

Working Agreements: The Key to High Performance

What is a working agreement?

A working agreement consists of ground rules (norms, expectations) that guide how a team will work together to achieve results/meet an objective/realize a goal.

How do you prepare a working agreement?

A working agreement begins with the members of the group identifying the objective or goals for the group. What does the group hope to accomplish? During the process of identifying and setting group goals it is important that they be **Challenging**, **Cooperative**, and **Clear**. A challenging goal focuses the groups' efforts on accomplishing something that will require effort and interdependence from each group member. Challenging goals can help to cultivate synergy and assist the group in reaching its' full potential. Goals must also be cooperative. Without support and buy-in from each group member goals become difficult to attain. Clear goals are measurable and allow the group to recognize if they are on track towards reaching that goal.

Next, it is important that team members reflect (early in the team's experience) on assumptions and expectations that have developed as a result of initial interactions. It may be helpful to make a list of these expectations. In addition, some teams may find it beneficial to consult a prepared list of productive and counterproductive norms (see attached list). Team members can then decide which norms to establish and enforce and which norms to eliminate. This process of explicit norm establishment requires negotiation so that all team members are comfortable with the final working agreement, and that the norms are shared enough to allow for collaboration, yet broad enough to allow for individual differences. Finally, consider the following issues when developing your working agreement:

- Communication
- Participation
- Decision Making and Problem Solving
- Managing Disagreements
- Responsibilities and Expectations

What does a working agreement look like?

A working agreement can be a list of dos and don'ts, it can be a bulleted list of guidelines for handling the aforementioned issues, or it can be a "results focused" narrative. Examples of each of these approaches are included in this packet of information.

How do team members adhere to the working agreement?

For a working agreement to successfully impact performance, it must be followed. Several things can be done to make sure the working agreement is being followed. First,

establish a structure for meetings. For example, designate a time keeper to note how much time is spent on certain topics, a note taker who records the ideas discussed, decisions reached, and action plans, and a facilitator who monitors the team's behavior in relation to the working agreement. Second, have all team members serve as secondary facilitators. Each team member should have a copy of the agreement and be familiar with its contents. Third, assess the team relative to the agreement. Review the team's performance and discuss both that which is working well and that which needs improvement; brainstorm ways to improve effectiveness. Fourth, build your own skills. That is, identify ways that you as an individual can improve (i.e. conflict management, time management). Finally, it should be noted that working agreements can and perhaps should contain a clause dictating consequences for team members not adhering to the agreement. This can be a vague or specific statement dependent upon the comfort of team members in establishing consequences for norm violations.

Content for this information packet was compiled from the following sources:

1. Canney Davison, S. (2002). Creating working norms and agreements. CGIAR Gender and Diversity Program Online Course for High Performing Scientific Teams. Retrieved January 6, 2004, from www.genderdiversity.cgiar.org/CreatingWorkingAgreementsDavison3.doc.
2. Dominick, P. G., Demel, J. T., Lawbaugh, W. M., Freuler, R. J., Kinzel, G. L., & Fromm, E. (2001). Tools and tactics of design. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
3. Levine, S. (2002). The book of agreement: Ten essential elements for getting the results you want. Berret-Koehler.

Prepared List: Productive and Counterproductive Norms

Productive Norms	Counterproductive Norms
Specific, clear goals, milestones, and deadlines	Missing deadlines
Clear understanding of team member expectations	Key person/people do most work
People carry out assignments cheerfully	People do what they want, when they want
Leadership is shared	One person tells others what to do
Several alternatives are considered during decision making	First solution is accepted
Others are treated with respect during conflicts	It is best to avoid conflicts
Different opinions are valued	If someone does not speak up, their views are not considered
Meetings start and end on time	Side conversation is okay at meetings

This is not an exhaustive list, merely an example of a prepared list that teams might consult if having difficulty developing norms. This can be used as a springboard for other ideas.

Example 1: List of Do's and Don'ts

As a team, we will:

- Openly share information that is important to the rest of the team in a timely manner.
- Support each other with an open mind and mutual respect.
- Fill in for each other when necessary.
- Share leadership roles.
- Do whatever we agree to do in the time frame agreed.
- Give constructive, timely feedback to the relevant person before complaining to someone else.
- Acknowledge and/or respond to all relevant communication within 24 hours.

As a team, we will not:

- Criticize any other team member or the team as a whole outside the team.
- Plagiarize each other's ideas.
- Knowingly undermine the team leader's roles and responsibilities.
- Show up late to meetings.
- Come to meetings unprepared.

Again, this is not intended to serve as the list for your team; it is merely an example of how to structure a team agreement if you follow a “do/don't” approach. Remember that all team members should agree to your agreement. Thus, it should be personalized and relevant to your team's goals.

Example 2: Bulleted List of Guidelines

Group Organization

- Two group meetings to be scheduled before the end of class every Monday
- Check e-mail regularly and stay in contact with team members
- Minimize absences and inform members prior to absence

Meeting Format

- Focus on current task and work to accomplish it before moving on to other business
- Work efficiently and minimize tangent conversations
- Keep group members informed – no surprises
- Openly discuss any divisive issues
- Document all team discussions and collective ideas

General Guidelines

- Address any problems as they arise
- Always turn in journals/logs
- Divide work fairly
- Arrive at class meetings on time and be prepared to work
- Be open to all new ideas
- Keep good documentation of work
- This team agreement is open to modification and will be reviewed regularly

This format lends itself particularly well to the issues of communication, participation, decision making and problem solving, managing disagreements, and responsibilities and expectations. That is, each of these issues could be a category in which explicit norms are outlined.

Example 3: Results-Focused Narrative

1. *Intent and Vision:* All members of Team Engineer agree to follow the terms of this agreement. Our vision is to be a tightly coordinated unit whose members are cross-trained so that any one of us could do the job at any moment. Specifically, we will:

- Generate bulleted list of specific objectives your team may have

2. *Roles:* We will each capitalize on our strengths and facilitate the development of roles for each team member. Key roles include the leader, facilitator, devil's advocate, negotiator, team player, etc. (You can generate your own list of relevant roles.)

3. *Promises:* We each promise: to accept rewards on a team basis only; to give each other honest feedback; to devote our full time energy to the work of the team; to come to meetings on time; to follow the standards for team meetings that we have defined. (Again, this should be your own personal list of promises developed as a team.)

4. *Time/Value:* We agree that the potential benefits of teamwork far outweigh the costs involved.

5. *Measurements of Satisfaction:* Our measure of success will be adherence to the schedule, above average grades, and a strong showing at the competition.

6. *Concerns and Fears:* We are concerned that our program will not function properly, that team members will not "pull their weight," and that individual grades will be adversely impacted due to the work of the team.

7. *Renegotiation:* We understand the importance of on-going communication. We agree to keep our agreement current – we will evaluate it monthly to make sure it reflects the reality of what we are doing as a team.

8. *Consequences:* We assume that all of us are smarter than any of us. We agree to defer to the team to determine the consequences for any violation of this agreement. We realize that when we violate a term of this agreement, a consequence will follow. We fully understand that if we are not successful at becoming a self-sustaining unit, we may be disbanded and left without jobs (i.e. passing grades).

9. *Conflict Resolution:* We agree to the following rules: 1) manage emotions; 2) talk to the person with whom we are in conflict; 3) ask a team member to mediate; 4) get the entire team involved.

10. *Agreement:* We all take responsibility for managing the team as we rotate team leadership.

CREATING GROUP NORMS

The following is a list of questions and issues that will serve as a guide for groups as they negotiate how they wish to function. The purpose of this process is to enable you, as a group, to agree on behavioral norms and expectations for working together *before* you begin your work. All of these may not apply to your group. Focus on the ones you find useful.

1. Who is in charge here? Do we need a designated leader?
2. How will we deal with members who come on too strong and dominate discussions? Also, how will we know this and monitor it?
3. How will we involved members who are shy and reserved?
4. Who will make the decisions for the group and how?
5. How will we deal with members who don't "pull their weight" (referred to as "social loafers")?
6. How do we feel about our group's beginning and ending times for meetings?
7. How will we deal with interpersonal conflict in our group?
8. What role do we want our professor to perform and is it congruent with her desired role?
9. How will we know if we are honoring these agreed upon functional norms?
10. How will our functional norms impact our ability to accomplish our tasks?
11. How will our functional norms influence how our members feel about being a part of our group?
12. How much are we, as individuals, and as a group, willing to invest in accomplishing our specific tasks?