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## ARTICLE MEETINGS

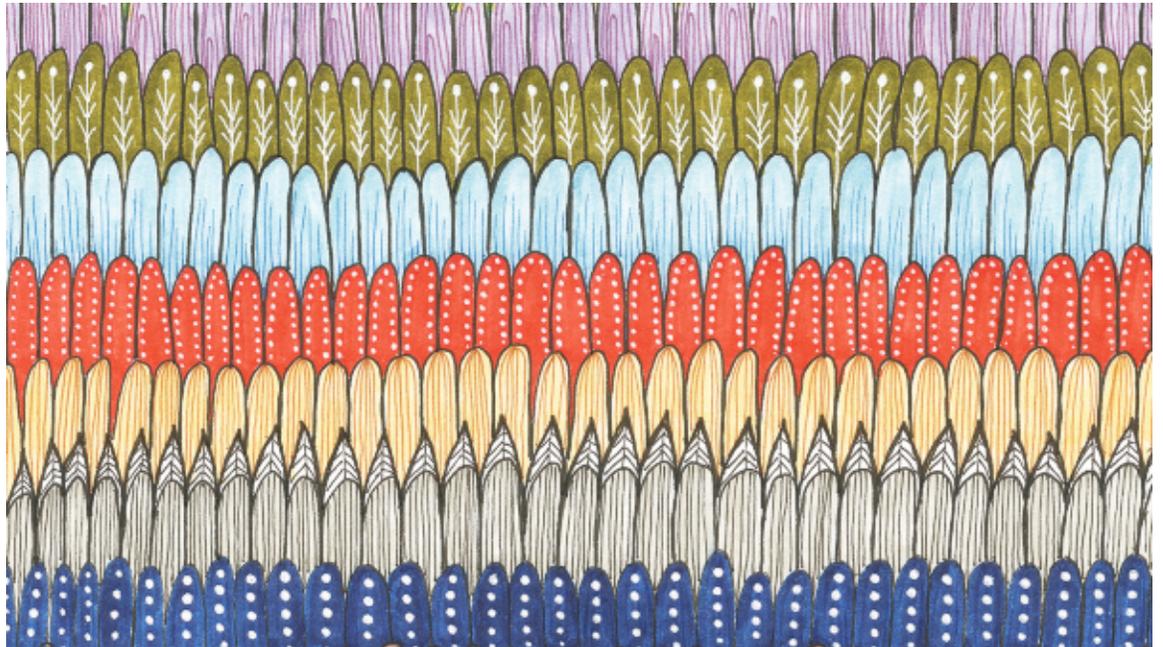
# How to Create Executive Team Norms — and Make Them Stick

*by Sabina Nawaz*

MEETINGS

# How to Create Executive Team Norms — and Make Them Stick

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Have you ever been on an executive team where things [just clicked](#)? You had a common goal, communication flowed easily, and everyone was willing to put in the long hours for a final push. Looking back, you wish you could replicate and carry forward that same secret sauce on every team, especially the teams that you struggle with. You know the ones. The groups where everything is

harder, where you revisit decisions, move slowly, are confused about the direction, and dread [the politics](#).

While many factors contribute to the best and worst teams, one practice has consistently helped my clients: having an agreed-upon set of group norms and, more importantly, a set of practical steps to follow those norms.

Group norms are a set of agreements about how members will work with each other and how the group will work overall. These agreed-upon behaviors allow the team to increase its collective performance through healthy debate and clarity of purpose and roles.

Having a set of norms that an executive team consistently follows helps team members be clearer about each other's intentions, increases trust, saves time, decreases backbiting and politics, and sets a clear operational compass for the rest of the organization. When employees observe their senior executives behaving in intentional, transparent, and consistent ways, they're inspired to follow them and adopt those norms themselves.

To create your own executive team norms and put them into practice, follow these five steps:

1. **Identify successful norms based on your past experience.** Think back to a team where things worked well and then identify one to three norms that contributed to that success. When I ask executives to do this, they often say that a consistent cadence of communication or being fully present in conversations helped things work smoothly.
2. **Break down the norms into behaviors.** Once you have an abstract list of norms, turn them into measurable behaviors. For example, one norm might be to encourage equal participation in meetings. As a team, ask yourselves what equal participation in meetings looks like. A behavior then might be that for key issues, you will go around the room and solicit input from everyone, starting with the person who's spoken the least in that day's meeting.
3. **Commit to five norms or fewer.** Prioritize what you want to tackle first. It's OK to start with just one norm, but don't take on more than five at once. Focusing on fewer norms increases your chances of remembering them and [practicing them regularly](#).
4. **Create a recurring plan.** Too often executive teams spend time at an offsite coming up with well-crafted norms, only to fail to transfer them to the boardroom on Monday morning. Create a plan with owners and time lines for how you will follow through on each norm.

5. **Create a system of mutual accountability.** Discuss how you will hold each other accountable if you don't practice the norms you've agreed to. What will you do if, after repeated check-ins, there's still no progress? What will you do if all but one of you follows through? What are other scenarios where things can stall or go off the rails, and how will you have the conversation to hold each other accountable? One team, for example, restricted the use of devices during their executive team meetings. If someone got distracted by their phone, they had to throw \$5 into the "norm bucket." At the end of the year, the team went out for drinks and donated the rest of the money to charity. In this case, creating a system to police a new behavior made it more comfortable — and even fun — to call each other out.

To see this process in action, consider the executive team for a services company I'll call Acme. During a retreat, the team outlined several challenges in how they worked together. One of these challenges was that their weekly executive team meetings had three dominant personalities who took up most of the airtime in discussions. The remaining six team members didn't say much and were often interrupted when they did speak. Meetings failed to cover all agenda items and frequently ran over time. What's more, the talkative executives assumed that silence from their peers indicated agreement and were later surprised when decisions weren't executed smoothly. The quieter executives were frustrated that their more loquacious colleagues didn't seek out their opinions. Actions took longer to execute and came with significant confusion among the direct reports of the executive team.

To tackle this issue, one of the more talkative executives suggested they adopt a norm that would encourage equal participation, so that everyone could contribute more evenly. Once the norm was identified, the team brainstormed behaviors that would allow them to put it into action. Here's the list they came up with:

- One business day before a meeting, the agenda owner provides brief background or possible outcomes, so attendees are clear about what will be discussed and have time to process the agenda items before the meeting.
- The owner of agenda items and decisions asks each team member if they have input during the meeting, even if just for concurrence. All team members must say something, even if it's simply "agree."
- Every team member is responsible for soliciting input from other attendees during meetings.
- Partway through a meeting, the meeting owner will directly ask for different points of view.
- The meeting owner deliberately changes the order of who speaks in each meeting to give different people a chance to voice their opinions first or listen first to other's points of view.

When I talked with each member of Acme's executive team nine months after the retreat, they all mentioned that this norm was working well. Not only were they following the behaviors they'd outlined, they were also regularly checking in on progress against this norm. By increasing participation from each member of the team, decisions remained stable from meeting to meeting,

people were clear on what others thought about contentious topics, and new ideas were benefiting from diverse and multiple viewpoints.

Consciously agreeing on how you will work together and sticking to that agreement is essential to having a high-performing team — especially at the executive level. Not only will you create a high-functioning team capable of achieving extraordinary results, but you will also model creating such teams for the rest of your organization.

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