

The Ten Commandments



In either case, once established, the mission and vision serve as the context within which the team works to develop and implement more specific strategies and plans. In Gestalt terms, the former is the forest, while the latter are the trees. As pressure to get results increases, teams often lose sight of the bigger picture and become mired in details. When this happens, therefore, it's important for the leader to remind the team of its mission and vision, by saying such things as, "Let's remember what we're trying to accomplish," "Is that consistent with our mission?", or "What are some other ways we can achieve our vision?"

2. Don't Accept Unacceptable Behavior

While mission tells us why we exist and vision defines what we want to become, values and norms describe how people will work together to achieve these ends. Values represent the criteria or standards for decision-making, while norms are rules of conduct for implementing values. Typically, values and norms evolve over time and remain both unspoken and unwritten unless they are violated. Because some values and norms will be more consistent with the team mission and vision, however, it's much better to enter into a process where they can be chosen deliberately. A value for teamwork, for example, is better served by norms stressing listening, open communication and cooperation, than norms emphasizing talking, subtle communication and competition.

The team leader should advocate exemplary values and norms, and prevent members from appeasing each other by gravitating to the lowest common denominator. Once adopted, the leader's credibility hinges on modeling the values and norms—"walking the talk"—and holding members accountable for adhering to them. Members are quick to spot what they perceive as hypocrisy ("Do as I say, not as I do"), causing them to become cynical about the values and norms. Also, values and norms are meaningless unless positive expressions are rewarded and negative expressions are punished. This serves to make the values and norms real. While a leader can't control how members feel about each other, behavioral expectations can be made very clear. Like children, members will test the lower limits of behavior to see if the leader is serious about the standards. A leader who champions positive behavior gains respect, while a leader who ignores negative behavior loses respect.

We often discover what works by finding out what doesn't work. As a specialist in team process, over the years I've seen leaders make many mistakes, some large and some small. These observations have led me to formulate ten commandments of team leadership, the first five of which are presented here for your consideration.

1. Don't Stray From Your Mission and Vision

The concepts of mission and vision are crucial to team leadership. A mission statement defines an organization or team's purpose, answering the question why we exist, while a vision describes a desired future state that would fulfill the mission statement. Sometimes mission and vision are established by a team leader, who then must work to gain member support, while at other times these aspects of organizational functioning are the product of team interaction and consensus-building.

Behavior is so key to team success or failure that I think willingness to abide by agreed-upon values and norms should be a qualification for membership. Making this expectation non-negotiable sends a strong message ("If you want to work with me, this is what I need from you"). Thus, when people refuse to abide by the expectations, they are choosing not to be on the team. Members allowed to remain in spite of their behavior will undermine team morale and performance—you may win the battle, but you'll lose the war. Several years ago I worked with a team containing a member who openly described his contribution as "criticism." While this was stated tongue-in-cheek, the man's impact on the team was very negative but, since the leader said nothing, it persisted. I found his behavior so abrasive that I was relieved when the project was over. As with mission and vision, team members tend to lose



sight of values and norms with increased pressure to achieve results. During such times, the leader should be prepared to remind members of the values and norms. Members should also be expected to hold each other accountable for their behavior, making this a shared responsibility.

3. Don't Allow Self-Interest To Prevail Over Mutual Interests
Teams can outperform individuals working alone, but only if members suspend self-interests in favor of mutual interests. Some people have trouble working in teams because they're unwilling to share control; others have trouble because they're unable to make the adjustment from



independence to interdependence. In situations like these, self-interest often becomes a barrier to the pursuit of mutual interests. Team members can sense when someone has a hidden agenda or is seeking personal gain, and the result is resentment, competition and conflict.

One way a leader can deal with this issue is to make teamwork a criterion for satisfactory performance. If people who promote their own interests aren't held accountable, there's no incentive for them to behave differently. Once they realize that they can't succeed without contributing to the team, they're forced to reassess their actions. To remain on the team, some people may have to be more willing to share control, while others may have to develop their team skills. For the sake of the team's mission, the leader should insist on such changes.

4. Don't Allow Fear To Control Team Behavior
Fear has a negative impact on teams because the focus is on preventing bad things from happening, instead of making good things happen. Fear operates as an invisible barrier between people, and the resulting defensiveness keeps them from developing effective working relationships. I've worked with many organizations and teams where the level of fear was so high that people's primary goal was staying out of trouble ("You have to watch out for number one around here"). Fear is so counter-productive that W. Edwards Deming listed Drive Out Fear as one of his 14 management principles.

When people first join an organization or team their guard

is usually up until they see what behaviors are rewarded and punished. If they test the waters and get their hand slapped, it will be a long time before they try it again. This is one of the reasons why norms are so important to a team. An astute leader can help neutralize the impact of fear by



championing such norms as these:

- We will honor confidentiality. Unless otherwise agreed, whatever we discuss will remain within the team.
- We will encourage risk-taking and honest communication.
- We will share our opinions openly.
- We agree to disagree without taking it personally.
- We will treat each other with respect.
- We will deal with issues face-to-face, not go behind people's back.
- Once a decision is made we will support it, even if we don't agree with it.
- What we say in the team will be consistent with what we say outside the team.

5. Don't Allow Sub-Groups to Control Team Dynamics

Cliques or sub-groups are problematic because they prevent the team from becoming a cohesive unit. Cliques tend to compete with each other, promoting self-interest over mutual interest. In addition, the criteria for inclusion in cliques usually work against the larger team mission. I once worked with a team bitterly divided into two camps. One camp was composed of older people striving to preserve traditional approaches; the other camp was made up of younger people enthusiastic about new ideas. The older camp viewed the younger one as not valuing its experience, while the younger camp viewed the older one as resisting change. After working with the two camps to build mutual respect and find common ground, the team was able to bring about a greater degree of cohesiveness.

The expectation that everyone will work together in a spirit of cooperation needs to be communicated very clearly by the team leader, and this expectation should be reflected in the team norms. In my experience, sub-groups will not simply go away on their own. If sub-groups exist or begin to develop, therefore, the leader should indicate that identifying and resolving their differences is non-negotiable. Sometimes the services of an outside consultant helps to expedite this process.

Be sure to check out Team Leadership Commandments 6-10 on Our Website!

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