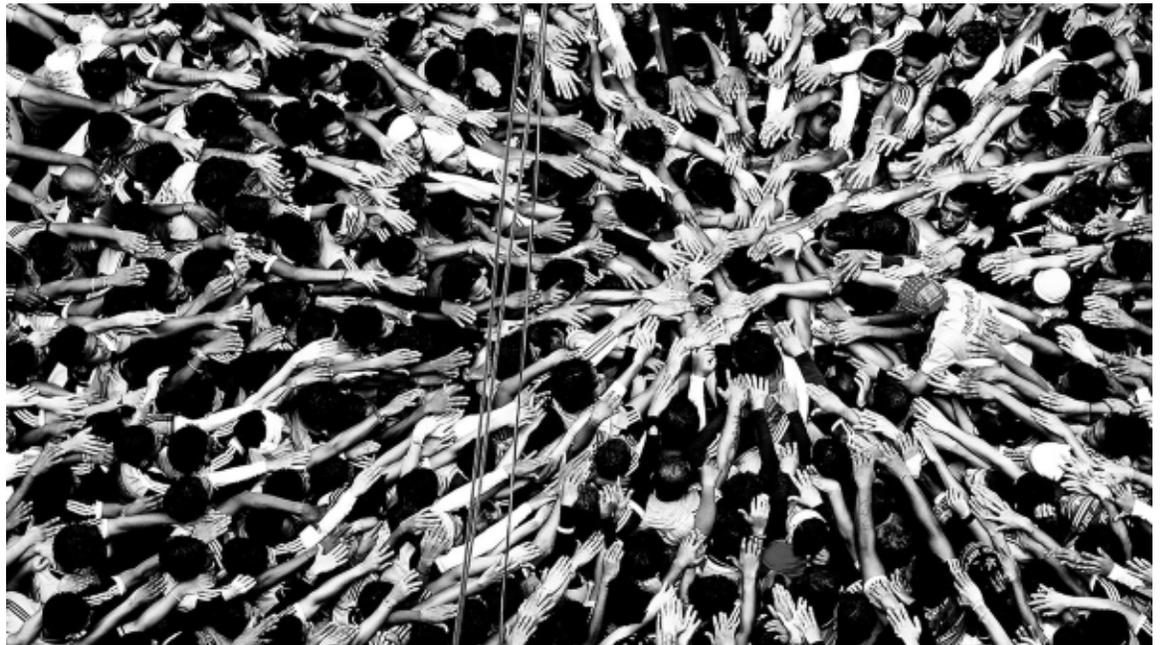
Help Your Team Agree
on How They'll
Collaborate

by Mary Shapiro

LEADING TEAMS

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It's easy to assume that everyone knows how to work on a team — and on some level this is true. But each member of your team probably has her own understanding of how to collaborate, not to mention individual styles and preferences. If you ask six team members what they think “completing work on time” entails, you'll probably get six different answers. The same holds true for your team's other aspirations. It's tempting to get going on the task work of a project, skimping on the people aspects of team work. But agreeing on clear rules of conduct allows you to blend individual team members into one cohesive unit.

We each have our own rules of conduct, of course. Yours may tell you that getting to a 9:00 a.m. meeting at 9:03 is just fine. Or that it's OK to chime in mid-presentation when you're enthusiastic about an idea. Or that you should remain silent to avoid rocking the boat when you disagree with a decision the majority of people seem to support.

So what happens when you work with someone who thinks that a 9:00 start time really means 8:55? And that interrupting is rude? And that silence signals agreement? One or both of you end up frustrated, angry, or feeling disrespected, and tensions will mount.

Most of us want to do a good job and work well together. But when individuals' rules of conduct are unspoken, motives are often misinterpreted ("He's just doing that because he always has to be right" or "She's trying to hog the spotlight").

Rules of conduct clarify how you'll make decisions, keep everyone informed, run meetings, hold one another accountable, assess progress, and continually improve. The purpose of discussing your team's rules isn't to determine the *one right way* of running a team. It's to agree on the *one consistent way* you'll run this particular team.

Rules of conduct:

- Clarify what others expect of you, the leader.
- Make members' behavior more predictable.
- Rein in members' behavior so you won't have to play "cop" as often.
- Reduce the amount of time you spend rehashing processes, such as how team decisions are made.
- Provide criteria for objective feedback and conflict resolution.

Rules of conduct will form and evolve whether you talk about them or not. Without deliberate conversations, you'll find that unproductive rules crop up as people mimic what you and other influential team members do in practice. If you, the leader, routinely show up five minutes late for meetings, lateness becomes the norm, overriding any notion that punctuality is important. Rules also evolve according to what you reward. By listening to a team member complain about another member, you reward that behavior—you're giving the complainer your attention. And that kind of exchange becomes an accepted way of operating, even if the team originally agreed that members should try to resolve conflicts without your intervention.

Reconciling personality and style differences isn't the only reason to create rules of conduct (though it's a big one). If you're leading a cross-unit team, you'll need to blend the different approaches. If you've added new people to a team, you'll have to take their perspectives into account. If you're managing two teams that must collaborate to achieve larger goals, you'll have to establish a third, overarching set of rules. You get the picture: Any time you bring people together, you have to create explicit rules of conduct—or the work will suffer.

Here are a couple of exercises to help your team establish its rules.

Begin with a Boilerplate List

Rather than having open-ended discussions about desired conduct—which can take a lot of time and exhaust everyone—find and use an existing framework (a quick Google search yields several and one is included in the *HBR Guide to Leading Teams*). Ideally it lists basic rules for respect and trust; meeting discussions and decision making; dissent and innovation; feedback and reporting; and conflict resolution.

A framework like this serves as a starting point for establishing your team’s top 10 rules (a manageable number to generate and remember). You can then reach agreement on them through what’s called the *nominal method of decision making*:

- Ask individuals to do their own assessments: Which rules has the team followed from the get-go? Which would they like to add? Which would they rate as their top 10?
- At a meeting, post everyone’s lists on the wall.
- Have team members walk around, view everyone’s lists, and put checks next to the 10 rules they value the most (with fresh ideas in the room, their picks are likely to differ from their original 10).
- The rules with the most votes become the team’s top 10.

This exercise works well for new and existing teams. At a large technology retailer, a team of eight Service Center staffers had worked together for several years, but they had never held team-building conversations. As a result, some counterproductive rules of conduct had emerged: For instance, team members weren’t following up on customer requests. As more and more of those requests went unaddressed, people started pointing fingers. The team decided it was time to create explicit rules of conduct; members consulted some sample ones they found online and then worked together to come up with the following list:

1. Bring up problems (regarding tasks or relationships) when they arise. Don’t expect them to go away; instead, name the elephant in the room.
2. Take ownership and follow through on problems.
3. Don’t let things fall through the cracks. Even if the next step is someone else’s responsibility, stay in touch until it’s done.
4. Tell people what you need. Don’t expect them to guess.
5. When responding to someone’s request, always explain why you are doing what you are doing, especially when you have to say no.
6. When asking for something, always explain why you are making the request. This allows the person to come up with an alternative solution if what you are asking for isn’t possible.
7. If you need training or tools in order to be successful, ask for them.
8. Take risks, but inform key people so that they don’t get blindsided. Analyze the risks, identify the unexpected consequences, and plan for them.

9. Think Center-wide. When your actions diverge from usual practice, always ask, “What impact will this have on the team?”
10. Start each meeting with individuals sharing “what I did this week that constituted excellent customer service.”

To make these rules stick, the team regularly reviewed them, especially when they experienced backsliding. And when the Service Center added three employees, veteran staffers used orientation as an opportunity to reexamine the rules. They invited the new hires to propose different rules or suggest changes to existing ones.

Even if the makeup of your team doesn’t change, members should periodically reassess its rules. Do this quarterly or each time you close out a project. That keeps the rules relevant as tasks and timelines change. It also helps quash undesirable behaviors that emerge, as the Service Center staffers discovered.

Conduct a Cultural Audit

A cultural audit helps newly blended or ongoing teams with new members identify rules of conduct that already exist—whether explicitly established or unofficially evolved. The team can then decide what to keep, modify, discontinue, or add.

A few days before you meet, ask people to think about how they would describe to a new member “the way things are done around here.” Use the following questions as prompts:

- What rules were you told explicitly when you joined the team? Did someone take you aside and give you the “inside story”? If so, what did that person say?
- What rules do you *wish* you’d been told about early on?
- Has a teammate ever told you, “That’s not how it’s done around here”? (Violating an unknown rule is often the quickest way to learn!)
- What criticisms have you heard about others’ behavior? Name the criticisms but *not* the people involved.

As the leader, conduct your own audit of the culture. Don’t spend too long on it: Your spontaneous responses are probably the most accurate. When the team meets, ask members to share their perceptions. Take time to highlight differences—they’re often a source of conflict (or at least confusion). As in the boilerplate list exercise, ask members to vote for the top 10 rules they’d like to see the team adopt.

A team I consulted with at a large health care company used the Cultural Audit to identify and resolve a culture clash. The leader, a VP of marketing, had brought together some internal folks and a group of contractors to create a social media campaign. But the two camps had problems gelling. The internal folks complained that the consultants were too lax about details and deadlines, and too

informal. Not surprisingly, the contractors saw the company insiders as bureaucratic and stodgy. When each group fell back on its own home rules, conflicts arose. The Cultural Audit gave the team a nonjudgmental way of recognizing the two sets of rules, which took the heat out of the conversation. Members then negotiated one common set of rules to guide interactions within the blended team.

Rules of conduct should help your team work together smoothly and productively, so keep things simple and practical. Focus on behaviors that will improve collaboration and the quality of the work. Early on, though, it's usually best to err on the side of more structure (and a few more rules), which you can adjust or relax as the team hits its stride. For instance, you might start out with a rule about answering e-mails by the end of the day. As that behavior becomes ingrained, you may no longer need that rule to ensure responsiveness. When teams don't have clear, specific rules at the outset, they often have to impose structure later as confusion and conflict arise, which takes more time and energy than spelling out desired behaviors in the first place.

This article is adapted from the Harvard Business Review Press Book [HBR Guide to Leading Teams Ebook + Tools](#).

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