Agreements

Agreements are how we get stuff done. They are all around us, all the time. We agree to meet at a particular time, to lead a project or send an email. We make "bigger" agreements as well - to help every student achieve their dreams, to grow sales by 20% in a year, to exercise daily, to raise children with a partner.

These agreements are the foundation of our lives. If there's anything we want for the future, it requires us making agreements with ourselves and/or other people.

Why do teams struggle with agreements?

First, teams don't make *explicit* agreements.

Many agreements are unstated. Sometimes, this works out fine. For instance, when I first entered my neighbor's house, I saw a pile of shoes at the door. I inferred this was a 'shoes-free' home so I took mine off as well. No one said anything, but I still made an agreement to take my shoes off in their home. This unstated agreement "works" to give them what they want: clean floors.

But too often, our unstated agreements do not work - indeed, they get in the way of what we want. Consider the work team that just knows, but never says out loud, that their manager only really considers an idea if it comes from a man, or a senior team member, or a white person. Or the homes where one person does all the cooking and cleaning, but they've never discussed it explicitly and resentment builds over time.

If we even realize this is happening, we tend to say "that's just how it is". We may not like these unstated agreements, but at some level we are resigned to them. Unstated agreements quickly become rules, baked into how we live our day to day lives, and it takes energy and commitment to name them and decide if you want to keep them, or make new ones.

If teams break through to making *explicit* agreements, they run into the second challenge: making *clear* agreements. Clear agreements specify **what** will happen, **when**, and **who** is involved. How often have you left meetings thinking "wait, who's actually going to do that project we just approved?" or "I just agreed to lead that project, but I don't really know what that entails yet…" or "our deadlines are more best guesses - no one really expects the project to be complete by then".

If teams muster the energy to make explicit and clear agreements, they run into the third challenge: living in a world of explicit and clear agreements means taking on a lot more responsibility. There's no vagueness to hide behind ("well, when I said I'd update you on the project, you didn't ask for a specific date so I figured next week would be fine"). There's no room to play the hero or the victim - either you did what you agreed to do, or you didn't.

How do effective teams handle agreements?

Effective teams make their agreements explicit and clear.

Then, they commit to keeping them. They make a real effort to keep every agreement they make, keeping 90% of them. Of course, life happens, so the minute they realize they won't keep an agreement, they renegotiate it.   And in the few instances they break an agreement, they clean it up right away.

As a result, they are wildly productive and happy.

How do they do this? What is the secret? I believe these teams make two moves that are transformative.

Move #1: They embrace their power to shape the future. This means they don't want vague or unstated agreements to hide behind. They *want* to keep their agreements, because every agreement kept means more power to create the future they want. They *want* to renegotiate and clean up right away, because they want to get back into a place of agency and impact.

Move #2: They don't tell stories. They refuse to call people "bad" for breaking an agreement, or go imagining motives. They don't beat themselves up when they have a string of unclear agreements. They deal with the facts, saying "there's nothing bad or wrong - that just didn't work for us". This means they can quickly move onto the next agreement they'll make.

How do effective teams clean up broken agreements?

Cleaning up broken agreements	
There's nothing 'wrong', it just didn't work	
Acknowledge the "breakdown"	"We agreed … but what's true instead is……"
Acknowledge the impact	"The impact that this breakdown has caused is…." (impact for you & your team)
Put something in place for next time	"In the future, I will…"
Ask If there is anything else you can do to clean it up, or anything they'd like to share with you.	"Is there anything else I can do to clean this up with you?" (stop and check) "Is there anything you'd like to say about this to be complete?" (stop and check)