

## An Easily Missed Ingredient for High Team Performance.



One of the worst teams I've been part of was comprised of experts on facilitating teams. Our meetings were chaotic and unproductive as some experts got into intense debates without really listening to each other while some fell into silence.

I am embarrassed to say I participated in the mess.

When we finally stopped to **actually** apply our team expertise to **ourselves**, we transformed and had great results. We did not eliminate all problems but we *managed* them much better.

### What helped most in turning this team of experts around?

It became clear to us that we had overlooked defining and using team norms. Norms are ground rules or guidelines for how members communicate and behave with each other—like really listening to each other, exploring ideas instead of debating them, giving feedback without blame, assuring everyone's involvement, and being clear about how decisions will be made.

Even if, like my experts, team members bring a lot of prior experience with norms, every team has to create them yet again. Norms gain their power through development *in conversation*.

### Why are team guidelines about communication and behavior so important?

Teams which do not define and use norms are at higher risk for falling into mediocre performance or failure. In a study of 120 senior leadership teams, only 21% were high performing and the factor most strongly associated with high performance was clarity and use of team norms—not brilliance in things like strategy, quality, or efficiency. (1)

Defining and using norms leads to better communication, problem solving, and conflict resolution all of which lead to both better results and higher quality work relationships. The latter enhances sustainability and team resilience.

### Why is it so easy to overlook establishing adequate team norms?

- **Norms seem so basic and simple.**

For my team of experts, needing to create and apply norms felt like being demoted from grad school to grade school. But, impressive credentials don't protect anyone from the way our brains are hard-wired. At times, in anyone, stress activates ancient brain pathways for survival—for flight or flight. Socially, such activation may lead to strong emotions and fixed opinions or withdrawal into silence. Norms remind us we are human and we all make mistakes.

- **Teams with problems can appear to be doing just fine.**

Not all teams are like my team of experts in which lack of sufficient norms led to "noisy" signs like difficult conflict. It is not uncommon to see teams claim in meetings that they are getting

along just fine. But, there are hallway conversations outside of meetings with complaining about problems that never get adequately addressed or about people some members feel are not behaving well. Yet these concerns are not raised in meetings. This is exactly what guidelines for communication and behavior should be designed to address.

- **Developing and using team norms is like learning a new language.**

People have less confidence and experience talking about communication and behavior compared to technical issues like strategy or quality. Developing and using norms takes practice and trial and error *as a team*. In particular, it takes time and practice to define norms with enough behavioral specificity so that people can check to see if they are being followed.

For example, compare “We need to feel safe.” to “When someone offers an idea we will always check understanding to make sure they feel heard.” Or, “When we give feedback we will avoid negative labels and be specific about the situation and behaviors we have observed. We will own observations as perceptions and not The Truth and check out each other’s perceptions.”

- **Ongoing feedback is required for making progress and it is uncomfortable.**

Some teams, like my team of experts, turn around very quickly once they define and use norms. More often it takes ongoing feedback to steadily improve alignment of communication and behavior with those norms. Naturally, this raises concerns about embarrassment--feedback is uncomfortable. But it gets less so with steady and frequent practice.

Feedback is facilitated by making explicitly clear that it is not about “bad behavior.” Getting off track from norms can happen to anyone at any time no matter how long a team has worked together. Feedback is about helping people be at their best. Leaders help greatly by modeling feedback including inviting it about themselves.

- **Changing habits of behavior is hard.**

Team norms are not useful unless they are used. And that requires changing habits which is usually hard no matter how simple the new behaviors seem to be. For example, in my team of experts, we had to work hard to assure time at the end of meetings to ask: “What is working and not working in our communication based on our norms?” Also, we had to work to remember to check in during meetings to ask about specific norms--e.g. “Do you feel heard?”

### **Transform team problems into learning and creativity.**

Strong evidence links quality of team experience to better results, resilience, and sustainability. Norms are the rudder to maintain the desired team experience. I am humbled by how easy it is, even for experts, to neglect norms. By remembering this aspect of our humanness, I am better at helping myself and others transform team problems into learning and creativity.

#### **Tool to guide creation of team norms**

*In-the-Moment Reminder for Team Norms*—available for subscribers only. To subscribe for free monthly articles and tools, click on [Subscribe](#).

## References

1. Wageman, Ruth et al **Senior Leadership Teams** Harvard Business Review Press 2008.

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## About Neil Baker M.D.

Neil Baker M.D. works with healthcare leaders and teams to enhance impact through *In-the-Moment Leadership and Team Strategies*. This means focusing on immediate work challenges—using any work situation, even the most complex and difficult—as opportunities to achieve immediate impact on quality of work relationships and on progress to results.

He has developed these approaches as a leader, speaker, consultant, and executive coach for 30 years. Past positions include serving as Director of Psychiatric Inpatient Services at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, Colorado; Medical Director of Quality at Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, Washington; and faculty and improvement advisor for ten years for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

You can learn more and see client testimonials on his website at [neilbakerconsulting.com](http://neilbakerconsulting.com).