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Talking Toolbox for Productivity - Morale and Differing Opinions

It is expected that people have different opinions and perspectives on matters within a team. However, how those differences are treated in a team will impact that team's performance. When differing opinions are handled in a way that is psychologically safe, it can improve a team's creativity, cohesion, and resilience. It is important to note that respecting differing opinions with empathy and openness does not necessarily mean agreement or acceptance. If different opinions are treated without respect, openness, and fair consideration, it can diminish individual well-being, productivity, and erode team morale.

💬 How differing opinions might make a difference?

Creativity and Problem-Solving
When everyone thinks the same, it can lead to "Group think", where ideas go unchallenged, and creativity is narrowed. But different perspectives can broaden a team's actions and ensure accountability to decisions.

Belonging and Inclusion
Inclusion is not only related to matters of demographic, gender, ethnicity, and so on. It is also about inclusion of different views. When peoples' opinions and ideas are listened to, they feel they belong.

Improves Commitment
Of course, not everything that people input is relevant or to be adopted. But if people know they are heard and not dismissed, it can increase their commitment to the actions that are taken, even if they perhaps don't fully agree.

Minimizes Interpersonal Friction
A healthy approach to differing opinions or diverse viewpoints can reduce friction between individuals who don't see eye to eye. It means people work more smoothly together.

Differing opinions aren't the sign of someone who is perhaps disengaged, difficult or doesn't "Get it". Rather they represent the diversity of perspectives within humankind and provide an opportunity to think more creatively.

💬 **Conversation Starters** | Feel free to adapt these questions to resonate with your team's unique dynamics.

What different perspectives have you adopted that turned out to be a success?
Share personal experiences of when you have taken on a different opinion, and it worked out. Encourage empathy within the team to share their own experience.

As a team, how can we take the time to listen to everyone's opinions and input?
This could be an uncomfortable discussion, so it is asking it in a very gentle way that doesn't stir recent frustrations. Welcome people's vulnerability if they share.

How do you want your opinions to be listened to?
Allow a nonjudgemental place to consider different perspectives in the teams based on personality, upbringing, work experience, educational background, culture, etc.

How often do you keep your opinions to yourself?
The idea of "psychological safety" is that people have an environment where they can share their opinions and ideas. How might people do better at speaking up?

How can we create a positive culture of differing opinions within our team?
Brainstorm how your team can keep an open mind to different ideas. This might not always mean adopting them, but it does mean having the space to discuss them.

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Talking Toolbox for Productivity – Effective performance evaluation

Performance evaluation period is always a stressful time for personnel including managers and supervisees. Performance evaluations are time consuming and are prone to bias and subjectivity, vague standards, personal preferences, etc. There are many controversies around performance evaluation but nonetheless if utilized effectively, it can help improve the employee's quality of work and personal skills, foster professional growth and development, improve communication and increase employee engagement and satisfaction.

How does Effective Performance Evaluation make a difference?

Enhanced and constructive feedback
An effective performance evaluation provides feedback about employees' strength and areas of improvement. It will provide specific examples that could help personnel understand their skills development and knowledge needs to excel in their roles.

Career development and growth
Effective performance evaluations celebrate employees' achievements which will increase job satisfaction. Furthermore, an effective appraisal helps employees identify opportunities for growth based on the identified areas of improvement and may help them decide to take on mentoring and coaching for this purpose.

Reasonable goal setting
Effective performance evaluations will help employees set clear and measurable goals for the year. It will help them better understand the expectations. Furthermore, this process will ensure the organizational objectives are informs individual goals and their contribution to the overall progress of the organization. Clear goals will increase staff engagement and motivation.

Enhanced communications
Effective performance evaluation improves teamwork by strengthening the culture of feedback and open/effective communication. This will be key to creating a healthier work environment. Enhanced communication paves the way for regular consultations which will help build trust with team members.

Conversation Starters | Feel free to adapt these questions to resonate with your team's unique dynamics.

Focus on strength and accomplishment.
Ask employees to talk about their accomplishments, strengths, what gave them joy and what makes them proud of themselves.

Ask them how you can contribute to their future goals and plans.
Ask them how you can help them achieve their goals; what resources or capacity building programs would be helpful for them to develop further, what their career aspirations are and how you can contribute to them.

Ask them how you can contribute to their improvement and their development plan.
Focus on the challenges they have faced previously and how successful they were in addressing them. Ask how you can support them in overcoming those challenges. Ask what knowledge gap they feel needs filling for them to improve further? Talk about what they enjoyed the least and explore ways you can help them change that.

Focus on two-way feedback and collaboration.
Ask how you have done as a manager and what you can do to improve to support the team's growth. Ask how they see their contributions to the team and how they believe their role can help the team and the organization's overall goal and mandate.

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Talking Toolbox for Productivity – Emotional Regulation

It is not easy to control our emotional state but when we do, we are able to rethink a difficult situation to reduce associated anger, review/manage our own emotional response to the situation (fear, sadness, anxiety, and change the focus on positive aspects of the situation to help us feel calm. This is called emotional regulation, which is important for everyone, especially for the managers. Emotional regulation helps managers promote collaboration, build trust, foster healthy relationships, manage workplace conflict and contribute to a healthier workplace. Emotional regulations can help managers engage in more productive relationships which leads to healthier team dynamics and improves wellbeing for everyone.

How does Emotional Regulations make a difference?

Enhanced collaboration and staff engagement
Managers who can effectively regulate emotions create an environment that is positive, supportive and fosters trust and open communication. This will lead to increased staff engagement and jobs satisfaction.

Leadership effectiveness
Emotional regulation helps managers make better decisions despite pressures and challenging situations. This will help managers to lead by example and become a positive role model that exhibits a culture of respect and understanding.

Burnout prevention and more effective stress management
Emotional regulation helps managers become more aware of their own feelings and emotional triggers which in turn helps them prevent burnout through effectively managing their stress and the pressure of their managerial roles.

Enhanced communication and reduction in conflicts
Emotional regulation cultivates empathy and openness to others' perspective, promotes effective communication with the team and enables managers to better de-escalate conflicts in the office.

Conversation Starters | Feel free to adapt these questions to resonate with your team's unique dynamics.

What emotions am I feeling right now?
Look into your emotions right now and connect with them. Are you feeling angry, sad, anxious, and overwhelmed? Or are you feeling happy, satisfied and calm? Check in with your body and see if you are experiencing relevant physical sensations. Are there any specific things that my body needs? E.g. exercise, food, rest and relaxation, etc.

What am I thinking right now?
What are the thoughts that cause these emotions. Check and see if those are realistic and helpful or negative and destructive. Ask yourself if there are any other perspectives that you can consider that could change your thoughts.

How does my response influence my team?
Evaluate what impact your response may have on the team and see if showing emotions can help at this moment or hinder the effectiveness of the ongoing conversations. Ask yourself how you can prevent emotions from negatively impacting your team.

What do I need to improve as a manager?
Ask yourself about strategies that you can use to regulate your emotions better. What are my weaknesses and strengths as a manager? Ask yourself how you can understand the emotions of others around you better? What do

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Talking Toolbox for Productivity - Clear Expectations

Setting clear expectations has a positive and protective impact on productivity and their well-being. When roles, responsibilities, and project objectives are well-defined, team members can prioritize effectively, understand their contributions, and feel a sense of ownership. Clear communication minimizes confusion, reduces stress, and fosters a positive work environment. It ensures people aren't busy… doing the wrong things!

💬 Why do clear expectations matter for mental health?

Greater Focus
When people clearly know what they are expected to do, it means they can focus better on the task at hand. Such focus improves well-being in contrast to regular distractions, which can diminish mental health.

Reduces Anxiety
We all can worry if we feel there are unspoken expectations that we don't know if we are meeting or not. Clear expectations help reduce anxiety and reinvest that energy into performance.

Prevents Burnout
When we are trying to achieve vague goals, we can expend a lot of effort "spinning wheels". Over the long term, this can lead to burnout, because the job is never done. Clear expectations help prevent this exhaustion.

Improves Trust and Morale
When teams know who is doing what, and for what goals, it enhances that team's morale and boosts individuals' sense of achievement.

There is a saying that "clear is kind". By taking the time to communicate clearly, we do the act of saving people from needless anxiety and instead put our efforts into achieving those goals that we've made even clearer.

💬 **Conversation Starters** | Feel free to adapt these questions to resonate with your team's unique dynamics.

What do "clear expectations" look like to you?
What are the characteristics of clear? What things should be made clear? What things don't need to be? Take time to listen and understand what things make the difference between clear and vague.

How does it affect you when expectations aren't made clear?
Consider the effect that clear and vague expectations have upon an individual's well-being and performance. Welcome people sharing personal stories to help make the impact better understood.

Have you found ways to make expectations clearer?
Share methods and strategies that people have used to make things clearer. Are there techniques that can be replicated to help others out?

How clear are you on our team's goals, tasks and expectations?
Allow a nonjudgemental place to explore how well people feel they understand what they need to, and where there might be unspoken expectations.

How can we have clearer expectations in our team?
Think about goals, projects, tasks, feedback, behaviors – are there ways that things could be communicated more clearly? If so, now?

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Talking Toolbox for Productivity and Breaks

In our fast-paced work environments, productivity often takes centre stage. Prioritizing breaks may seem counter-productive, but it is not only essential for productivity but also crucial for mental well-being. Let us explore how strategic breaks can boost both our work output and our mental resilience.

Why do breaks matter for mental health and productivity at work?

Stress Reduction
Breaks provide a chance to step away from stressors. Whether it is a short walk or a few minutes of mindfulness, these moments allow our minds to reset and recharge.

Preventing Burnout
Continuous work without breaks can lead to burnout. Regular pauses help prevent physical and emotional exhaustion and maintain our mental equilibrium.

Creativity and Problem-Solving
Ever notice how ideas flow during a coffee break? Breaks enhance creativity and allow us to approach challenges with fresh perspectives.

Connection and Social Well-Being
Sharing a break with colleagues builds positive social bonds which contribute to our sense of community, contributing to happiness as a group and individually.

Productive breaks are not a luxury; they are a necessity. They are a daily investment in sustaining long-term performance. Let us prioritize our mental health to support meeting our work goals.

Conversation Starters | Feel free to adapt these questions to resonate with your team's unique dynamics.

What benefits do you get from having breaks during your workday?
Discuss how people might benefit from breaks, such as getting some perspective on a matter, having time to tend to personal matters, or do some exercises.

Have you ever experienced "mental fatigue" at work? How did you recover?
Share personal experiences or strategies for using breaks to overcoming mental exhaustion. Encourage empathy within the team.

What is your own relationship with breaks?
Allow a non-judgemental place to consider different perspectives in the teams based on personality, upbringing, work experience, educational background, culture, etc.

What role does mindfulness play in your break routine?
Explore mindfulness techniques—whether it is focusing on your breath, talking a walk, practicing gratitude, or simply being present.

How can we create a break-friendly culture within our team?
Brainstorm ways to encourage colleagues to take breaks without feeling guilty. Collective well-being benefits everyone.

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Talking Toolbox for Productivity - Working Remotely

Remote work, whether someone works full time remotely or in a hybrid manner, offers many benefits that enable our work as a global organization. But it can also present some mental health risks that are not always immediately obvious, which can impact both individuals and teams. Let's look at how we can make virtual work, work the best.

💬 **Why do clear expectations matter for mental health?**

Clearer Working Hours
When someone is working remotely, we might overlook agreeing on core working hours, which is especially relevant where there may be a time zone difference. It can also blur the boundaries between work and personal life. Agreeing on working hours suitable for the individual and team makes remote work more sustainable.

Keeping Positive Morale
Granting remote working to an individual might help them but negatively impact a team's morale. For instance, it might at times be perceived as favoritism or cause extra workload. Ensuring equity can help keep morale positive.

Connection and Resilience
Working remotely might reduce commutes and support personal matters such as caregiving. But at the same time, it can isolate people from social connection through work. Creating moments for social connection for remote workers will improve their well-being and resilience.

Being Effective
People working remotely might engage in attending back-to-back meetings to "prove" they are working, despite it making them less effective. Healthy habits can help prevent this and ensure effective work patterns.

Virtual work is more and more common, and often a norm and a necessity in our global organization. But it carries with it some individual and team risks that need to be healthily managed to ensure it is a sustainable benefit.

💬 **Conversation Starters |** Feel free to adapt these questions to resonate with your team's unique dynamics.

What are the pros and cons of remote work for our team?
It can be easy to assume we know what the pros and cons are. Instead, listen to what positives and negatives people experience when working remotely, both at an individual level, and a team level.

Are there practices that make remote work better?
Think about things like having breaks, ways of communicating, making time for social connections, updating each other when you won't be at your desk, how meetings can be effective, etc.

How can we make the most of working remote?
What opportunities for different types of work does remote work provide? For instance, does it provide a chance for individuals to do deeper work, away from meetings in the office?

Are there things you privately worry about when working remotely?
In a nonjudgemental way, create a safe space for people to share the pressures, spoken and unspoken, that might make remote work a stressful experience. Might people feel guilt, or envy?

As a team, what should our guidance be for remote accommodation?
Allow space for people to share what they think is good team guidance that everyone can stick to.

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Talking Toolbox for Productivity – Helping colleagues suffering from Mental Health issues

Workplaces that promote mental health can and do lead to staff who feel that their wellbeing is being supported. The result of such a positive approach is that staff are often more engaged and productive. Often, employees are afraid to share their mental health problems with their managers due to various reasons. It is vital to create a healthy workplace culture that supports and encourages staff to be open about their mental health. Furthermore, managers need basic skills to be able to effectively support an employee with mental health problems.

How does healthy workplace culture matter in helping colleagues suffering from Mental Health issues?

Encourages proactive approach:
It is important for managers to routinely talk about mental health in the workplace and promote workplace mental health discussions using special occasions, team meetings/retreats, posters, workshops, etc. Furthermore, managers who reach out to their staff individually and asks them about their mental health work directly to destigmatize Mental health. This approach, over time, builds team members' confidence to focus on their mental health and get the help they need earlier than later.

Builds up skills and knowledge about mental health:
A healthy workplace will encourage everyone, especially managers, to learn more and increase their knowledge of Mental Health issues and the resources and policies that are available in the organization that benefit staff suffering from mental health (counsellors, medical services, Ombudsman, HR, etc.)

Respects Confidentiality
Often, accommodations geared towards supporting a team member who suffers from mental health are interpreted as favoritism. In such situations, managers face difficulties in addressing this due to confidentiality. Regular conversation about workplace mental health and the importance of confidentiality is key to addressing this issue and establishing principles that would be followed for everyone who will need support due to mental health issues in the future.

Conversation Starters with someone suffering from mental health issues

General well-being check questions:
How are you feeling today? Is there anything specific you would like to talk about? How are you coping with the pressure and demands of the work? How can I help you?

Questions about concerns related to work:
Do you feel that your work impacts your mental health? Is there anything about your work that causes problems? Do you feel appreciated and recognized for your work? What does your ideal work look like? How can I help you to make things easier at work?

Questions about available resources and support?
Do you have a support system in place? Are you aware of the resources available for the employees (counsellors, medical services, Ombudsman, etc)? Do you need help in accessing those resources (contact information, etc)? Do you have questions about possible options for leave, reasonable accommodation, workplace adjustments and other policies available in the organization?

Before having any conversation, select an appropriate place and ensure your employee of the confidential nature of the conversation. Practice empathy and active listening and avoid giving advice. Focus on supporting your employee rather than trying to fix the problem. Reassure them that you acknowledge their experience and that you remain available if they need support.

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Talking Toolbox for Productivity – Handling Grief

It is easy to say that losing loved ones, friends and family is part of life, and no one can avoid that but experiencing that loss is a totally different experience. It is a painful experience where one might feel that their whole world has gone upside down. Unfortunately, as UN staff, we are not immune to this experience and may experience the loss of our colleagues in the locations that we work in. "Grief is the anguish experienced after significant loss, usually the death of a beloved person. It often includes physiological distress, separation anxiety, confusion, yearning, obsessive dwelling on the past and apprehension about the future". It is important to note that the experience of grief and its response is unique, and everyone experiences and reacts to grief differently.

How to cope with Grief?

Acknowledge your emotions and allow yourself to experience them and be kind to yourself.
Do not bury your feelings since grief could bring about a wide range of emotions such as sadness, anger and confusion. Understand that there are no right ways to grieve and that it is a process that takes time. Hive yourself time to process the loss and heal. Don't feel guilty for feeling fine or for having mixed emotions.

Find and seek support.
Connecting with others and sharing your feelings brings comfort and support. If possible, in your location, join a support group or create a support group with the help of your agency's staff counsellor. Seek professional help from the UN staff counseling services or external mental health professionals if needed. You are not supposed to go through the pain alone.

Focus on self-care.
Take care of your physical health as well as your mental health. Eat well and get enough sleep and exercise regularly. Utilize the activities that help you relax, including prayers, meditation, yoga, spending time in nature, etc. to reduce stress.

Conversation Starters | Feel free to adapt these questions to resonate with your team's unique dynamics.

Remember and honor the loss of the loved person.
Be empathetic and share your sadness with the team; this will help validate the team's feelings and emotions. Acknowledge everyone's emotions and recognize that grief is a process and that everyone may experience and feel differently. Encourage everyone to share good memories of the deceased to help process the grief. Create a memorial in whatever form acceptable to the specific culture; examples are offering prayers, visiting the family and the grave to offer prayers, creating a photo album or a memory book, etc.

Offer support and flexibility.
Do not ask open-ended questions about what you can do to help. Ask them "How can I best support you right now?". Talk to your team and offer whatever resources that are available in your organization. This can be flexible working arrangements, time off for team members to attend funeral if applicable, additional breaks for a period after the loss, psychosocial support available through staff counsellors, support groups if available, etc. Ensure your team that you are there to support them with their needs during these difficult times of loss and that you are always available if they want to reach out and talk about their difficulties.

Follow up:
Regularly check in with your team, either individually or in groups, knowing that grief is a process. Refrain from offering advice but focus on acknowledging the difficulties everyone experiences. Continue to be available since this regular support demonstrates your authenticity and your genuine care for your team's wellbeing.

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Talking Toolbox for Productivity – Maintaining Boundaries

As the UN staff, we spend at least 40 hours at work every week. Creating clear boundaries and maintaining them creates a healthier work environment where staff are more confident and efficient while experiencing less stress. Everyone is familiar with the storm of so many tasks, responsibilities and expectations at work that obscures the boundary between our professional and personal lives. This lack of boundaries will cause many workplace related issues including mental health conditions such as anxiety, burnout, and depression. Setting boundaries at the workplace does not only mean setting limits on our time and/or physical space but rather protecting our mental health and wellbeing.

How does maintaining boundaries make a difference?

Enhanced communication
Defining clear boundaries prevents conflicts and misunderstandings amongst personnel, and between personnel and managers. This will help with increased understanding of acceptable and not acceptable behavior at the workplace. This will increase respect and collaboration and will improve job satisfaction and productivity.

Psychological safety
As a manager, having clearly defined boundaries at work will help personnel feel more psychologically safe and secure to raise any workplace or personal issues and concerns with

Healthy work-life balance and enhanced self-care
Self-care practices are important in maintaining personnel's overall physical/mental health and wellbeing. Lack of clear boundaries will negatively impact personnel's self-care practices such as relaxation and exercise which leads to poor mental health.

Enhanced productivity
A healthy boundary at work can help in the reduction of the stress level among personnel and improve productivity and efficiency. Personnel's anxiety, distraction, exhaustion, and overwork will only lead to lower quality of work and increased mistakes.

Conversation Starters | Feel free to adapt these questions to resonate with your team's unique dynamics.

What are your preferred methods of communication?
Discuss with your team what type of communication works best for them whether they prefer emails, messages, calls or in person short meetings. Considering the vast variety of locations that UN personnel work, it will be important to agree upon "preferred methods of communications" with your team.

What does time management mean and look to you?
Discuss with your team their ideal work hours, the times they do not want to be contacted due to other personal commitments, availability outside of core hours, expectations regarding after-hour communications, focus and productivity and ways in which you can help them to stay on track.

How do you feel about your role and workload?
Review your team's ToR's and workload collectively as a team and re-distribute work if necessary to ensure personnel are clear on their roles and are more efficient with their workload.

How do you care for your wellbeing?
Talk about self-care with your team and seek their expectation of a good work-life balance and how you as a manager can support them achieve it. Discuss leave planning, RnR, and the regular time-off to ensure improved wellbeing. Ask your team to bring up things that they feel affect their well-being at work and discuss ways that you can help with improving the situation.

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Talking Toolbox for Productivity – Self Care

Self-care means that we take care of our own mental health and wellbeing proactively. Our lives in this modern era are stressful and are full of various demands related to our families, personal/social expectations and workplace requirements. When we talk about self-care, we are looking beyond sporadic morning exercise or some type of relaxation. Self-care is regular activities that every person chooses to do to help them improve their physical/mental health and wellbeing. As managers, we tend to prioritize and think about taking care of our teams and find ways to help them become great both at personal and work levels. But not taking care of ourselves as managers will be detrimental to our personnel and our team's wellbeing and effectiveness. If managers neglect their own wellbeing, their effectiveness will decline gradually but if they invest in taking care of themselves, they will be stronger leaders who are capable of care and compassion and can be good role models for their personnel.

How can self-care help you and your team?

Build resilience
Regular self-care will help you build resilience and enable you to deal with the daily stress of life and work. Resilient managers can effectively address challenges and setbacks at the workplace.

Stronger leadership
Self-care will help you become compassionate and a happier leader who is positive and helps others stay positive. Stronger leaders can model healthy behaviors and habits such as prioritizing wellbeing and are able to inspire their teams to follow to promote a culture of support and wellbeing.

Enhanced communication and relationships
Regular Self-care will help managers be in a better emotional and physical place which will help them communicate more effectively and create stronger relationship with their personnel. Self-care will prevent different moods to dictate how you work with your team.

Enhanced productivity
Regular self-care will help managers to feel energized, refreshed, relaxed and mentally clear. Such managers are better at focusing on issues, making them better decision makers and more productive at the workplace.

Conversation Starters | Feel free to adapt these questions to resonate with your team's unique dynamics.

What does self-care mean to you?
Ask your team to talk about their self-care ideas. You can talk about your own self-care and any plan/activities that you have and share tips that have been helpful to you. Self-care activities are unique to everyone, but they all contribute to good physical, mental, and emotional health and wellbeing.

What prevents you from taking care of yourself?
Talk about the things that could get in the way of self-care. Time constraints coming from commitments from work and personal life would not leave enough time for self-care. Lack of knowledge, not having a self-care plan, financial issues, and alcohol/tobacco use are other reasons for not taking care of ourselves.

What are some of the stressors in our office and how can all of us help alleviate it as a team?
Poor work-life balance, conflicts in the workplace, lack of clear roles and responsibilities, high workload, lack of managerial support are some of the stressors in the office. Talk with your team and seek their opinions about how to alleviate these stressors.

How can you, as a manager, help your team's wellbeing?
Talk about self-care with your team and seek their expectation of a good work-life balance and how you as a manager can support them achieve it. Discuss leave planning, RnR, and the regular time-off to ensure improved wellbeing. Ask your team to bring up things that they feel affect their well-being at work and discuss ways that you can help in improving the situation.

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