

# Table of Contents

<b>How to Preempt Team Conflict?</b> .....	3
<b>Want to Know More?</b> .....	4



# How to Preempt Team Conflict?

I thought [this article from HBR](#) was pretty useful. It takes the discussion we have about [setting up team working agreements](#) one step further, suggesting a series of relatively short meetings to level set people's views of each other based on how team members react to how people look, act, speak, think and feel. The recommendation in the article is to have a ~20 min conversation with the whole team on each of these areas in order:

- How people look: People often make snap judgments based on how people look and this effects how they interact with those people. An example of this is the reaction we have when we see someone who dresses differently such as how we respond to someone wearing a tie in a business meeting when the norm is something more casual.
  - An interesting sample question to drive the discussion - "In your world, what do you notice first about others (dress, speech, demeanor)?"
- How people act: People will misjudge people based on their behavior. Something as simple as relative attitudes to turning up on time to a meeting, where one person thinks its OK to turn up 10 mins late, while another thinks that is the height of rudeness.
  - An interesting sample question to drive the discussion - "In your world, are there consequences of being late or missing deadlines?"
- How people speak: People react to communication styles. For example the words "I'll have that for you tomorrow" without the appropriate context is probably one of the most fraught statements people make ("is it tomorrow morning or tomorrow afternoon or really the day after tomorrow because I meant tomorrow afternoon but I know you won't get to it in the afternoon so I have additional time", "is it to some understood 'done' standard or is it a first draft", etc). The problem is that is we don't have common understanding of the words, then expectations cannot be met and trust is broken. Even simple words like "yes" can mean different things in different cultures and contexts.
  - An interesting sample question to drive the discussion - "In your world, is unsolicited feedback welcome?"
- How people think: People have different approaches to problems. More introverted people work better when they have time to think about something, while extroverted people think by firing off the ideas of others. Both inputs are required but sometimes we don't set the situation up so that people can work through it their own way.
  - An interesting sample question to drive the discussion on how people think - "In your world, is uncertainty viewed as a threat or an opportunity?"
- How people feel: People have different levels of intensity and react differently emotionally to events. For example, a team I worked with had an ex-cheerleader as a manager but when the team heard what they thought of as "empty rah-rah words" from him, they thought him insincere and shallow where he thought he was being encouraging.
  - An interesting sample question to drive the discussion - "In your world, what emotions (positive and negative) are acceptable and unacceptable to display in a business context?"

Having these discussions before your team gets into a situation where they have a conflict will help the team work together toward resolution by removing or reducing the effect of these (very normal) perceptions. Perhaps this is something you can do in a retrospective.

See [HBR's How to Preempt Team Conflict](#) for more information and (a lot more) sample questions that may help drive the conversation. If you decided to do this with your team, you will find that you need to “lead by example” and talk about your reactions so others can feel comfortable about expressing their opinions.

## Want to Know More?

- [What Kind of Working Agreements Should We Set Up for the Team?](#)

Note that usually HBR lets you use see about 5 articles before demanding a subscription so the link should work.

[BlogEntry](#), [FAQ](#), [Team](#), [Conflict](#), [WorkingAgreements](#), [FirstSprint](#)

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