



The Neuroscience of Norms: Understanding Collective Patterns of Behavior

Here are two, two hour exercises that you can use to work with norms in your organization. Everyone should complete exercise one by November 4th.

Exercise two is optional. If you'd like to have a longer norms session with your staff you can combine exercise one and two into a four hour workshop. You may also hold two, two hour separate workshops.

We all have well-established neural pathways. If left unexamined these can become “ruts” or patterns that limit our ability to change. In the case of groups, we can think of norms as collective neural pathways that make up the group mind. **Norms** are the unwritten rules of behavior in a group that guide member actions.

Once two or more people come together, norms begin to emerge. They form, change and grow over time. Different groups create different norms. Some norms are helpful and some norms get in the way. To understand norms is to understand the invisible, informal structure of the organization. It is our collective “under the waterline.”

Norms:

- are more powerful than any force exerted by outside forces.
- can help or hinder goals. May be in opposition to formal policy.
- create predictability and reduce uncertainty.
- when broken can lead to alienation - “being voted off the island.”
- carry the seeds of the culture.
- can be difficult to disclose.
- can only be changed by agreement of the group.

Understanding and working with norms is a valuable leadership tool. Getting people to talk about norms can be a challenge. This process gives the group a way to work with norms that minimizes defensiveness.

This discussion of norms and mapping activity is an adaptation of work developed by Neal Clapp and Patrick Williams. We have added the discussion of neuroscience and the element of using a metaphor to help start the conversation about norms.

Exercise 1 - Using Metaphor and Simile to Uncover Norms

Time: 2 hours

Materials: Unlined paper or sketch paper, markers, tape

Metaphors offer a powerful lens into how we perceive our organization and ourselves. Metaphors also promote neural integration by activating the right side of the brain. They can be used to analyze situations and stimulate new insights into dynamics at all levels of the organization.

Step 1 - individual: Take ten minutes and create a metaphor for your group – give yourself a role in the metaphor. Ex: My team is a herd of cats. I am the “cowboy” trying to keep them in line and drive them to task completion.

Step 2 - as a group: Share individual metaphors and then pick/create a common metaphor for the group. Make sure that everyone in the group has a role. Create a visual representation of the metaphor to present to the rest of the group.

Step 3 - individual reflection followed by group discussion: What do our individual and collective images say about the following in our organization? Conflict, communication, decision making, trust, innovation, risk-taking, accountability, urgency, empathy, leadership, humor/play?

Exercise 2 - Norms Mapping Activity (optional)

Time: 2 hours

Materials: copies of this exercise, flip chart paper and markers

What is the “norm voice”? One way to think about norms is as an invisible voice in the organization. It is the voice that is talking to me all the time even though I may not notice it. How to surface the voice in self and others? Ask! It helps to use the format below.

Ex: “Around here when it comes to _____ we _____.”

Remember, typically norms grow up around conflict, communication, decision making, trust, innovation, risk-taking, accountability, urgency, empathy, humor/play, leadership.

The two step process below can help individuals and teams make the invisible norm voice visible.

Step 1: Each team member identifies 3 positive norms and 3 negative norms and rates them in terms of helpfulness and frequency.

Norm #1:

Hurtful	<u>1 2 3 4 5</u>	Helpful	Infrequent	<u>1 2 3 4 5</u>	Frequent
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Norm #2:

Hurtful	<u>1 2 3 4 5</u>	Helpful	Infrequent	<u>1 2 3 4 5</u>	Frequent
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Norm #3:

Hurtful	<u>1 2 3 4 5</u>	Helpful	Infrequent	<u>1 2 3 4 5</u>	Frequent
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Norm #4:

Hurtful	<u>1 2 3 4 5</u>	Helpful	Infrequent	<u>1 2 3 4 5</u>	Frequent
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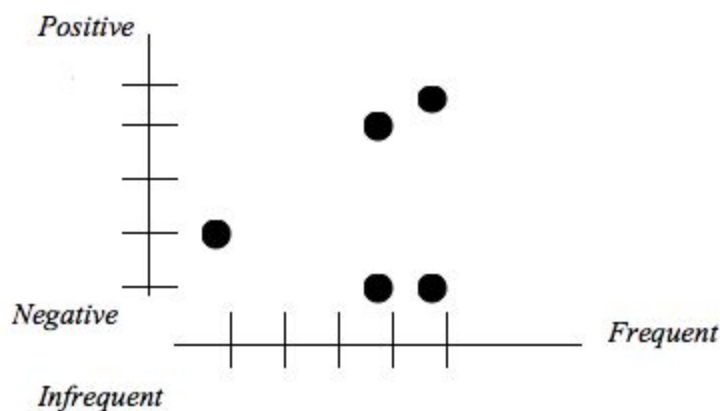
Norm#5:

Hurtful	<u>1 2 3 4 5</u>	Helpful	Infrequent	<u>1 2 3 4 5</u>	Frequent
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Norm #6:

Hurtful	<u>1 2 3 4 5</u>	Helpful	Infrequent	<u>1 2 3 4 5</u>	Frequent
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Step 2: Each team discusses individual responses to step 1 and selects six norms that they agree are important to investigate. When selecting norms, try to find the “norm voice”—a norm that when stated receives universal, enthusiastic approval from group members. Groaning or laughter is often an indicator that the norm is shared and meaningful to the team. Once six norms have been selected, plot the norms on a flipchart using the example below as a guide. You will end up with 6 words (norms) plotted in the grid.



Step 3: Choose one or two norms to change, and discuss the following questions:

Why does the norm exist?

What new norms can replace it?

How will we know if the new norm is working?

What will each individual do to make it happen?

Some comments:

- The bigger the group, the harder the process. The maximum number is 15 to 20 people
- Very high performance teams always try to move to the right-top quadrant. Usually working with 3 or 4 norms in a team is enough.