

Executive Team Dynamics and Behaviors

Organizational success requires a cohesive executive team. A cohesive team sets the tone for the rest of the organization, modeling the importance of collaborative behavior. The set of dynamics below support productive engagement for an executive team.

The six key dynamics for executive teams

Shared Ownership

Joint responsibility for agency-level trade-offs and decisions beyond the work of an individual's department

Constructive Conflict

Comfort with and encouragement of diverse perspectives and productive disagreement as necessary ingredients to innovation and good decisions

Trust

Psychological safety that enables interpersonal risk taking and confidence that the team will not embarrass or punish someone for speaking up

Accountability

Commitment to team processes, the decisions of the team, and holding each other accountable for expected performance

Collaboration

Active listening, building on and connecting the ideas of others to solve each other's problems

Equity & Inclusion

Prioritization of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the team's work; identifying and mitigating bias in team discussion; and seeking out underrepresented perspectives when gathering input



Prioritizing Behavioral Norms

The steps on the following page will help you prioritize a set of team behavioral norms that will support executive team effectiveness. The first step is for each executive team member to choose six of the following behavioral norms (or new ones they do not see here) using this worksheet.

Shared Ownership	Trust (Psychological Safety)	Equity and Inclusion	Constructive Conflict	Collaboration	Accountability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We make the best decision for the organization overall, not for our own function or department. • We share our perspectives and ask questions even if the issue is not in our area of expertise. • We prioritize the work of the team above our personal functional responsibilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We seek to build relationships with our teammates, so we better understand each other. • We model vulnerability, explaining personal perspectives and sharing our mistakes when they arise. • We actively seek and acknowledge the input from our teammates, demonstrating our desire for their views. • We show respect to our teammates' perspectives by not interrupting or dismissing their input. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We often ask each other "what bias might be in this conversation and how can we mitigate it?" • We seek out marginalized voices and bring their input into this room. • We make improving diversity, equity, and inclusion a priority in our organization and our work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We engage in candid, constructive debate. • We generate alternatives and play "devil's advocate." • We mine for conflict, seeking out different viewpoints. • We have the real conversation in the room, avoiding side negotiations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We actively listen to and consider the ideas of our teammates. • We build on the ideas and perspectives of our teammates. • We care about the problems of our teammates and proactively share ideas and information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We uphold our team commitments and behaviors. • We close out meetings with a recap of each members area of accountability. • We follow through as a team and individually. • We support decisions once made, regardless of personal views. • We give each other feedback and support to improve our team experience.

These are examples. There may be other dynamics or behaviors that are critical for the context or work of specific teams. Also, some behaviors can contribute to more than one dynamic.

Prioritizing Behavioral Norms: Instructions

1 Set team norms: agree on the critical few (5-6) behaviors to focus on

- As a team, review the list of team dynamics and associated behavioral norms and ask:
 - What are the most critical behaviors we need to prioritize to execute the specific work we have set out to do as a team?

2 Explore actions you can take to more consistently achieve these behaviors

- For each identified behavioral norm, ask:
 - What would it look like for us to be at our best at this behavior?
 - What gets in the way of us consistently demonstrating this behavior?
 - What commitments do we need to make or steps do we need to take as individuals or as a full team to improve?

3 Establish ongoing ways to remind and reinforce these behaviors over time, e.g.,

- Attach shared behavioral norms to meeting agendas
- Commit to proactively show appreciation for others' productive behaviors and, when needed, provide feedback focused on the behavior, not the person
- Assign "behavior stewards," team members who are responsible for holding the team accountable for one or more team behavioral norms
- Reserve time every quarter to do a process check

Are we living into our behavioral norms?

4 Research shows that better interpersonal relationships enable better teamwork; to that end, create structured opportunities for team members to get to know each other better, e.g.,

- Start every meeting with a check-in question that reveals something personal about yourself (builds understanding and vulnerability)
- Invest in intentional team-building exercises (e.g., offsite retreat, personality assessment tools, executive coaching)
- Plan opportunities to get to know people outside the work context
- Invest in one-on-one relationships; have each team member spend one-on-one time with every other team member periodically. (Find suggestions for specific questions for this time together on [pages 33-34.](#))

Prioritizing Behavioral Norms: Client Example

Erie Neighborhood House Leadership Team behavioral norms

Erie House as an agency is our #1 team.

We demonstrate trust and courage by voicing our opinions and asking others to do the same.

We give each other the benefit of the doubt and ask clarifying questions before jumping to conclusions.

We're responsible for agency culture and demonstrate cohesive leadership by presenting a unified front and not undermining each other or decisions agreed upon as a team.

We demonstrate vulnerability and ask for help.

We really listen, ask why, and seek to understand rationale and intentions, from each other and all staff perspectives.

Wherever possible, Leadership Team will be consulted for input on decisions that impact the agency.

We are solutions-focused, and focus on our mission, in all the work that we do.

Remember that participants are our number one priority, and our decisions are grounded in our mission and values.

We commit to understand and champion others' departments, and each other.

We close out each meeting with a recap of what has been decided, how decisions will be communicated, and what each person is accountable for and when.

We commit to being present and engaged.

Executive Team Dynamics/ Behaviors: Peer Perspectives

No two executive teams are alike when it comes to team dynamics and behaviors. Each team comprises a set of unique individuals, all of whom have their own approaches to work and personalities. Yet the effectiveness of the team relies on collaboration and alignment. One key lever a CEO can pull to ensure time together is well spent is to establish clear behavioral norms of how the team will work together.

Kirstin Chernawsky, the executive director of Erie Neighborhood House, found that focusing on her team's norms helped her create a path to increased nonprofit team effectiveness. (See [page 28](#) for the list of behavioral norms that the executive team of Erie Neighborhood House developed.) Here she tells us how she did it.

How did your team develop its behavioral norms?

“We went through and named as a group what we thought our norms should be. Then, we went around the table and had each individual person say, ‘Yes, I buy into, agree to, and am committed to these.’ This made a night and day difference for us, because at first, we simply asked the group if anyone had objections, and no one said anything. It wasn’t until we went around one by one that objections were surfaced. If we hadn’t done this, I think we would have moved forward with our original set of norms, which would not have been successful. We went through one to two further iterations before we were all in agreement. It was a difficult process, but the front-end work was worth it; it made the norms that much more successful thereafter.”

What have been the benefits of establishing these norms?

“The process of coming up with the norms itself can be a way to air grievances directly or indirectly. The process of working together to develop and agree on these norms is almost more valuable than the norms we landed on themselves. The norms also make it easier to have courageous conversations. They make us feel empowered and comfortable to call out ways we aren’t being accountable to them, and also to celebrate when we have done a really good job of living into them. They have served as a way to keep us on track and remind us of the work we put into this process. They have also been helpful for bringing new team members into the group.”

Which norm has had the biggest impact on team dynamics?

“One of the biggest norms in terms of importance is our norm that Erie Neighborhood House is your number one team. This captured that team members need to balance the needs of their staff and program participants with the leadership team’s overall responsibility for the success, leadership, and culture of the organization. We use this as a reference point when making decisions. This norm took the most time to get everyone’s buy-in, but of all the norms, I think it was the most revolutionary for our group.”

How does the team hold itself accountable to upholding these norms?

“We list out our norms on every one of our meeting agendas. Then, at the end of each meeting, we designate five minutes to actually read through the norms and do a self-audit of whether or not we adhered to them. There are two purposes to this. First, it helps keep the norms front and center in our minds because we are actually re-reading them. Second, the self-audit exercise helps ensure we stay accountable.”

Do you have a plan in place for updating your norms?

“Yes. We agreed that our list of norms should be a living document, not something that’s set in stone. We have established opportunities in our team’s annual calendar to revisit the norms and ask ourselves: ‘Are these working? Is there anything missing? Do we need to revise these?’ This way, we don’t feel constrained by the current list.”

Do you have any other advice for organizations on establishing behavioral norms?

“If you are a new executive director, do this as soon as possible. You almost aren’t a team without it. Even if you come into an organization and group that has established norms, take the time to revisit them and get clarity on what they mean to each member of the team.”