



Completing this 30-minute exercise makes teams less anxious and more productive



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People work better together when they understand where everyone else is coming from.

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Here's a funny thing about work: We spend more time with our colleagues than with our friends and family. Yet more often than not, we don't really understand our co-workers—because being honest with one another is scary.

When a teammate's lack of organization annoys us, we vent to others. When a boss says "this is fine" (not "this is great"), we wallow in anxiety. Many of us figure out our colleagues' personalities, preferences, and dislikes through trial and error, not through explicit conversation.

This strikes me as a colossal waste of time, productivity, and happiness. Ignoring these issues just leads to confusion and frustration, and, in time, can wind up threatening your job performance (and your paycheck).

Thankfully, there's a tool that every team can use to bypass workplace miscommunications and angst, helping to amp up every employee's potential and morale from day one. It's called a user manual.

Meet the “user manual”

In 2013, Ivar Kroghrud, co-founder, former CEO, and lead strategist at the software company QuestBack, spoke with Adam Bryant at the *New York Times* about his leadership style. Kroghrud revealed that he had developed a one-page “user manual” so people could understand how to work with him. The manual includes information like “I appreciate straight, direct communication. Say what you are thinking, and say it without wrapping your message,” and “I welcome ideas at any time, but I appreciate that you have real ownership of your idea and that you have thought it through in terms of total business impact.”

Kroghrud adopted the user manual after years of observing that despite individual dispositions and needs, employees tried to work with everyone in the same way. This struck him as strange and inefficient. “If you use the exact same approach with two different people, you can get very different outcomes,” he says.

The user manual aims to help people learn to adapt to one another by offering an explicit description of one's personal values and how one works best with others. This shortens the learning curve for new employees, and helps everyone avoid misunderstandings.

Kroghrud says his team's response to his user manual is 100% positive. “I think it just makes them open up. And there's no point in not opening up, since you get to know people over time anyway,” he explains. “That's a given, so why not try to be up front and avoid a lot of the conflict? The typical way of working with people is that

you don't share this kind of information and you run into confrontations over time to understand their personalities.”

Reading the interview, it struck me that it's not only leaders who ought to write user manuals. Having worked at Bridgewater Associates, a hedge fund notorious for creating “baseball cards” for every employee—which list each individual's strengths, weaknesses, and personality test scores—I know how helpful it can be to have a user manual of sorts for everyone on a team. So my editor and I decided to test it out.

How to structure the manual

The idea of describing all your personality quirks, values, and workplace desires in one page is overwhelming. To rein myself in, I followed the structure Abby Falik, founder and CEO of Global Citizen Year, used to write her user manual.

On LinkedIn, Falik describes how she “sat with questions like: Which activities give me energy, and which deplete me? What are my unique abilities, and how do I maximize the time I spend expressing them? What do people misunderstand about me, and why?”

She synthesized these answers into a six-section manual:

- 1 My style**
- 2 What I value**
- 3 What I don't have patience for**
- 4 How to best communicate with me**
- 5 How to help me**
- 6 What people misunderstand about me**

Each section contains four or five bullet points. While points may overlap between sections, the goal is to stay succinct and specific. Given many workplace conflicts stem from differences between employees' personal styles, these categories help ensure your

colleagues (and you) understand not just who you are, but how to *engage with you* most productively.

Our experience: garnering relief and respect

While filling out my user manual, many responses felt run-of-the-mill: Interviews, first dates, and a life-long obsession with personality inventories have prepared me to recite how much I value honest, explicit feedback; personal relationships; and providing support for those I care about. And how little I can tolerate lying, pretense, or discrimination.

Fittingly, my editor (whom I chat with all day every day) wasn't surprised by my "resume level" responses. Nor was I shocked by hers, which included collaboration, humor, courage, specificity of feedback, and tight deadlines. Obvious as these core values may be to those we spend significant time with, documenting them gives colleagues a mental rubric to check when confusion or conflict—like a blunt statement or missed deadline—arise.

But sections like "How to help me" and "What people misunderstand about me" pushed both of us to go deeper, acknowledging the insecurities that colleagues may not notice on a daily basis. These insecurities—the ones we're good at hiding, and hesitate to probe in others—are the root of most workplace and personal struggles. While somewhat uncomfortable to document, sharing these descriptions was the most relieving and rewarding aspect of writing the manual.

As a chronically anxious person, I shared that I'm bad at compartmentalizing, so occasionally, personal struggles overwhelm and distract me at work. One way to help me is to create an environment where it's okay for me to admit I'm anxious and ask for some space. Flexible deadlines are also useful, as is knowing that I can occasionally leave the office early to rest. Upon reading this, my editor validated these feelings, saying she too struggles with anxiety. She gave me permission to step out whenever things get over my head. Simple as this sounds, I felt a massive weight lift.

I also wrote that I'm an intense over-achiever, and tend to excessively critique myself when I feel my work isn't up to par. To

help, though it felt indulgent, I asked for praise when I do really well, as it motivates me to stay ambitious, and to be called out when I'm hating on myself. My editor admitted that she'd noticed this tendency, and would take a stronger stance next time I spiraled, as she knew I'd appreciate it, not be offended.

Lastly, as a naturally blunt person, I shared that people often perceive me as cold or single-minded. To help, I asked that colleagues let me know if I'm too brusque, and share their counterarguments, as the real sign of intelligence is "strong opinions, weakly held." After reading this, my editor shared a concern that she wasn't blunt *enough* with me. This was an excellent opportunity for clarification, as I told her I wouldn't want her to change her communication style to match mine, and that I valued learning from her softer approach.

While my editor's personal manual points are hers to share, they also facilitated invaluable clarity. For example, she wrote, "Help me protect my time. I have an easy time saying no to pitches, but when it comes to people asking for my help, I always want to say yes—so I can wind up overextended and overwhelmed." Given I Slack her at least hourly, reading this point pushed me to inquire whether the frequency of our conversations is overbearing—a worry I'd always held. She assured me that it wasn't, and we agreed to let each other know when we need space.

If anything, this process highlights the importance of including a call for feedback at the end of your manual. It's essential to acknowledge that this is a living document, to be adapted as you get to know yourself and your colleagues better. I pulled from Kroghrud's manual, which ends with: "The points are not an exhaustive list, but should save you some time figuring out how I work and behave. Please make me aware of additional points you think I should put on a revised version of this 'user's manual.'"

The takeaway

Fun and cathartic as our manual writing experience was, my editor and I couldn't help but wonder how much time and stress we could've saved by writing and sharing these manuals seven months

ago, when we began working together. What's more, we considered how little we knew (and how much we *wanted* to know) about the dispositions and preferences of our coworkers.

Psychological safety—the ability to share your thoughts and ideas openly, honestly, and without fear of judgment—has been repeatedly proven the key to innovative, happy teams. Whether you're a manager or young employee, writing and sharing a user manual has a clear business payoff. The better a team knows one another, the easier it will be for them to navigate conflict, empathize with one another, and feel comfortable sharing, critiquing, and building upon one another's ideas.

Thirty minutes spent writing a manual can save hours analyzing and predicting what your colleagues like and hate. What's more, if my experience is anything to draw from, sharing manuals with your colleagues will build connection, and make you feel less alone. I know I'll take any opportunity to celebrate the fact that on the inside, we're all a little bit crazy.

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