

Leading Team Meetings to Address Work Challenges

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Team members experience daily challenges working with co-workers, faculty, students, administrators, customers, and other constituents. They are called upon to respond to interpersonal and team conflict, complaints from internal or external constituents (students, faculty, the public. etc.), unprofessional behaviors exhibited by others, and generally the misunderstandings

and communication missteps that inevitably arise in everyday interactions.

Effective teams foster a spirit of collegiality and team engagement so that team members can support one another to respond to these challenges. More experienced team members can offer advice and counsel to less experienced team members. Individuals who are more adept at dealing with particular kinds of challenges, such as responding to irate customers or communicating with a particularly difficult campus administrator, can serve as a sounding board for teammates facing similar challenges.

Leaders must seize opportunities for improving team effectiveness by supporting team interaction to address these common, everyday situations. **As a leader, you can play a role in facilitating conversations in a safe, supportive, non-punitive environment where team members can continually learn and improve their interactions with others.** Such conversations can occur in three situations:

Before Incidents Arise

This is the most proactive opportunity where the manager can challenge team members to think about potential circumstances where they need heightened vigilance to engage appropriately and to watch for triggers that may cause them to react in an unprofessional manner. For example, as a part of each regularly-scheduled team meeting, the leader asks

team members to review one of the organization's many policies, employee conduct codes, or values and mission statements. One week they review the conflict of interest policy, next week the sexual harassment policy, the third week the non-discrimination policy, and so forth. She asks them how they would concretely demonstrate the values or behavioral expectations articulated in the selected policy.

The leader can also engage team members in hypothetical discussions about how they would respond to specific situations. These situations may relate to that week's selected policy or statement or based on scenarios that the leader or team members suggest. The purpose of engaging in such hypothetical scenario discussions is to ensure they are modeling appropriate behaviors and to better prepare them to respond when similar situations actually arise in the workplace.

In the Moment When an Incident Occurs

Perhaps the leader observes an employee struggling to respond to an irate customer and must jump in immediately because the employee has crossed the line. She must assist the customer and counsel the employee later. Perhaps instead the team member simply needs help and the leader steps in to support him. In another scenario, perhaps two team members are squabbling and the situation escalates to a level where they are not able to resolve the matter on their own. In these situations, the leader's job is to intervene immediately, correct the situation to maintain civility, and address the incident with the team member or members later. The post-incident discussion may involve advising team members how to respond differently next time, offering praise for handling the matter effectively, or, in the worst case, firmly counseling employees to correct behavior, including possibly discipline.

While these situations may often involve leader intervention, **team members should be equipped to step in to help one another through difficult challenges as they arise.** Other than potential discipline situations, leaders should foster an environment where team members routinely assist one another in this way, particularly when it will keep matters from escalating.

After an Incident Has Occurred

No matter how prepared team members are to respond to difficult challenges, every situation cannot be anticipated. Hypothetical scenario discussions will not contemplate every possible circumstance. Also, team members will respond differently to the same situation based on varying levels skill, ability and experience. Some will respond with ease while others will struggle. Mistakes are inevitable. Employees will "blow it" at times.

While an employee's actions in responding to difficult interactions with others may on occasion be out of line and require discipline, they are more often the natural consequence of well-intended and very human efforts to deal with a difficult situation based on the employee's best judgment at the time. Punitive measures are not warranted. Leaders who foster an environment where harsh consequences will follow for honest mistakes miss opportunities for team members to learn, grow and improve their skills and performance.

Instead, the leader should engage the team in conversation about the specific incidents,

circumstances or patterns of behavior that have recently occurred so team members can formulate better responses for the future. In these conversations, the leader guides the team through an analysis of what happened, how the matter was addressed, and how similar matters might be addressed differently in the future. These conversations also present opportunities to revisit group norms for conduct and behavior that the team established previously or that were identified based on review of specific policies and organizational statements, as discussed above. These discussions can again serve to remind team members of their commitments to the norms and values to which they've agreed.

The leader's role is crucial for creating a safe environment to hold these conversations, whether before or after an incident or in the moment. Punitive environments only serve to "chill" such conversations because they constrain team members from speaking up out of fear of retribution. Without an open, supportive environment that encourages sharing of information and concerns, true learning and behavior change will not occur.