Importance of Team Ground Rules

Many of us work in remarkably diverse workplaces with staff that represent a broad spectrum of backgrounds, work experiences, education, ethnicities, orientations, ages, places of origin, religions etc. It is truly one of the most wonderful aspects of our reality and it gives us the opportunity to share different perspectives and develop synergistic solutions to problems. However, one challenge that our diversity presents is that we are not always on the same page. This is especially true when it comes to how we work together and the ground rules we follow.

To address this, I believe that establishing basic ground rules for your team is imperative to your potential success. Here are some examples of ground rules that you should come to a consensus on with your team. Some you can mandate, others you may want input from the team and have them decide what works best for them. Either way, the key is to have explicit agreement among the team on the ground rules.

1) When do meetings start and end? I worked in several organizations where my role required me to attend many back-to-back meetings. In most of these situations there were no clear ground rules on start and stop times. This made it particularly difficult when it came to the reality of having to traverse a large head office and get from one meeting room to another. A meeting cannot end at 10am in one meeting room and another begin at 10am on the other side of the office with the expectation of being in both places at the same time. It just is not reasonable or practical. Starting on the hour and ending five to ten minutes before the hour is a practical way to alleviate this unneeded burden on people. The negativity of always feeling late or being perceived as being late is a terrible stigma to deal with, especially when it is a function of the system and not your fault.

2) What are the expectations for meetings? Are agendas sent ahead of time? If there are pre-read materials, is everyone expected to be up to speed and ready to discuss? Is everyone expected to attend? Is the expectation to attend in person or remotely? The clearer the expectations are for the team, the more likely it is that there will be synergy and the team will not get sidetracked by procedures and misunderstandings. I had experiences where I went out of my way to commute an hour and a half to attend meetings in person, only to arrive and discover that 80% of the attendees were calling in. I could have called in and saved myself a 3 hour round trip. Consider that a lesson learned.

3) How will the team communicate? Today there are more methods of communication than ever. Phone, email, text messages are just some of the common methods. I worked on a team that commonly agreed that email was not a legitimate method of communication. I had an experience where I had sent some crucial information via email only to find out later that quite a few team members didn't read email. Not just my email, but email in general. I was shocked when they openly stated, "Oh I don't read email" and many nodded in agreement as if to say "of course, no one reads email (you dinosaur)".

4) When should communication switch from text or email to an actual conversation? We live in a world of text messages and emails. The personal touch has been lost. Over the years I've seen many email and text battles escalate into deep resentment and bitterness as each side stews over writing the perfect response to defend their position. In almost all cases, a simple phone call or in person conversation would have resolved the issue and left the relationship intact. One of my first bosses had a "3 message rule". Once the back and forth got to 3 messages, it was time to pick up the phone. I have adopted this rule and found it to be quite successful.

I could go on and make a much longer list of possible ground rules but these four make the point clear. The key is to get explicit on how the team will work together so that everyone is on the same page. This will create a solid foundation on which the team can operate. As new people join the team make sure to share the ground rules with them and set them up for success.