

# The Ten Commandments



## of Team Leadership

Part 2

by Ken Hultman

### 6. Don't Shy Away From Conflict

All teams go through three stages of development, which I call the three C's: Courtesy, Conflict and Cohesiveness. During the first stage, people are polite and diplomatic with each other, with fear inhibiting open expression. In the second stage, anger, frustration or resentment break through the fear, as issues dividing people begin to surface. Anger is a more productive emotion than fear, because it can serve as a catalyst for positive energy. Conflict tends to occur when people disagree about goals and/or methods for achieving goals, and when they believe they're being treated with disrespect. The second type is usually harder to deal with, because the issues tend to be more personal. In the third stage, people bind closer together as a result of effective conflict resolution.

A leader shouldn't be afraid of conflict, because cohesiveness can't emerge without it. It's essential for a team to learn that it can handle conflict, otherwise members never fully trust each other. Rather than avoiding conflict, the emphasis should be resolving or managing it in a way that increases team effectiveness. Sometimes it's better for the entire team to discuss an issue; at other times it's better for the members most directly involved to discuss it privately. Either way there should be specific norms for handling conflict, and members should be expected to abide by those norms.

One time I worked with a team containing two members who refused to speak to each other. One member felt so strongly about it that he said, "I couldn't work with him without compromising my values." I offered to facilitate a meeting dealing with their issues, and after some pressure from their supervisor they both reluctantly agreed to participate. I administered a personality inventory to help them understand each other more fully. Once they learned that their ways of responding stemmed from some basic personality differences, they stopped personalizing each other's behavior and agreed to be more cooperative.

7. Don't Accept Lack of Trust as an Excuse  
Mistrust leads to fear and defensiveness which, as I discussed above, function as an invisible barrier between people. On the surface it can appear as though people are getting along fine, when in reality their relationships are very calculated and controlled. I've worked with teams where mistrust was an unspoken norm, creating a pervasive atmosphere of paranoia and suspicion. In these situations, it was common for people to use mistrust as an excuse for not dealing with each other and even as a justification for being manipulative ("If you're honest with her, she'll hold it against you"). Obviously, these behaviors greatly interfered with team effectiveness.



Of course, it's much easier to build trust from the beginning and make efforts to maintain it, than it is to lose trust and try to rebuild it. Once activated, mistrust remains as a permanent fixture, unless a determined effort is made to get rid of it. Like fear, mistrust must be driven out of an organization. To this end, it's important for a leader to remind the team of its mission and values. Also, since people almost always view themselves as being trustworthy, the leader should challenge their assumptions that others can't be trusted. When trust issues develop, the leader should insist that people face them head-on, and never accept mistrust as a reason for lack of cooperation.

8. **Don't Allow People To Play It Safe**  
During team building workshops, people are almost always more open with each other than they were previously, and regard this as a positive experience. Even if the team establishes a norm for risk-taking and people vow to continue their new-found openness, however, after the workshop they gradually revert back to old ways of interacting. Typically, this happens because people get caught up in the demands of work and, since it's safer to be less open, they take the path of least resistance. It's also safer for people to tell you what they think you want to hear, than to say what they really think. To maintain higher levels of openness it's not enough to establish a norm for risk-taking. In addition, the leader must both model risk-taking and reward members who take risks. These efforts will be well worth it, however, when the team sustains a more authentic level of interaction.



9. **Don't Be Stingy With Information**  
Since the sharing of information is such an integral part of team functioning, it's risky for a leader to make assumptions about what members need to know. If members believe that the leader doesn't share enough information, they could conclude falsely that it's being withheld deliberately, resulting in mistrust and suspicion ("I wonder why she didn't tell us about that?"). The sharing of relevant and timely information should be high on any list of team norms. As a rule of thumb, it's usually safer to share too much than too little.

10. **Don't Neglect Process in the Rush to Get Results**  
When under pressure, people tend to forget team norms and use methods they think will get results the fastest. To prevent this from happening, the leader should remind the team of its norms and stress the importance of abiding by them. In addition, it's a good practice to include a review of team process as an agenda item at the end of each meeting. Stepping back from content to focus on process gives the team an opportunity to self-correct. The leader can structure this discussion by asking such questions as, "How do you think we did today as a team?", "What did you like about the meeting?", "What could we have done to make the meeting more productive?"

In addition, leaders should specifically ask for feedback about their performance during the meeting. Sometimes team members have issues with the leader's behavior but fear of reprisals prevents them from saying anything, unless the leader actively seeks input and follows through by making appropriate changes.

Following these commandments will greatly enhance your ability to provide effective team leadership.

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