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Norms put the ‘Golden Rule’ into practice for groups

By Joan Richardson

Lillian always arrives late and thinks nothing of chatting with her seatmate while someone else is trying to make a point. Arthur routinely reads a newspaper during each meeting. Barbara can’t wait until each meeting ends so she can head to the parking lot to tell someone what she could have said during the meeting.

Later, most of them grumble that “these meetings are just a waste of my time. We never get anything accomplished.”

Having a set of norms—or ground rules—that a group follows encourages behaviors that will help a group do its work and discourages behaviors that interfere with a group’s effectiveness.

Think of norms as “a behavior contract,” said Kathryn Blumsack, an educational consultant from Maryland who specializes in team development.

Norms are the unwritten rules for how we act and what we do. They are the rules that govern how we interact with each other, how we conduct business, how we make decisions, how we communicate, even how we dress when we get together. “Norms are part of the culture. They exist whether or not you acknowledge them. They exist whether or not you formalize them,” Blumsack said.

Pat Roy, director of the Delaware Professional Development Center, said identifying a set of norms is an effective way to democratize a group. Writing norms helps create groups that are able to have

honest discussions that enable everyone to participate and be heard, she said.

WHO NEEDS NORMS?

Any group that meets regularly or that is trying to “do business” needs to identify its existing norms or develop new norms. In school districts, that would include department groups, grade level teams, interdisciplinary teams, content area teams, school improvement teams, action teams, curriculum committees, leadership teams, advisory committees, and special project groups.

Although a group can pause and set norms at any time, Blumsack and Roy agree that it’s ideal to set norms at the beginning of a group’s work together.

“If you don’t set norms at the beginning, when the behaviors become ineffective you have a harder time pulling behavior back to where it should be,” Roy said.

Because every group has unspoken norms for behavior, groups need to work at being explicit about what they expect from each other. “Get those assumptions out on the table,” Blumsack said.

CREATING NORMS

Some groups would prefer to have a set of norms handed to them. But Roy and Blumsack both said groups will feel more ownership of the norms

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Norms put 'Golden Rule' into practice

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if they identify and write their own.

"If they don't do this, 10 minutes after you've handed them a list, they'll begin violating the norms because they aren't their norms," Roy said.

There are two distinct ways to write norms. The first is by observing and writing down the norms that already are in use.

That's how the NSDC Board of Trustees established the set of norms it has used for about eight years. The NSDC board meets for two days twice a year, each time with a lengthy agenda of material that must be addressed.

The norms (which are published on Page 5) grew out of a board discussion about how it operated and how it wanted to operate. Pat Roy, who was then a board member, was tapped to observe the board's implicit norms during one meeting and draft a set of norms. "Essentially, I wrote down what I saw in operation," Roy said.

Roy's first draft was edited and refined by staff and other board members. That set of initial norms has been largely unchanged over the years.

The second way is to have group members suggest ideal behaviors for groups, eventually refining those suggested behaviors into a set of norms. (See the tool on Page 3.)

Blumsack cautions that norms must fit the group. Not every group would feel comfortable with the same set of rules, which is why each group must create its own rules, she said.

For example, she recently worked with a group that was "very chatty, very extroverted." Initially, the group wanted a norm that banned side conversations. Two days into their work, the group was frustrated because Blumsack, as the facilitator, kept trying to enforce the norm against side conversations. Finally, the group agreed to

modify the norm to fit its unique personality. Their new norm was: "If you need to make a comment, do so but return quickly to the main conversation."

PUBLICIZING THE NORMS

Simply writing norms does not guarantee that the group will remember and respect them. Groups need to continually remind themselves about the norms they've identified.

At a minimum, the norms should be posted in the group's meeting room, Roy said. "Post them and celebrate them," she said.

Blumsack recommends creating tented name cards for each group member. On the side facing out, write the group member's name; on the side facing the member, print the group's norms.

The NSDC board receives a list of its norms along with materials for each of its twice-a-year board meetings. Then, at the beginning of each meeting, the president reintroduces the norms to acquaint board members with them. Since new board members join each year, this also helps to acculturate newcomers with the board's expectations.

Sometimes, the board uses activities to aid in that. During one meeting, for example, each board member was asked to illustrate one norm and the others tried to identify the norms based on those illustrations. Those illustrations were then taped to the meeting room's walls as visual reminders to be vigilant about the norms. Another time, board members were asked to write down as many board norms as they could recall from memory.

ENFORCING THE NORMS

Perhaps the toughest part of living with norms is having the norms enforced.

"The reality is that every group will violate every norm at one time or another. So you have to talk about violations and

how you'll deal with them," Roy said.

Blumsack agrees. "If you don't call attention to the fact that a norm has been violated, in effect you're creating a second set of norms. For example, a common norm is expecting everyone to be on time. If you don't point out when someone violates that norm, then, in effect, you're saying that it's really not important to be on time," Blumsack said.

After a group identifies its norms, they suggest asking how they would like to be notified that they have violated a norm.

Roy recommends finding light, humorous ways to point out violations. One group she worked with kept a basket of foam rubber balls in the middle of the table. Violation of a norm meant being pelted with foam rubber balls. Other groups have used small colored cards, flags, or hankies that could be waved when a violation was noted.

Having all group members take responsibility for enforcing the norm is key, Blumsack said. Enforcing the norms should not be just the job of the group's leader.

EVALUATING THE NORMS

Finally, each group needs to periodically evaluate its adherence to the norms. A group that meets once or twice a year might evaluate each time they meet; a group that meets weekly might evaluate once a month or so.

Blumsack recommends giving each group member an opportunity to speak about what he or she has observed or take each statement and ask group members "how well did we do on this norm?"

Each member should be encouraged to identify the group's areas of strength as well as its areas of weakness, but not to single out violators.

"The more 'up front' you are about how the group is doing, the easier it will be to communicate about the other issues you're dealing with," Blumsack said.

Developing norms

COMMENTS TO THE FACILITATOR: This activity will enable a group to develop a set of operating norms or ground rules. In existing groups, anonymity will help ensure that everyone is able to express their ideas freely. That is the reason for suggesting that the facilitator provide pens or pencils and ask that everyone use the same type of writing implement.

SUPPLIES: Index cards, pens/pencils, poster paper, display board, tape, tacks.

TIME: Two hours.

Directions

1. Indicate to the group that effective groups generally have a set of norms that governs individual behavior, facilitates the work of the group, and enables the group to accomplish its task.
2. Provide examples of norms by posting the list of norms that appears on Page 5 of this issue of *Tools for Schools*.
3. Recommend to the group that it establish a set of norms:
 - To ensure that all individuals have the opportunity to contribute in the meeting;
 - To increase productivity and effectiveness; and
 - To facilitate the achievement of its goals.
4. Give five index cards and the same kind of writing tool to each person in the group.
5. Ask each person to reflect on and record behaviors they consider ideal behaviors for a group. Ask them to write one idea on each of their cards. Time: 10 minutes.
6. The facilitator should shuffle all the cards together. Every effort should be made to provide anonymity for individuals, especially if the group has worked together before.
7. Turn cards face up and read each card aloud. Allow time for the group members to discuss each idea. Tape or tack each card to a display board so that all group members can see it. As each subsequent card is read aloud, ask the group to determine if it is similar to another idea that already has been expressed. Cards with similar ideas should be grouped together.
8. When all of the cards have been sorted into groups, ask the group to write the norm suggested by that group of cards. Have one group member record these new norms onto a large sheet of paper.
9. Review the proposed norms with the group. Determine whether the group can support the norms before the group adopts them.

Source: Adapted from *Tools for change workshops* by Robby Champion. Oxford, Ohio: National Staff Development Council, 1993.

Writing norms helps

create groups that are

able to have honest

discussions that enable

everyone to participate

and be heard.

Developing norms

WHEN ESTABLISHING NORMS, CONSIDER:	PROPOSED NORM
<p>TIME</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When do we meet? • Will we set a beginning and ending time? • Will we start and end on time? 	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>LISTENING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will we encourage listening? • How will we discourage interrupting? 	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>CONFIDENTIALITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will the meetings be open? • Will what we say in the meeting be held in confidence? • What can be said after the meeting? 	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>DECISION MAKING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will we make decisions? • Are we an advisory or a decision-making body? • Will we reach decisions by consensus? • How will we deal with conflicts? 	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>PARTICIPATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will we encourage everyone's participation? • Will we have an attendance policy? 	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>EXPECTATIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do we expect from members? • Are there requirements for participation? 	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

Norms of the NSDC Board of Trustees and Staff

WE WILL WORK TOGETHER as a community that values consensus rather than majority rule.

WE WILL BE FULLY “PRESENT” at the meeting by becoming familiar with materials before we arrive and by being attentive to behaviors which affect physical and mental engagement.

WE WILL INVITE AND WELCOME the contributions of every member and listen to each other.

WE WILL BE INVOLVED to our individual level of comfort. Each of us is responsible for airing disagreements during the meeting rather than carrying those disagreements outside the board meeting.

WE WILL OPERATE in a collegial and friendly atmosphere.

WE WILL USE HUMOR as appropriate to help us work better together.

WE WILL KEEP CONFIDENTIAL our discussions, comments, and deliberations.

WE WILL BE RESPONSIBLE for examining all points of view before a consensus is accepted.

WE WILL BE GUIDED BY the NSDC mission statement which focuses on organization and professional development which enhances success for all students.



Norms for meetings

- ▶ Start on time.
- ▶ Develop and review the agenda.
- ▶ Conduct one piece of business at a time.
- ▶ Participation is a right...and a responsibility.
- ▶ Initiate ideas.
- ▶ Support...challenge...counter. Differences resolved constructively lead to creative problem solving.
- ▶ Give others a chance to talk. Silence does not always mean agreement.
- ▶ Communicate authentically; what a person says should reflect what he thinks as well as what he feels.
- ▶ Conduct group business in front of the group.
- ▶ Conduct personal business outside of the meeting.
- ▶ Develop conditions of respect, acceptance, trust, and caring.
- ▶ Develop alternative approaches to the solution of a problem.
- ▶ Test for readiness to make decisions.
- ▶ Make the decision.
- ▶ Assign follow-up actions and responsibilities.
- ▶ Summarize what has been accomplished.
- ▶ End on time.

Source: Building systems for professional growth: An action guide, by the Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands, 1989. Reprinted from Keys to successful meetings by Stephanie Hirsh, Ann Delehant, and Sherry Sparks. Oxford, Ohio: National Staff Development Council, 1994.

Norms within which we agree to work

WE WILL:

- ▶ Expect a leadership team member to make a commitment for one year.
- ▶ Meet only when there is a meaningful agenda.
- ▶ Start and end on time.
- ▶ Dress comfortably.
- ▶ Have refreshments.
- ▶ Have a different facilitator and recorder for each meeting.
- ▶ Keep meetings open.
- ▶ Differentiate between brainstorming and discussion.
- ▶ Only address schoolwide issues.
- ▶ Express disagreement with ideas, not individuals.
- ▶ Feel responsible to express differing opinions within the meeting.
- ▶ Maintain confidentiality regarding disagreements expressed during the meeting.
- ▶ Reach decisions by consensus.

Source: Hamilton Park Pacesetter School, Richardson Independent School District, Dallas, Texas.



Learning about developing norms

- **How to Make Meetings Work** by Michael Doyle and David Straus. New York: Jove Books, 1982. Describes how to stop wasting time and make meetings more effective. ISBN 0-515-09048-4. Check your local bookstore or library for a copy.
- **Joining Together: Group Theory and Skills** (6th edition) by David Johnson and Frank Johnson. Needham, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1996. Explores trust, leadership, and group development theory, including development of norms and why they are needed. Provides activities and simulations. ISBN 0-2205-19750-7. Check your local bookstore or library for a copy.
- **Keys to Successful Meetings** by Stephanie Hirsh, Ann Delehant, and Sherry Sparks. Oxford, Ohio: NSDC, 1994. A manual that provides the knowledge, skills, and processes necessary to conduct team meetings. Includes more than 70 guide sheets for immediate reproduction and use in

meetings. NSDC stock # B39. Price: \$80, non-members; \$64, members. To order, phone (513) 523-6029 or visit the NSDC Web site at www.nsd.org.

- **Skilled Facilitator** by Roger Schwarz. San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1994. Practical guide for leading groups effectively, including many suggestions about developing norms. ISBN 1-55542-638-7. Price: \$30.95. To order, phone (415) 433-1740.
- **Team Building Toolkit** by Deborah Harrington-Mackin. New York: American Management Assn., 1994. Spells out guidelines for turning a diverse group of employees into an effective team. Offers helpful lists of tips and tactics for team members and group leaders. ISBN 0-8144-7826-3. Price: \$ 17.95. Phone (212) 586-8100.
- **Tools for Change Workshops** by Robby Champion. Oxford, Ohio: National Staff Development Council, 1993. Eighteen workshop modules help

groups learn more about the four phases of organizational change. Includes ready-to-use structured exercises, case studies, instruments, transparencies, and handouts. Includes discussion about development of norms. NSDC stock # B27. Price: \$150, non-members; \$120, members. To order, phone (513) 523-6029 or visit the NSDC Web site at www.nsd.org.



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Ask Dr. Developer



Dr. Developer has all the answers to questions that staff developers ask. (At least he thinks he does!)

A simple test can be revealing

Q *I think spending hours to develop norms is a waste of time. Everyone attending these meetings is an adult. Adults know how to behave and participate in meetings. We just want to get to work when we get into one of these meetings. We don't want to sit around and talk about how we're going to do that work.*

A I wonder if everyone attending these meetings agrees that everyone knows how to behave. Whenever I've asked groups if they need to develop norms, I usually hear from at least two or three persons who like the idea. I've discovered that these individuals often haven't been able to fully participate in meetings. Often, they believe that one or two individuals dominate the discussion, resulting in decisions that they can't support.

Answering these questions may help you decide whether your group needs to spend time developing norms:

- Does every member join in your group's discussions?
- Does each member listen as the others speak?

- Does any single member dominate the discussions?
- Do all members arrive on time and stay for the entire meeting?
- Is everyone prepared to do their work when they arrive?
- Does each member of the group believe his or her time at the meeting has been well spent?

One way to test whether everyone agrees on the norms that guide your meetings is to ask the members of your group. Distribute index cards and, on each card, ask each member to write one norm that they believe governs the group's behavior. Post those responses so that all members can see the responses.

If you find that the group identifies the same norms and wants to continue those norms, then you merely need to assemble them into a list that can be easily shared with your group.

On the other hand, if your group is not in agreement on the norms, you still have work to do.

Ultimately, all members of the group should have a voice in deciding whether the group needs to spell out norms and then in working to identify what they should be.

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