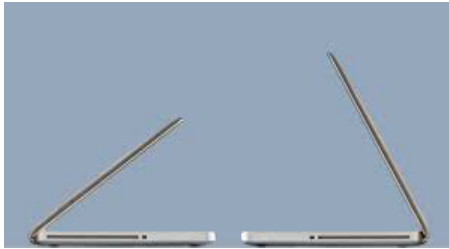


Guidelines for Creating Virtual Team Norms

Team norms are especially important when meeting virtually. Many of the cues and reactions that we experience when occupying the same physical space are invisible to team members when working in a virtual environment. These guidelines will be particularly useful when new teams are being formed around a specific mission, task or desired outcome.



Before you dive into the task, take some time to talk about how everyone will work together in this environment. How often will the group meet? How will disagreements be handled? How will decisions be made – e.g., consensus or majority vote? How will participation be balanced so that no one person dominates? The answers can become norms that help the team take ownership of its work.

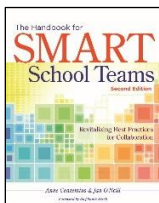
Team norms should be generated by the group, reviewed often, discussed with new members, visible at all times, discussed honestly and respectfully when members violate them, and revised as needed. They can be established early on in a team’s development, or after several meetings once there is a sense of its normal dynamics.

One method for starting the discussion is to pose open questions like *What drives us crazy about meetings?* The “Cotter Question”¹ – *What could this group do to assure that we fail?* – usually generates some laughter; but after the group begins to really think about it, they discover that some of their previous team experiences were bad enough to have been planned that way! Had they thought through the behaviors they had wanted to avoid those experiences would have been quite different.

Another method is to have the group or team discuss various categories of behavior. Topics to consider include:

- **Attendance** - Is everyone expected to attend 100% of the time? Will substitutes be allowed? What is the expectation for notifying one’s teammates if someone cannot attend?
- **Participation** - How will the team respond if members come to the meetings unprepared or do not actively participate in the conversations? What virtual tools can be used to assure everyone has the opportunity to participate? Examples include chat functions, smaller virtual spaces or rooms to accommodate small-group conversations, virtual roll calls for decision-making especially when a topic is of high importance to the team’s mission.

- **Interruptions** - What constitutes an acceptable reason to interrupt or leave the meeting? If working from home, what are some practical ways that predictable interruptions can be kept to a minimum?
- **Timelines** - Will meetings start and end on time even if all members aren't present? How will time be monitored? What is a reasonable amount of time to spend in a virtual meeting? How will breaks be handled?
- **Decision-making** - How will the team determine the decision-making method for each situation? Which decisions are best made by the team? Which decisions should be made by others outside of the team?
- **Conflict management** - How will we know when there is conflict that needs to be addressed? Who can identify that a conflict exists? What will be the team's process for addressing and managing conflicts?
- **Communication** - When will agendas and meeting notes be posted and available for review? How will the team assure that all members are receiving important communications? How will team members stay in touch between meetings?
- **Use of Jargon** - How will the team ensure that individuals are not unintentionally excluded because they don't know the "lingo" being used in its discussions? What are some clever ways that jargon can be identified and addressed?



More about creating norms and other norm topics can be found on pages 47 through 49 of *The Handbook for SMART School Teams (Second Edition): Revitalizing Best Practices for Collaboration*.

¹ Named for its creator, Maury Cotter, Director of the Office of Quality Improvement, University of Wisconsin.