

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.

Conflict prevention

Foundations for conflict prevention

Conflict can be more likely in teams or organizations that have undefined boundaries between roles, unclear communication, patterns of unmet expectations, and a lack of belonging or inclusion. If there are patterns of conflict that are hard to break, make sure you are continually working to:

- **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.
- **Set Clear Expectations** - Establish clear deadlines, goals, and expectations for projects to reduce stress and avoid conflict.
- **Consistently Promote Inclusivity** - Intentionally create there are ample opportunities for people to get to know and learn from each other in meaningful ways. Team members who know a little about each other may be less likely to insert their own biases and conclusions when miscommunication occurs. Creating an inclusive environment also makes the workplace more fun and less stressful, thus less likely to lead to conflict. See the section below, *Prioritize Relationship-Building*, for tips.

Reflection questions

- Do you have one or more of the foundations of conflict resolution in place – clear roles and responsibilities, communication, inclusion practices, and expectations? If so, which ones?
- If you don't have these foundations in place yet, what changes could you put in place to solidify these foundations?

Clear and Positive Team Norms

Conflict may be inevitable where there are no clear and positive expectations for behavior. **Establishing positive team norms** will create a foundation for good team dynamics, productivity and effectiveness. You can follow these steps to establish team norms. Developing and documenting norms takes some time, but the benefits can be long-lasting.

1. **Document Agreed Norms:** Collaborate with your team to create a detailed list of positive behavioral norms everyone agrees to follow.
 - Be as specific as possible when developing norms. For example, rather than “Be kind,” a positive and clear norm might be, “When people request your help, kindly tell them how and when you can help them rather than saying “I’m too busy.” If you cannot help, help them find a resource.” When norms are clear and specific, they are easier to follow. You may also consider calling them “guiding principles” or “team agreements” – whatever feels most comfortable for the team.
 - Behaviors will not change overnight. Keep practicing!
2. **Align with Organizational Values:** Relate your norms to existing organizational values to ensure alignment with the organization as a whole.
3. **Align with Personal Values:** Help everyone understand that implementing norms starts with each person. Following the norms is everyone’s responsibility. Ask how they can connect the norms to their own values.
4. **Regular Check-ins:** Revisit these norms at monthly or quarterly team meetings and when coaching employees to ensure they remain personal, relevant and top of mind.
5. **Onboard New Members:** Include team norms in the onboarding process to set positive expectations early.

Reflection questions

- Do you have positive team norms in place? If so, how were they created? How often do you refer to them and/or update them?
- If you don’t have them in place yet, what would it take to create them? Is that a next step you want to try?

Prioritize Regular Relationship-Building

Building trust and understanding at work not only helps your team’s confidence and collaboration - it’s more fun! And developing strong relationships between employees can prevent conflict.

Relationship-building is especially important for remote teams who don’t benefit from spontaneous, in-office interactions. Make an extra effort with team-building when people work remotely!

1. **Weekly Check-ins:** At the beginning of monthly/weekly/daily meetings, start with a five-minute, fun check-in question where people can get to know each other in a work-appropriate way. Example questions include:
 - Do you have pets? If so, what are their names and how did you select their names?
 - What has been the most interesting place you have visited in the last week? What was interesting about it?
 - What is your favorite mode of transportation and why?
 - What is your favorite hobby? How did you get interested in it?

Rotate who gets to select the check-in question to involve the whole team

Make sure questions allow everyone to share, keeping the process fair and inclusive.

2. **“Personal operating system” activity:** Have each team member create a slide that includes the following information about themselves and have everyone share their slide during a team meeting.

This builds the team's understanding of who they work with and can head off conflicts by "humanizing" people to each other.

- Name and role
- Personality
- Work style
- Cultural influences
- Top values
- Top priorities
- Ways I like to communicate

Feel free to switch out or add other topics as needed.

3. **Read/watch and discuss:** Have your team read a short article or watch a video relevant to collaboration or your work area, then discuss in a team meeting. This may be particularly fun for teams that love research and have enough time to complete the assignment.
4. **Virtual Coffee Breaks (For Remote Teams):** Create space for informal virtual conversation. You could use the questions above under "Weekly Check-ins" or "Personal Operating System" to get started.

Reflection questions

- In what ways do you regularly prioritize relationship-building for your team?
- If you don't prioritize that yet, which of the practices listed in this handout do you want to try?

Resolving conflicts

When managed well, "productive conflict" or "productive disagreement" can lead to creative innovations and better team relationships. However, conflict that is not managed well can erupt suddenly, disrupting a team's effectiveness.

Teams can develop a conflict resolution protocol to ensure a consistent, constructive process is followed when conflicts arise – as they inevitably will. It is incumbent on managers and employees to surface issues when they come up and improve their ability to navigate conflict effectively. A conflict resolution protocol can be used to keep conflicts manageable and to resolve them as quickly as possible so they don't escalate.

Resolution foundations

1. **Provide the skills:** Help team members get basic training in conflict resolution skills, like listening, reframing, problem-solving mindset, de-escalation and boundary-setting.
 2. **Address issues early:** Encourage team members to address issues as soon as they arise rather than waiting for conflicts to escalate.
 3. **Resolve at the lowest level:** Aim to resolve conflicts within the team before escalating them further, if possible. (This is easier to do when the team has had a foundation of team-building and training in conflict resolution.)
 4. **Provide resources to all team members:** Provide the names, contact information, and reasons for contacting a variety of helpful resources (e.g., HR, EAP facilitation, or a mediator) during the onboarding process and during employee training so people know what to do when conflicts arise.
 5. **Be accountable to yourself and others:** Encourage team members to both reflect on how they contribute to team dynamics and follow up as needed when they are involved in a conflict.
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6. **Be a role model:** Be a model of good conflict resolution yourself or get the training and coaching you need to be a role model in this area. Conflict is normal and expected in the workplace *and* is often hard to deal with. Get help when you need it.

Process

1. **Meet:** Set aside one hour to talk as the team about you currently handle conflict as a group.
2. **Share and document:** Document how you would like to handle conflict in the future, making sure everyone on the team has a chance to share and provide their thoughts.
 - Include a decision about when team members are expected to escalate the conflict and they should escalate it.
3. **Reflect on what's working:** Regularly check on how conflicts are being resolved and update the conflict protocol documentation to accurately and comprehensively describe how it should work.
4. **Debrief After Major Conflicts:** After a significant conflict, conduct a debrief with team members who directly or indirectly experienced the conflict to discuss what went well, what could have been done better, and what actions to take moving forward.

Reflection questions

- Do you have a process or processes in place to help your team resolve conflicts?
- If you don't have these in place yet, how might a conflict protocol help your team with the kinds of conflicts they deal with now or might deal with in the future?
- Is creating a conflict protocol a step you want to take? If yes, what immediate next steps can you take to get started?