

Creating a Healthy Team Culture

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This document was created in partnership with MMB's [Leadership and Team Dynamics](#) team.

Creating a positive, productive team environment requires more than just collaboration on tasks—it also involves fostering strong relationships, preventing unnecessary conflict, and addressing issues early. Use the following guidelines to help your team proactively prevent and manage conflict.

1. Establish Clear Team Norms

Positive team norms create a foundation for team dynamics and set expectations for behavior. Norms should be documented, regularly revisited, and tied to your organization's core values.

Steps to Establish Team Norms:

1. **Document Agreed Norms:** Collaborate with your team to create a list of positive norms everyone agrees to follow. These norms should focus on behaviors you would like people to demonstrate in the workplace.
2. **Align with Values:** Base your norms on existing organizational values to ensure alignment across the company.
3. **Regular Check-ins:** Revisit these norms at team meetings to ensure they remain relevant and top of mind.
4. **Onboard New Members:** Include team norms as part of the onboarding process for new hires to set expectations early.

Examples of Positive Norms:

- **Respectful Communication:** “We listen actively and speak with respect.”
- **Timely Feedback:** “We give constructive feedback and accept it as an opportunity to grow.”
- **Collaboration:** “We share responsibility for team outcomes and help each other succeed.”

2. Prioritize Regular Relationship-Building

Strong relationships can prevent many conflicts from arising. Building trust and understanding through informal interactions creates a positive atmosphere, especially for remote teams.

Relationship-Building Activities:

1. **Weekly Check-ins:** A simple, informal team check-in (in-person or virtual) can strengthen connections.
2. **Find Common Ground:** Encourage team members to share memorable experiences or hobbies to break down barriers.
3. **Read/watch and discuss:** Have your team read a short article or watch a video relevant to collaboration or your work area and have a discussion about it.
4. **Virtual Coffee Breaks (For Remote Teams):** Create space for informal conversation using tools like Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

Tip: Relationship-building is especially important for remote teams who don't benefit from spontaneous, in-office interactions. Make an extra effort to build connections virtually.

3. Develop a Conflict Resolution Protocol

While healthy conflict can lead to innovation, dysfunctional conflict needs to be addressed early and strategically. **Develop a conflict resolution protocol** to ensure a consistent, constructive process is followed when conflicts arise. Understand that all teams have some degree of conflict, and everyone can improve their ability to navigate conflict effectively.

Steps to Develop a Conflict Protocol:

1. **Early Intervention:** Encourage team members to address issues as soon as they arise rather than waiting for conflicts to escalate.
2. **Take ownership:** Encourage team members to reflect on how they contribute to team dynamics, both positively and negatively.
3. **Identify a Safe Space for Help:** Provide a resource (e.g., HR, EAP facilitation, or a mediator) that team members can approach for support if they need help resolving an issue.
4. **Use a Problem-Solving Mindset:** Equip the team with problem-solving techniques and helpful phrases to use when conflicts arise.
5. **Resolve at the Lowest Level:** Aim to resolve conflicts within the team before escalating them further, if possible.

Conflict Protocol Flowchart:

- **Step 1:** Identify the Issue or specific behaviors that are problematic
- **Step 2:** Address the Conflict Early
- **Step 3:** Engage in Problem-Solving
- **Step 4:** Seek Help (If needed)
- **Step 5:** Document the Resolution

4. Conflict Prevention Strategies

Prevention is better than cure. Use these strategies to minimize misunderstandings and prevent conflicts from happening in the first place.

Proactive Conflict Prevention Tips:

- **Clarify Roles and Responsibilities:** Avoid misunderstandings by ensuring everyone knows their roles and how their work contributes to the team’s success.
- **Encourage Transparent Communication:** Make it a habit to discuss issues openly and early to prevent tension from building.
- **Promote Inclusivity and Diversity Awareness:** Provide training on cultural diversity and inclusion to minimize conflicts rooted in cultural misunderstandings.
- **Set Clear Expectations:** Establish clear deadlines, goals, and expectations for projects to reduce stress and avoid conflict.

Tip: Recognizing early signs of tension—such as frustration, withdrawal, or decreased communication—can help prevent conflicts before they escalate.

5. Helpful Phrases for Conflict Resolution

When conflicts do arise, it’s important to use language that de-escalates tension and fosters collaboration. Here are some **helpful phrases** you can use in difficult conversations:

For Raising a Concern:

- “I’ve noticed [specific issue or behavior], and I’d like to discuss how we can improve this.”
- “Can we talk about [issue or behavior]? I think it’s affecting our work.”

For De-escalating Tension:

- “I understand this situation is frustrating for you. How can we work through this together?”
- “It sounds like you’re concerned about [specific concern]. Let’s figure out a solution.”

For Offering Solutions:

- “How do you think we could solve this issue?”
- “What steps can we both take to move forward and improve the situation?”

6. Ongoing Conflict Review

Reflecting on past conflicts can help teams learn and grow. Make conflict review a regular part of your team's process to ensure continuous improvement.

Steps for Conflict Review:

1. **Hold Regular Check-Ins:** Schedule a monthly or quarterly conflict review to discuss recent conflicts and what was learned.
2. **Reflect on What Worked:** Identify effective strategies that helped resolve conflicts and integrate them into the team's norms.
3. **Debrief After Major Conflicts:** After a significant conflict, conduct a debrief with the team to discuss what went well, what could have been done better, and what actions to take moving forward.

7. Action Plan for Implementation

To ensure that these strategies become part of your team's routine, use the following action plan:

- **Step 1:** Schedule a team meeting to discuss and document your positive norms.
- **Step 2:** Plan weekly check-ins for relationship-building and team updates.
- **Step 3:** Develop a conflict resolution protocol with input from all team members.
- **Step 4:** Conduct a team-wide training on using proactive communication and conflict prevention strategies.

Key Takeaways

- **Positive norms** create a foundation of trust and respect in teams.
- **Relationship-building** fosters deeper connections and helps prevent conflicts.
- **Conflict resolution protocols** provide clear steps for addressing issues early and effectively.
- **Preventive strategies** can stop conflicts before they start by promoting clarity and transparency.