

Social Contracts for New Teams

Document Overview:

1. Key Takeaways
2. General Recommendations for Writing Social Contracts
3. Examples of Social Contracts
4. Team-Building Exercises and Getting the Conversation Started
5. Potential Pitfalls to Address in a Social Contract
6. Other Best Practices for New Leadership Teams

Key Takeaways

- (1) Social contracts (also called team contracts or team charters) help kick off new teams by creating shared expectations and ground rules for which team members can hold themselves and each other accountable.
- (2) Domains to consider discussing as part of your team's social contract include: the team's mission & goals, general expectations and ground rules for meetings, information-sharing & communication, decision-making, asking for help, how to discuss tough issues, cooperation versus competition, and transparency.
- (3) Many of the sources reviewed in this document detail a similar process for creating the social contract: having a facilitator ensure all voices are heard, asking team members to each contribute their ideas about expected behaviors (e.g. by posting a note on a whiteboard or shared online document), and continuing to do so until the team is satisfied.
- (4) An excellent and comprehensive template for a team social contract [can be found here](#). It includes sections on commitments, participation, communication, problem-solving, decision making, and handling conflict, as well as meeting guidelines & procedures.
- (5) As important as developing the social contract is agreeing on what to do in the event that someone violates the norms.
- (6) Your team's social contract should be a living, breathing document that you return to and update on a regular basis. The contract should be easily accessible or prominently displayed for all team members to see.

General Recommendations for Writing Social Contracts

The following articles offer easy-to-implement suggestions for social contracts, including not only the content of an effective contract, but also the environment in which it is created, agreed to, and enforced.

- (1) [“For Great Teamwork, Start with a Social Contract”](#) (HBR)
 - (a) *Team norms exist whether openly stated or not*, social contracts clearly outline those norms, covering territory ranging from decision-making to information-sharing to fostering a supportive environment.
 - (b) Social contracts can be simple, but must reflect the majority of the group’s sentiments. This may include encouraging positive behaviors and also reducing negative ones.
 - (c) Violations of formal (or even informal) social contracts can lead to employee dissatisfaction or a drop in trust in leadership or among teammates. Because of this, *outlining upfront the procedures that will be enforced to hold the team accountable is extremely important*.
- (2) [‘Agile Ways of Working -- Social Contracts’](#) (Drill)
 - (a) References the [‘forming-storming-norming-performing model’](#) for group formation attributed to psychologist Bruce Tuckman.
 - (b) It is ideal for the team to define their own standards and *have a sense of ownership and commitment to those standards*. One way to do this is by having team members each contribute expected behaviors and continue to add to the list until they have exhausted everything; online, this might be done in Google Docs or [Miro](#).
 - (c) Teams *may find it helpful to appoint a facilitator* when writing a social contract.
 - (d) [This article](#) takes you straight through writing a social contract with the Agile framework. Another article detailing the Agile approach to social contracts can be found [here](#).
- (3) [‘Social Contract’](#) (Open Practice Library)
 - (a) This article gives useful tips for remote teams creating a social contract and includes an embedded [video](#) explanation.
 - (b) For more on remote teams, see [this](#) article.
- (4) [‘How a Social Contract Creates Team Integrity’](#) (DPM)
 - (a) When writing a social contract, start by taking stock of where you are as a company or team; what are the existing unspoken expectations or norms? Pair this against your values and mission statement.
 - (b) Draft concrete, simple steps every team member can take daily to reinforce positive behaviors and reduce negative ones.
 - (c) Commit to the contract as a living, breathing document that can and should evolve over time.

Examples of Social Contracts

Your team’s social contract can take a variety of forms, and as these examples suggest, an effective social contract can be anything from a list of bullet points to a lengthy document to a series of diagrams or visualizations. Whatever route you choose, it’s most important that all team members are committed to the agreement and believe in its core sentiments.

- (1) [Here](#) is a detailed template/sample for social contracts, made by the Griffin Tate Group. It includes sections on commitments, participation, communication, problem-solving, decision making, and handling conflict, as well as meeting guidelines & procedures.
- (2) This [document](#) includes artifacts from hospitality, global services, energy, and waste management. Each of the team contracts is written out in bullet points, with sections for values/expectations, the means by which those expectations will be met, and procedures to uphold when violations occur.

Team-Building Exercises and Getting the Conversation Started

Whether you're launching your team in person or virtually, here are some creative ways to get the conversation started about expectations, transparency, communication, decision-making, and the other domains your team may want to cover in a social contract.

- (1) Lencioni provides a '[personal histories exercise](#)' to build trust amongst team members and a '[team effectiveness exercise](#)' to provide actionable feedback to improve team performance. For more about his approach, see *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* below.
- (2) These [5 Virtual Team-Building Exercises](#) are fun activities designed to facilitate collaboration between team members working together for the first time virtually.
- (3) These [Three Exercises for Creating High-Performing Teams](#) are more direct inroads to drafting a social contract. [Focusing a Team - Team Expectations](#) goes into more depth about the various important conversations you'll likely want to have.

Potential Pitfalls to Address in a Social Contract

Teams are susceptible to a range of common pitfalls. In the process of drafting your team's social contract, consider these pitfalls and determine a mechanism for conflict resolution.

- (1) *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* (Lencioni). Full text [here](#).
 - (a) Outlines the root causes of team dysfunction and politics, arguing that they are identifiable and curable: *Absence of Trust, Fear of Conflict, Lack of Commitment, Avoidance of Accountability, & Inattention to Results*. Positions each of these attributes within a pyramid, building up from trust.
- (2) The Table Group also offers resources for setting norms around conflict [here](#). Recommendations include aiming for full participation, having flexibility with the meeting agenda, and confronting difficult topics with the whole group (rather than moving conversations offline).
- (3) Per the resources section, it is important to establish guidelines for violations of your social contract. Consider the 8 steps to conflict resolution detailed [here](#).

Other Best Practices for New Leadership Teams

Beyond creating a social contract, the following articles detail some of the more general considerations when launching a new leadership team, including best practices to set the team up for success.

- (1) [‘Important Steps when Building a New Team’](#) (MIT)
 - (a) Factors to consider to help the team function effectively: its mission & goals, roles & responsibilities within the team, ground rules, decision-making, communication, accountability and self-evaluation.
- (2) [‘4 Tips for Managers Working with a New Team’](#) (Business News Daily)
 - (a) Among other recommendations, this source suggests scheduling one-on-one meetings to get to know each team member, determining how team members prefer to receive feedback, establishing open communication, and gauging roadblocks within the team early on.
- (3) [‘Onboarding isn’t Enough’](#) (HBR)
 - (a) Suggests using language around “integration” as opposed to “onboarding” for new executives. Integration is a more aspirational goal which includes engaging with the culture of the organization.