

# How To Defend Your Core Principles

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**B**uilding a high performance team takes time, effort and a backbone. Are you willing to stand up and address team members who exhibit self-oriented behaviors?

Hark back to the days when you played sandlot baseball as a kid. The kids on the block didn't have any problem giving counsel. Good play or bad play, a swing and a miss or a line drive you heard constant chatter on the field.

Why do we lose that wonderful ability to talk openly and frankly to each other when we become adults?

### Why We Lack Soft Skill Muscle

There are many reasons why our soft skill muscle becomes flaccid<sup>1</sup>:

- There's no set formula for how you should approach a team member exhibiting a self-oriented behaviors.
- We assume that soft skills are a genetic trait; that we either possess them or we don't. This is similar to the "leaders are born argument."
- We feel uncomfortable practicing our soft skills. What if we make a mistake or what if we hurt someone's feelings?

There are 101 reasons why we stop giving each other feedback. But there is one very good reason to start giving feedback today: high performance teams are bound by an element of trust. And what is more indicative of trust than the ability to speak openly and freely to each other?

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<sup>1</sup> **flaccid**: soft , mushy, weak; *also* : lacking youthful firmness



*“Soft skills are the ability to defend your core values without the other guy getting too mad.”*

### **An Unconventional Definition of Soft Skills**

The textbook definition of Soft Skills: includes the terms, negotiating, compromising and facilitating. While accepting that these are elements of soft skills, let's twist the definition a bit:

Soft skills are the ability to *defend* your core principles without the other guy getting too mad.

This definition presents the idea that there is some line in the sand or point where you will not negotiate or compromise further. And there are certain behaviors that you will not tolerate. Your core values set that line. Leaders defend their core values.

There may be some tension in the air when you make your defense, but you should accept that risk. The tension caused by unchecked bad behaviors is usually far greater than the perceived tension that may accompany the defense of your core values.

### **What Are Your Core Values?**

We all have core values at work or how we expect people to behave. When we go home and complain to our wife, husband or close friend about so-and-so, it is because that person crossed our invisible core value line.



*Can you describe the core values that you want to defend?*

One of the great secrets in business today is that your core value line does not need to be invisible. Why not communicate your core values right at the very start of team formation? Tell your team what makes you tick. And let them know that you will call violations if anyone steps on your core principles.

Take the time to put your core values to paper today. It is a simple exercise. Just ask yourself what does an ideal team look like?

Here's my core values which I dub my Project Management Philosophy (PMP):

- 1. Don't waste my time.**
- 2. Let your "Yes" mean yes and your "No" mean no.**
- 3. This team is a decision making body.**
- 4. I feel comfortable using directional data to make decisions.**
- 5. The whole team commits every deliverable.**
- 6. You are expected to provide headlight warnings if we could potentially miss an important milestone or deliverable.**
- 7. You are the single focal point for your entire function.**
- 8. You are empowered to schedule side meetings and talk directly to anyone else on the team.**
- 9. I expect every person on this team to provide tangible value to the project.**

The great thing about this PMP is that it is nonnegotiable. It is the way my brain is wired. Some people like cats and some people like dogs; it is just the way it is. You communicate this list to your team

so that they know the triggers that will make you edgy and short tempered.

After years of tweaking, my list remains relatively stable and short (under 10 triggers). I'm really a simple guy. Understand, however, that if you attack one of my core values, I will respond. For example, if you make a commitment, keep it. Let your "yes" mean yes. If you can't keep it, then give me a headlight warning. Happy John deals with issues out in the open. The hider of mistakes, on the other hand, can expect a visit from "cranky John."

*“ If someone throws a ball at your face, you either duck or catch it. ”*

### **Respond Without Thinking**

You don't need to plan a strategy to redirect a bad behavior; just respond naturally. If someone throws a ball at your face, you either duck or catch it ... it's a spontaneous and unconscious action. Likewise, you should respond to bad behaviors without over analyzing the situation. The longer you wait to respond to bad behaviors, the more likely they will become institutionalized.

It is always best to address bad behaviors directly with the people who exhibit them. Face-to-face counseling with your team members is the fastest way to develop a high performance team. But remember this tip: counsel privately, praise publically. I am sure you understand the wisdom of this tip without further explanation.

### Be Fluffy the Cat

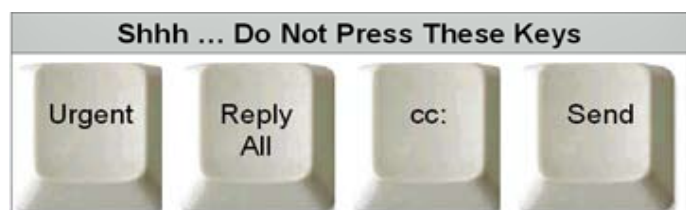
Fluffy the cat is really good at defending her core values. Do you know what Fluffy did just after Corky the Spaniel gave her a tender kiss? She swatted that puppy into another room. Because no one kisses fluffy without permission.



Sure, Fluffy is soft and precious. She purrs. People love to pet fluffy. But you don't mess with cats. You respect their boundaries. In short, cats are the masters of soft skills. They let you know exactly how they feel at any given moment.

I'm not suggesting that you swat some team members when they cross the line. I'm simply saying that soft skills are all about expressing your personal core values and then defending them with consistency. When you see pattern problems, call them out. Your team will respect you.

For example, when someone starts a **Reply All** e-mail blizzard, I immediately tell the offending party to stop pressing these keys and pick up the phone. E-mail blizzards are a waste of everyone's time.



Another pet peeve of mine is using instant messaging as a *Tommy Gun*.

*Hello ...*

*How are you?*

*I have a question.*

Ping... Ping... Ping ... on three different lines. My response: "Did you know that you can press a soft enter after a line? This lets you send multiple lines in a single message.

You will also be surprised how many people share your frustration and will be receptive to change.

### **How To Give Useful Counsel**

Provide unsolicited feedback and counsel employees when you observe a violation to the norm for conduct and behavior. Why wait for a formal scheduled appraisal meeting?

To give useful counsel, you must be able to differentiate between good and bad behaviors.

Write down one good behavior and one bad behavior on a sheet of paper ... it's easy ... just think of someone or something that makes you cranky and the right side of the table will fill itself in quickly. Your list may end up looking a bit like this Table:

## Good Behaviors

- His attendance is regular and he actively participates in the meeting
- He strives to reach consensus with other team members.
- He is the single point of contact for his function
- He closes actions promptly
- He provides crisp, clear status reports
- He considers the customers in every decision
- He keeps his management team well informed
- He manages his stakeholders so that there are few “surprises” during checkpoint meetings
- He schedules sub team meetings to resolve issues
- He drives sponsored change requests through the established process.
- He uses directional data to make decisions
- He provides tangible value to the project
- He has a sharp mind and he provides critical analysis.
- He raises risks early and often and he crafts effective mitigation plans
- He defines a well constructed plan
- He shares his function’s vision / strategy with the team
- He solves problems

## Not So Good

- His attendance is spotty and he is consistently late to the meeting. This means that I sometimes have to repeat things to bring him up to speed.
- He tends to take a functional point of view on decisions. He should strive to reach a team consensus on all matters.
- He sometimes redirects other core team members to other people in his function. This extends the lines of communication and sometimes results in delays in closing actions.
- His management team is sometimes “surprised” by project team decisions. I expect him to keep his function well apprised of project issues and decisions.
- He does not assume ownership of change requests initiated by his function. He depends heavily on the PM to call sub team meetings to collect change request impact assessments and to secure other team member votes. These are things he should do on his own.
- He does not highlight risks early. They tend to be raised after they become an issue.
- He’s bogged down by data paralysis. He requires multiple iterations of cases when the first sizing was sufficient to make the decision.
- He resists direction from the project team
- He provides little value to the team.

*“ Don't permit bad behaviors to become institutionalized on your watch. ”*

If repeated counseling does not change the behavior then ask the employee if your expectations are unreasonable or if there is some other obstacle in the way. Bottom line, don't let good behaviors go unnoticed and don't permit bad behaviors to become institutionalized on your watch!

### **The Power of Praise**

Develop a routine for exercising your soft skills. Schedule a set time on Friday afternoon, for instance, to give positive praise. There's no better way for someone to start their weekend rest than on a positive note. Be very specific in your feedback. It can be as quick as two sentences: Here's an example:

***Thank you for keeping your management informed of our project status. There were no surprises when we reviewed our status with the executive team.***

Done in 10 seconds. If you make it short and direct, you are more likely to do it again. If it is a long, drawn out affair, then you'll probably quit the exercise regime after a few short weeks.

## The Next Steps

1. Draft a list of good and bad behaviors that are consistent with your core philosophy.
2. Review the list of good and bad behaviors with your team so that they understand your expectations.
3. Set aside a given time frame per week, say Wednesday afternoon, to address violations to your expectations.
4. Pick your worst team member and give him and/or his manager feedback.
5. Pick your best team member and give her thanks. If you are sending her a note, copy her manager.

The more you talk about your Pet Peeves and defend your core values, the easier it will get.

I highly recommend that you tie recognition and rewards to behaviors and not to deliverables. When you focus on behaviors, you can begin rewarding team members immediately. Recognition of deliverables is usually at the end of the project when it has zero value to team development. Furthermore, a high performance teams are the function of many positive behaviors not the delivery of just a few deliverables.

## Conclusions

How much time do you spend counseling your team members on behaviors? If you answer “none,” then you deserve your dysfunctional team. Remember, counsel is instructive and beneficial to the employee.

Setting clear expectations for a behavior gives you a platform to provide employee feedback at every point of project execution.

Never treat the exercise as a punishment. Strive to make it a genuinely valuable experience for the employee. People who argue against the principles of good behavior will lose in the court of public opinion. Consequently, behavioral feedback can be used in any organizational construct.

As you exercise your soft skills with short, direct feedback, it will become second nature, a natural response and your team will learn to enjoy the banter just like kids playing baseball in a sandlot.



## About

### John Langlois

John Langlois is a visionary project manager who exercises the passion and wisdom to break down process barriers and cultural resistance to change.

John led the team that planned and delivered one of the most successful programs in the history of notebook computing - ThinkPad® T-series. His projects received numerous EditorChoice product awards while garnering the highest levels of customer satisfaction.

John earned IBM's most prestigious corporate award for outstanding project performance. John possesses a unique ability to see patterns of dysfunctional behavior in organizations. John specializes in recovering troubled projects and his book, *Project Wreck*, details the common causes for troubled projects and shows you how to avoid them.

John's work has been featured at ProjectWorld® & World Congress for Business Analysts® and PMLessonsLearned. His workshop was rated as a top 10 value (out of over 300 events) at IBM's Technical Leadership exchange.

Contact John at [www.projectEZ.com](http://www.projectEZ.com) to see how he can help your organization improve project delivery.



## References

This paper is based on the chapter “Provide Behavior Feedback” in the book *Project Train Wreck* by John M. Langlois, JoRoJim Publishers, 2007.

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