



How to Build Cohesive and Productive Teams in Polarized Climates

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We have been working with teams to help them become more cohesive and productive for close to 40 years. In the last year or two, building collaborative and harmonious teams seems to have gotten much tougher in our polarized U.S. climate. No matter where you sit on the cultural or political spectrum, we see, and clients tell us regularly, that working on teams has gotten more difficult and conflict prone. People frequently ask us for suggestions about how to deal with these tough differences so here are a few that are doable and could make a difference.

1. Discuss and clarify your expectations about what differences mean to the team.

Most people who are honest tell us that they like being on teams with people who share their worldview and values. It is not only easier, but also more pleasant. When we ask team members to reflect on the good news of such similar expectations and values, they can wax poetic about the wonderful environment to work in, the harmony, productivity and fun. It all feels good.

When we then ask them what the downside is, we usually first get silence. How could there be a downside to this harmony? But when we then ask what might be missing, they do get it that too much conformity in how we see things, behave or what our values are, can possibly minimize creative options. We are not suggesting that you cultivate totally opposite poles on issues. That could be too big a divide to cross but at the very least, counting on people to give differing viewpoints, other options that make you stop, think and reconsider is essential. We need to depend on others to respectfully challenge us and see things we might not even think about or consider. Having an expectation that the team members will try to help one another stretch is a great starting point.

2. Cultivate and reinforce an appreciation of differences.

If every team member knows that he or she will come with a point of view and

the collective responsibility is to challenge one another and avoid groupthink, that norm and expectation will go a long way toward having people demonstrate a more flexible attitude. Teams should offer all kinds of support and our colleague, Dr. Natasha Josefowitz, told us years ago in her enlightening book, *Paths to Power*, that the team is better off if the group provides a “brain to pick, a shoulder to cry on and a kick in the pants”. Team members that utilize and see these three behaviors as supportive will be set up to leverage their differences.

3. Agree on norms or protocols for showing respect and dealing with differences in a constructive way.

In all the many years we have worked with teams, there has never been even one that has not put respect at the top of the list of important behaviors and norms. Arguing that it matters is the easy part...there's never an argument. Deciding what constitutes respect and what behaviors violate respectful treatment and are off limits is the hard part. It is also the potentially richest part of a conversation. It will take time to hear everyone — to determine what respect looks like and how disagreement can also be respectful. This conversation is doable, it is essential and it will go a long way toward helping people grow, be more flexible with others whose views are different, and ultimately really practice respect and acceptance. It will also help teams get the advantage from different views.

4. Begin every meeting with a short warm up team building exercise.

The criteria for these activities are that they are fairly short, relevant to the team, help people learn more about others and build some connection as the team session gets underway. Having everyone in the group pair up, work in small groups or all give their answers in the whole group engages and focuses people. It creates relevance and involvement so long as questions relate to the issue of the meeting. The warm up is short but involving. The following are just a few samples of team warm ups that could be relevant in certain circumstances:

- a. What was the best part, or highlight, of our meeting last week?
- b. What do we do well as a team that makes you feel optimistic about us?
- c. You know we are undergoing changes. What concerns you most about our team as we move forward?

A word or phrase that describes the strength of our team...

5. Make a point of having fun together.

Laughter and fun are not luxuries. When Lee wrote her doctoral dissertation on stress and change in 1980, she remembers Dr. Hans Selye writing about how much

time people spend at work and how important it is to feel connected to those we work with since they often see more of us than those we live with. Fun, laughter, joy and connection are not trivial. They are essential for our good emotional health individually and collectively. Intentionally making a place for activities that bring the team together to play, laugh and enjoy one another as people pays big dividends in engagement, harmony and connection.

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Structuring and building strong teams in a polarized climate is doable. Over 20 years ago, we wrote a book entitled *Diverse Teams at Work*. One of our favorite quotes in it is "Good bridges don't just happen. Neither do good teams. Both are engineered."

Here is to you becoming a team engineer. If you pay attention to the previous five tips and focus on working the suggestions into your meetings and processes a bit at a time, you will see a difference. Cohesion will become stronger and the fear of dealing with differences will be less. We have used them all and seen the negativity of differences vanish and be replaced with thoughtful contemplation, good results and the enthusiasm that comes from having the confidence of knowing utilizing differences can get excellent results.