toolbox

On Setting Group Norms

Every group develops its own customs, habits and expectations for how things will be done. These patterns and expectations, or group norms as they're sometimes called, influence the ways team members communicate with each other. Norms can help or hinder a group in achieving its goals. The Brushy Fork Leadership Development Program emphasizes the need for teams to nurture group cohesion, and paying attention to norms is one way to do this.

Seating arrangements, for example, can illustrate norms. One group may have a norm of always sitting in the same place, another group may shuffle the seating arrangements and a third group's norm may be that some team members always sit together while others have no particular pattern.

While many norms operate without the member's conscious awareness, a team can decide to intentionally set norms that every member can endorse. In addition to the long-term benefits such a set of guidelines offers, the act of setting norms itself can be a team-building activity.

Setting norms does not mean regulating every aspect of group interaction; rather it is an opportunity for the group to express its values. For example, values such as mutual respect, egalitarianism and punctuality are reflected in this model:

1. Our meetings will begin and end on time.
2. We will listen to each other and not interrupt.
3. We will make sure everyone has had a chance to speak.
4. We will support our facilitator's efforts to moderate discussions.
5. We will avoid ethnic or gender-based humor.
6. We will speak respectfully to each other.
7. We will bring before the whole all group concerns regarding our group cohesion.

How does a group go about setting norms? There are probably many ways; the process outlined below is one suggestion:

1. On a flip chart list all the members' ideas for norms they'd like to see the group adopt
2. Have a period for questions and clarifications so that everyone understands what each of the proposed norms mean. Re-word as seems appropriate. Continue until every team member is satisfied that everyone understands each others' suggested norms.
3. Go through the list item by item to see which norms all team members want to adopt. No member should be pressured into accepting any norm that he or she cannot fully endorse. If any team member does not approve of a proposed norm, eliminate it.
4. If the list of approved norms is longer than ten items try to reduce the list by simplifying and combining complementary items.
5. Make sure all team members are comfortable with the revisions.
6. Adopt the set of group norms.

Norm setting can only work if the team is truly able to arrive at consensus. Norms won't stick if members have reservations about them. However, once consensus is reached, the team is equipped with a guide that can serve to strengthen positive practices. A set of norms can serve as a common reference if contrary behaviors arise. Finally, written norms are handy for potential members and newcomers who want to quickly get a sense of how a group operates.

Norms in hand, a team can move forward inspired and motivated to uphold group principles and confident in the security such guidelines provide.