

effective environments

designing innovative solutions for success



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Staff Agreements: Creating a Sense of Team

A common question we hear is: "How can we 'motivate' people to be more accountable or to demonstrate more 'ownership' in their jobs?" What factors result in high staff morale and employees who are responsible, self-generating and effective? This inquiry is at the heart of generating an effective environment for your organization.

Not surprisingly, job "ownership" is often a function of an employee's opportunity to participate in creating the work environment. People who can see that they make a difference, and who are able to contribute, tend to be happier, more satisfied, and more productive.

In this context, it's useful to create staff agreements for the organization. The opportunity to declare, jointly and formally, agreed-upon standards of conduct — and to put this declaration into practice — gives people a say in the creation of the organization's quality of life. In this context, it becomes clear that every

individual makes a difference. Authentic job ownership is one of the outcomes of this work.

Staff agreements *embody* organizational policy and procedure; they do not create them. These agreements address how people will work together. Often, the staff agreements formalize principles of communication and relationship. Such agreements also clarify expectations and create a foundation for active mutual support.

Begin this process with a meeting in which you and your staff envision the outcome you want. In this organization, or in this department or this team, how do you want things to go? What qualities will be evident when everything is working the way you would want it to work?

Aspects of the environment in which staff may be invited to craft agreements can include: communications, maintenance of common areas, interpersonal dynamics and effective work practices. All are areas where people have an innate

sense of what works and what doesn't work and are usually willing to say so.

It is useful to state the obvious. There is real value and power in a staff agreement that "We will treat each other with mutual respect," even though this may be regarded by some as a "given."

In selecting desired outcomes, you may identify broad qualities or characteristics such as "excellence," "integrity," "impeccability," or specific results such as: "All written communications from our department are clear and error-free," or "Our kitchen area is clean and comfortable."

Here are a few recommendations that may make the agreement-creation process easier:

1. Phrase agreements in terms of what you are **for**, rather than what you are **against**. For example, "We will communicate respectfully" is more powerful than "we will not swear or yell."

2. Reserve controversial issues for a separate discussion. Create any appropriate agreements after issues have been resolved.
3. Be sure that the agreements you select are directly related to the overall qualities you are committed to generating in your work environment. When this connection is clear, this process is inspiring.

The fundamental test of appropriateness of the agreements is, “WILL these agreements make things work better?” If they seem to add a layer of additional work or burden to the workplace, they will be ineffective and even counter-productive. If, however, everyone can see that adoption of a particular work practice would make life easier for all, it will be welcomed and supported — even if it takes time for it to become a habit.

Examples of staff agreements created and adopted by some of our clients can be found on www.effenv.com/newsletter.html, Example Staff Agreements.

PRACTICES FOR HAVING AGREEMENTS TAKE HOLD

Formulating staff agreements is only the first step. If you stopped there, the agreements

will likely gather dust on a shelf or adorn a bulletin board where, gradually, they will become invisible. Maximize the effectiveness of your staff agreements and ensure they become part of your organizational culture by giving staff an opportunity to choose them, take them on, and live inside them, day by day.

Be Sure They Are Really Agreements

Once your outcomes are identified and proposed agreements crafted, give everyone an opportunity to ask questions, express any reservations and, finally, choose these agreements as their own. We recommend that this step occur in a staff-wide meeting, if possible, or in department meetings, if that is more appropriate. Provide an authentic opportunity for people to express their concerns. Be sure to offer a context for the agreements that allows people to embrace them. A context that works will include the following points:

1. **Genuine opportunity to choose.** If they are not genuinely accepted and chosen, then the agreements have no impact except, possibly, as “rules.” Rules generate a very different working environment. Ask everyone if they would be willing to adopt these agreements as though they made them up themselves — simply

because they can see that working from these agreements would make a real difference in the quality of organizational life. Some fine-tuning of the language of the agreements may be needed to address people’s concerns.

2. **Mutual support.** Because these are not rules, no one will be appointed to enforce them. Rather, *everyone* will be invited to support everyone else in remembering them and making them a part of the culture. The spirit of mutual partnership and commitment is key. It means, in part:

- No one may make anyone else wrong for momentary lapses
- Staff members give everyone else permission to support them in keeping the agreements.

3. **Absolution in advance.** Remember that these agreements WILL be broken. People are human. They will forget. They will get obstinate. Life happens. Adopting these agreements is NOT a solemn vow never to break them. Rather, it is the expression of a fundamental commitment to operate together in a certain way. When an agreement is broken, the

thing to do is to acknowledge it, reaffirm the commitment to the agreement, and move on.

4. Keep the context alive.

The agreements are intended to express a context of partnership, inclusion, support and mutual regard. Be sure that this context is prominent on an ongoing basis.

Monitor Your Progress

Provide an opportunity for periodic review of how it's going — a chance for people to evaluate their progress, celebrate successes and acknowledge the difference being made in the organization. In your review, include an opportunity for people to suggest and adopt changes.

We've Moved!

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