Primer for Creating Team Norms (a.k.a. Operating Principles)

Objective

This primer is intended to assist teams in the creation of their shared principles.

What is a principle?

Principles are the articulation of the basic beliefs and values of the organization used to settle action or make decisions. Principles can be thought of as the "WHAT" they believe, not stating the "HOW" they are going to be accomplished. Beliefs and values are not the only determinants of principles. The organization's business situation and condition, its market position, competitive environment and other elements of business strategy all impact principles. **Principles are descriptions of the characteristics of the desired future state.**

For principles to be meaningful they need to follow a few simple heuristics.
- **First**, principles need to be few in number. No organization can pay attention to dozens of principles.
- **Second**, principles should not merely state the obvious. Stating obvious principles has no real effect on behavior. And for principles to provide value, they must drive behavior. An example of this type of principle is, "We believe in producing a quality product for our customers."
- **Third**, principles should provide the "right fit" for an organization. It should not be possible for another organization to use another's set of principles. This is another way of saying that given a different set of circumstances, it is possible to argue the principle's opposite point of view. An example of this type of principle is, "Our R&D investments are determined by the profitability of our products". This principle could possibly be "inverted" for a different organization, and under a different set of circumstances.

The process of crafting principles

Here's a process for crafting principles that we have used frequently:

1. Introduce the concept of principles
2. Determine areas for principle creation
3. Write several draft principles within a small subteam – virtually or face-to-face
4. Agree on the premise, not necessarily the wording
5. Expand the principle by adding the business rationale and its implications
6. Share the principle and supporting documentation with the rest of the team
7. Discuss, especially the implications, and fine-tune as needed

Facilitating the process

Following is a list of tips to help assist teams as they craft principles.

The "What and the How"
Often, when people attempt to create principles, they get stuck with the "HOW". This comes from years of being "Implementers". The facilitator needs to get the group back to thinking about the "WHAT". If the principle is describing how they are to do something, the facilitator can ask questions such as, "Would that principle still hold true five years from now?" "What are you trying to get at by stating that principle?" "Is there a way of stating the principle without also articulating how you will accomplish it?"

Too obvious
The facilitator can prompt the group with a question such as, "Can anyone argue the inverse of this principle?" "Is there a situation where the opposite would be true?" "How will this drive behavior or help you make decisions?"

Too vague
When a principle is too vaguely written it cannot drive behavior. Would the group know what to do (how to behave) based on this principle? How can we state this in a stronger way and make it more powerful? Some teams are concerned with making "too" strong a statement, so they deliberately weaken the principle with "exceptions". Using phrases like, "under certain circumstances", "if warranted", "when the moon is full". You can help the team craft a better principle by asking what are their concerns about stating it strongly? If the principle is "too vague", it gives the message it's not to be taken seriously.

In the present and positive
There is tremendous power in articulating a principle written in the present tense. Instead of "one day we will…" or "in the future we…" suggest to your teams that they think of their vision as being achieved. What will that environment look like? How will team members behave? Can they write their principle with these positive attributes in mind?

Additional documentation for Principles

Supporting documentation on each principle consists of the following:

Rationale: What are the benefits of this principle to the business?

Implications: What must change so that this principle can be implemented?

Issues: What are the obstacles to implementation?

Remember: The more detail that supports the documented principle, the easier it is to communicate it to others.

Crafting "Good" Principles

The following are actual examples of customer principles along with their evolution.

First Draft Principle - Example 1
Applications are designed for ease-of-use, portability among business units and ease of integration when used in conjunction with other applications.

Facilitator notes:

Background: This principle is a symptom of the group's desire to describe the problems of today's environment.

Ask	This principle describes the "how" more than the "What". Can we reword this principle to focus on the underlying value?
Ask:	Are applications really the point of this principle?
Ask:	Is this principle consistent with your other principles concerning applications?

Final principle:
Applications are consistent, easy to use and integrate easily into the corporate computing environment.

First Draft Principle - Example 2
There is a freely accessible central register identifying and describing technical committees, tasks forces, study groups, and so on, and indicating how to access their publications and communications of record

Facilitator notes:

Background:
This is another example of a principle which describes the "how" rather than the "what".

Ask	Can you state what you are trying to achieve without stating the implementation?
Suggest:	Is there an underlying value regarding, organizational communication and knowledge sharing, that you are trying to get at?
Suggest:	Is it possible that this principle describes a solution that may not be viable in a two to five year span?

Final Principle
The technical computing environment facilitates the sharing of experience of knowledge among internal and external experts and professionals.

First Draft Principle - Example 3
A bad decision is better than no decision.

Facilitator notes:

Background: This is an example of a team frustrated by continual bottlenecks, and lack of action.

Ask	What is driving this principle?
Ask:	Do you mean to imply that the costs associated with bad decisions are acceptable?
Suggest:	Is there another way that you can accomplish the same thing but stating the principle in positive terms?

Final Principle:
Decisions are made by the fewest number of stakeholders who can agree in the shortest period of time.