



CREATING COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

Overview

Developing community agreements is a powerful strategy for coalescing a group into a team. In fact, the process of constructing agreements can often be more important than the product. Agreements come from a consensus-driven process to identify what every person in the group needs from each other and commits to each other to feel safe, supported, open and trusting. As such, they provide a common framework for how people aspire to work and be together as they take transformational action. Here are a few tips for developing community agreements.

1. Frame the Conversation

- a. **Take time to define what a community agreement means.** For example: *“A consensus on what every person on our team needs from each other and commits to each other in order to feel safe, supported, open, productive and trusting... so that we can do our best work, achieve our common vision, and serve each other and our community well.”*
- b. **Distinguish agreements from norms and rules.**
 - **Agreements** are an aspiration, or a collective vision, for how we want to be in relationship with one another. They are explicitly developed and enforced by the group, not by an external authority, and as such must represent a consensus.
 - **Norms** are ways in which we behave and are currently in relationship to each other, whether consciously and explicitly or not.
 - **Rules** are mandated and enforced by an authority, and do not necessarily reflect the will or buy-in of the group.
- c. **Create the “why” – the benefits of community agreements.**
 - We can’t achieve our vision in a hostile, disrespectful, or undermining group culture.
 - Some of the most critical conversations teams need to have can be uncomfortable or emotional (e.g., equity issues, examining interpersonal relationships, breakdowns in customer service), but we won’t engage or make ourselves vulnerable without emotional safety and trust.
 - Team culture can shape organizational culture.
 - Healthy team culture is key to personal sustainability in the challenging jobs of public and environmental health.
- d. **Distinguish both kinds of agreements.**
 - **RELATIONAL** – are about how we want to be in relationship with each other (e.g., using “I” statements; listen fully; seek out multiple perspectives; embrace curiosity)
 - **OPERATIONAL** – identify procedures or structures we all agree to use (e.g., start and end meetings on time; avoid side conversations in meetings; come prepared to meetings; wait to get a colleague’s attention before interrupting them in their work). Be sure this includes how the group will support one another to live up to the agreements.



CREATING COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

2. Engage People in the Process

There are many pathways to engage your team in the process of developing community agreements.

For example:

1. Invite team members to **articulate the “why”**/benefits of creating a community agreement
2. Invite team members to **reflect on a prompt** for example: *“What do you need from every person on this team in order to feel safe, supported, open, productive and trusting... SO THAT we can serve each other and our community well, do our best work, and achieve our common vision?”*
3. In small groups of 2-3, share their lists. Ask the groups to agree on their top 1 -3 agreements in priority order and rewrite each one in a simple phrase or sentence. You will likely need to model this.
4. Each group shares their top 1-2 agreements and why it is important to them. Each agreement can then be discussed, clarified and tested for consensus by the large group
5. Once the large group list has been created, a small group of volunteers can simplify language, and synthesize and organize the list into themes.
6. Revised list brought back to the large group for final approval.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

- The size of the group – the engagement process will need to be adjusted to fit the size of the group
- Amount of time to work on the agreements – be sure you provide sufficient time to complete the process
- The Group’s experience with community agreements – this could impact the preparation or time needed
- The Group’s existing culture – this could impact the process and may need to be explicitly acknowledged or addressed

Adapted from *Developing Community Agreements*. National Equity Project.

<https://www.nationalequityproject.org/tools/developing-community-agreements>