

Norms Ensure Everyone Knows the Rules

Structure and guideposts help boards work effectively, stay on track

By Debbie Stair, M.N.M.L.

I think we can all agree that the work of school boards is challenging, but it's some of the most meaningful work one can do! If we begin with that premise, then we should also agree that we should do everything in our power to make that work as productive as possible. School board work is made up of equal parts art and science. Art is developed over time as we reflect and learn from each successful and unsuccessful endeavor. The art of the work can also be learned by observing others in the field.

When it comes to the science of school board work, it's all about setting up structures and guideposts to lean on when the work becomes more challenging. Some are for the individual and some are intended for the group as a whole. Taking the time and effort to put the structures in place early will pay dividends in the long term. Putting them in place when you think you need them the least is

when it is easiest to do. The proactive approach of developing such standards of behavior should be intended to help a team achieve higher levels of performance, rather than a reactive one to address seemingly bad behaviors.

When I'm called out to districts to provide assistance, it has been my experience more often than not that teams struggling to work together lack the structures to support them. They didn't take the time needed to do the work in a proactive and deliberate way. During that initial conversation, my first question is usually, "Do you have norms or a code of conduct in place?" because norms help establish a positive culture. Team norms guide and direct behavior, provide order and predictability, and make sense of and help us understand each other's actions. Without norms, chaos can — and usually does — occur.

Norm (noun):

A standard, model, or pattern;

- 1. General level or average;**
- 2. A behavior pattern or trait considered typical of a particular social group.**

In the context of teamwork and collaboration, norms are agreed-upon definitions of productive behaviors and mindsets that should be usual — or “the norm” — whenever a group works together. Norms are a social contract that supports a group’s collaborative work. Norms are explicit and visible to the entire group. When they are in place, they can provide a framework for addressing behaviors that might be distracting from the work of the team. Your norms don’t have to be an extensive list. Start small and build from there.

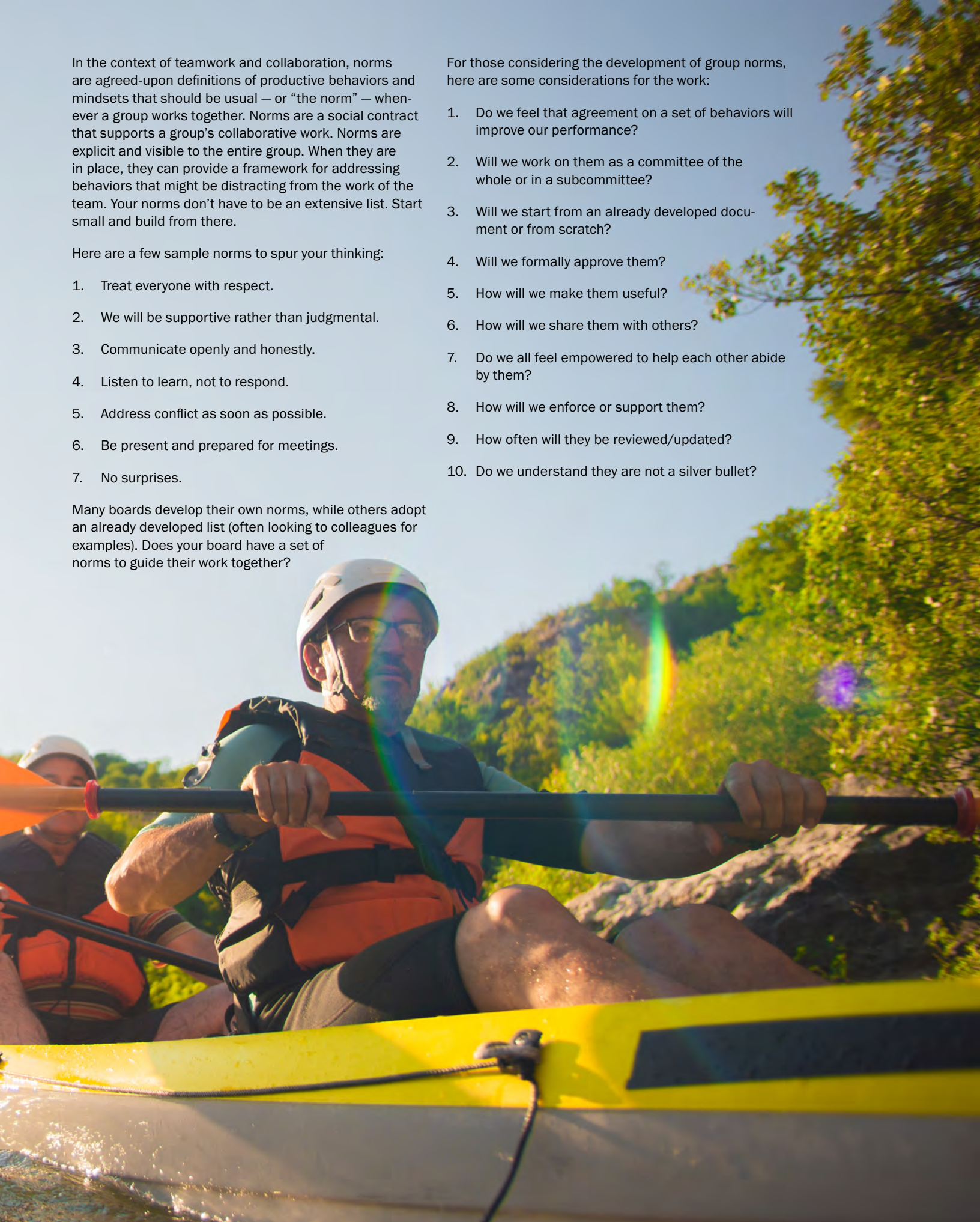
Here are a few sample norms to spur your thinking:

1. Treat everyone with respect.
2. We will be supportive rather than judgmental.
3. Communicate openly and honestly.
4. Listen to learn, not to respond.
5. Address conflict as soon as possible.
6. Be present and prepared for meetings.
7. No surprises.

Many boards develop their own norms, while others adopt an already developed list (often looking to colleagues for examples). Does your board have a set of norms to guide their work together?

For those considering the development of group norms, here are some considerations for the work:

1. Do we feel that agreement on a set of behaviors will improve our performance?
2. Will we work on them as a committee of the whole or in a subcommittee?
3. Will we start from an already developed document or from scratch?
4. Will we formally approve them?
5. How will we make them useful?
6. How will we share them with others?
7. Do we all feel empowered to help each other abide by them?
8. How will we enforce or support them?
9. How often will they be reviewed/updated?
10. Do we understand they are not a silver bullet?



Prefer to use an already developed list of preferred behaviors? MASB's Governance Standards is a great resource, based on extensive research that benchmarks best practices of highly effective school boards. It was developed by school board members for school board members. Its development was intended to provide boards a shared framework for effective school district governance. It's a tool that not only identifies desirable behaviors, but also provides common definitions for regularly used terminology and questions to give structure to the discussion of each standard. The standards are broken into two sections—one for the board as a whole and one for the individual board member. To find a downloadable version of the full document along with companion resources, you can use this link: masb.org/tools-and-templates/toolkits/governance-standards.

If you find MASB's Governance Standards a useful tool for your board, do the real work and have the rich dialogue that ensures

real ownership in them. Schedule time at an upcoming work session to dig deep into each standard.

Once you have agreed upon a list of norms, what's next? Formalize them with board approval. Keep a copy handy at board meetings, print them on your agendas, post them in your board room and share them with everyone! Send a message to your staff and community about how your board is going to treat each other while doing the tough work of leading. Make them real by using them, referring to them when needed and, most importantly, ensuring the whole team holds each other accountable when someone steps away from them. Norms are not intended to be used as hammers, but rather as guideposts.

Finally, set up a regular schedule to review and update them, offering new members a voice in this governing document. Ask, "How are we doing with our current norms? What might we need to update or add?"

Having a clear set of norms can build trust among your governance team by making sure everyone feels they will be heard, that attention is paid to inclusive behavior, and there is space and time for questions and contributions from all participants.

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