



Community Level Agreement



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Introduction

The community level agreement or CLA is a tool for making the expectations of how we are going to work together, explicit between two individuals or within a team.

In virtual and diverse teams, in the absence of an explicit process like this, different expectations may remain hidden and cause misunderstandings.

If we do not know what others expect – they will still measure us against the expectations in their heads, we just won't know what these expectations are.

When we are working with different individuals from a range of national and functional cultures, these different individuals will inevitably have different expectations of how teams and individuals work together.

The technique for dealing with this is a remarkably simple one – Ask them!

The community level agreement or CLA is a tool to help you to have a structured discussion and gain clear expectations of how you plan to work together.

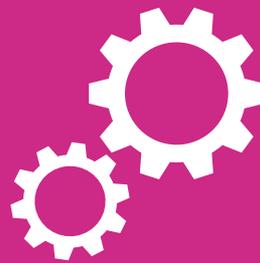


The Tool

Use the community level agreement to clarify your expectations of how you intend to work together, discuss limitations as well as expectations – be realistic.

Fill in the CLA separately to see if your expectations differ – if they do, then take time to negotiate mutually, satisfactory and explicitly agreed expectations.

Category	My expectations	Your expectations	What we agreed
Communication issues, frequency and media			
Frequency of face to face contact			
Reporting and information needs			
How and when will we review progress on objectives			
What other categories should be in your CLA?			



The Process

Individual CLA

If you are working with an individual remotely, especially a new boss, you need to sit down and agree shared expectations such as; how often you will meet, what information you will supply each other with, how often and in which media you will communicate and what should we escalate etc.

Feel free to add categories to discuss and make sure that you share expectations and then build a common agreement on each of these.

Team CLA

To create a team CLA, put your name on the top of a piece of paper to pass around the rest of the team members. Alternatively you can do this by email or in a webinar.

Each team member writes what **they personally** would like from you to help the team work most effectively.

You can ask for individual feedback or pass the same form around so everyone adds their comments. By the time it returns to you, you will have a statement from each other member of the team about what you personally could do to improve the team's performance.

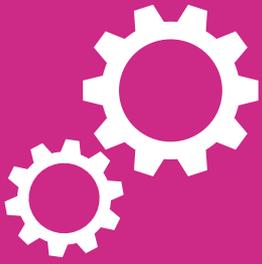
If you are doing this initial stage through email or other text based technology it would be easier to do this one-to-one and get individual comments sent directly to you.

You then structure a team discussion, or one-to-ones if appropriate, around the outputs.

If you have a good team and you want to move it to the next level, this is an excellent process and will help you fine-tune your way of working.

However, be warned, if the team has problems this will probably make these problems explicit and may generate some heated discussion, and even conflict.

This may, however, be necessary to the improvement of the team.



The Process *continued*

One of the oldest team building models, the Tuckman process talks about teams going through four stages – ‘forming, storming, norming and performing’. The challenge in remote teams is; when do we get to ‘storm?’ – For example, it is too easy to feel disappointed on a conference call but never address it – later you hang up and complain to the people you sit near – and the issues never get resolved.

A lot of inexperienced managers tend to suppress storming because they think harmony is good or they fear losing control of the conflict.

By doing this they are stopping a necessary team process of discussing what’s wrong and putting it right.

When you initiate an opportunity to storm you should be aware you are doing it and you should always be clear that the output of this must be some new norms, rules and ways of working together that overcome the existing niggles – if not then it is just conflict for its own sake and unlikely to move the team forward.



Conclusion

The principle of the CLA is to structure an explicit conversation about how individuals and teams are going to work together.

Use them to trigger a discussion and build agreement on norms in communication and other ways of working.

In the absence of this, people will still have expectations, but because they are not explicit they will often lead to misunderstandings.