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# 10 agreements for a happy and well-functioning team (aka, how to not suck as a coworker)

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Hi everyone, as a dashing and debonair nonprofit blogger, I get lots of emails venting about coworkers, from those who leave dishes unwashed for days to those who are passive-aggressive (see [“12 types of people who get on everyone’s nerves in nonprofit.”](#)) Our work is very complicated, with so many obstacles, from the instability and unpredictability of funding; to society’s ridiculous expectations; to intersectional dynamics of race, class, ethnicity,

culture, privilege, gender, sexual orientation, disability, health, age, parenthood, etc. To face all those complexities and do our jobs well, we need to work effectively with each other. So here are 10 fundamental agreements that I recommend we make with one another as we do the challenging work of making the world better. Let me know your thoughts.

## The 10 agreements for a happy and well-functioning team

**Agreement 1, We will assume the best intentions in one another:** I consider this the Cardinal Agreement. If someone makes a mistake the first time, let’s give them the benefit of the doubt. Yeah, there are jerks out there, but really, most of the time, people mean well. None of us are

perfect, and the world is full of chances for us all to screw up. Let's be generous with each other. I also find it to be a lot lighter a burden to think people are well-meaning. It is so much easier on our souls to think, "John didn't say good morning back to me. I hope everything is OK with him. Maybe he's just having a bad day." Versus, "He ignored me on purpose! Curse him! May his field remain fallow, his livestock weak and barren, his progeny afflicted with gingivitis unto the seventh generation!"

**Agreement 2: We will not get pissed at anyone for failing to fulfill expectations we never clearly set:** I've seen this happen over and over, and heck, I'm guilty of it too from time to time. We assume that everyone has the same information and values as we do. Then we throw a hissy fit when something doesn't happen the way we want. One day I got irritated at a coworker for escaping as soon as an event was over, leaving me to clean up by myself. What a terrible, lazy, thoughtless, inconsiderate jerk, I thought; ugly too. Then I realized, Dammit, I never asked him to help with take-down. And then I went back to Agreement 1 and think, Well, maybe he left right away because it's his son's birthday and he's going home to surprise him. Let's stop assuming things and just communicate clearly our expectations and requests.

**Agreement 3: We will give feedback honestly and directly and not be passive-aggressive:** Maybe it's just the Pacific Northwest, where I've spent most of my time, but there is a serious epidemic of people not talking directly to each other to resolve differences. We will talk to everyone about the person who gets on our nerves *except* to the person who gets on our nerves, and they often have no clue that they did anything wrong. Or we beat around the bush or lie when they ask if anything is wrong. And then finally someone tips them off—"so I heard from Mary that Edna told her that Edna was irritated by your loud singing to N'Sync while she was working on the newsletter"—and by then, the damage is done. This passive-aggressive behavior is incredibly destructive to any team. If you got beef with anyone, talk to them directly, one-on-one.

**Agreement 4: We will focus on specific behaviors, not attack personal character:** All of us have habits, some that are good, and some that suck. It is easy to generalize from a sucky behavior to an entire narrative about a person's character. When giving feedback, we will focus on specific actions, for instance "Would you mind not singing loudly to N'Sync when I am writing my newsletter? I'll give you a heads-up when I'm doing that, thanks so much" vs. "It is really inconsiderate of you to sing 'Tearin' Up My Heart' when I'm trying to work; can you be more thoughtful of the rest of us in the office?"

**Agreement 5: We will give everyone chances to learn and to improve:** After receiving feedback, everyone deserves at least one chance to improve. Habits are hard to break. Think of how difficult it is to quit smoking. All of us will lapse and relapse. Let's be patient with one another and give everyone a chance to change. Let's help each other learn and grow and blossom from a caterpillar of irritating habits and mistakes to a butterfly of awesomeness.

**Agreement 6: We will not get pissed at anyone if we've never given them feedback and a chance to improve:** If you don't give people feedback when they do something wrong, it is unfair for you to get mad at them. None of us are mind readers. So either you talk to people directly, which is Agreement 3, or else suck it up. If you are not comfortable talking to people directly for some reason, then find another solution, possibly talking to your supervisor to figure something out. But again, if someone has no clue that they did something that affects you, then you have no ground to glare daggers at them.

**Agreement 7: We will not form cliques nor spread gossip:** Few things are as destructive to an organization as when people start forming cliques. This often happens when the above Agreements are not followed. Suddenly an issue that can be solved by people talking to each other directly intensifies into a battlefield as people gather allies and form factions. Allies usually then only get one side of the story, and people in the clique start reinforcing whatever horrible narrative is proposed and find evidence to support it, ignoring evidence to the contrary, and then soon everyone breaks out into an elaborate musical number with lots of finger-snapping. Who wants that? No one. (It's a scene I'm writing for #nonprofitthemusical)

**Agreement 8: We will own our part in any conflict:** It is easy to think that we are amazing and perfect human beings and that other people are wrong and stupid when conflicts arise. It is also easy, once we believe that hypothesis, to find evidence to support it and ignore everything else. But it takes two to tango. I know because I took Argentine Tango in college, and it was really awkward dancing by myself when my partner was sick one time. So let us agree to own up to the part we play in any conflict, because it is never as simple as who is right and who is wrong.

**Agreement 9: We will own our part in creating and implementing solutions:** Same with owning our part in any conflict, let us agree that we will all contribute to solving problems that may arise. We agree to refrain from saying things like, "This is not my problem" or "At this point, I don't care anymore, y'all do whatever you want." If a problem affects the entire team, then it is the entire team's responsibility to solve it, including assessing the situation, brainstorming solutions, and selecting a direct but respectful way to tell Bob that he needs to remove his containers of moldy food from the office fridge.

**Agreement 10: We will not take our jobs for granted:** None of us are entitled to our jobs. Most of us are paid staff. We get money to do this stuff. Maybe not as much as some of us would like, but the point is that we are paid, and if we cannot do our job with quality, minimum complaining, and a spirit of learning and teamwork, then we don't deserve to be here. No one owes us a job, and there's probably lots of people who might do a better job if we are not here. Let's be appreciative of what we have, work to improve things, and support one another to strengthen our community.

Let me know of other agreements we should make with one another. The above rules should apply to most situations.

Especially when it comes to the dishes in the office sink; wash your gosh-darn dishes!

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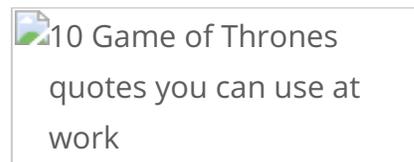
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