

Behavioral Solutions for Successful UN Integration

BEHAVIORAL SOLUTIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL UN INTEGRATION

INTRODUCTION

The *Review of UN Integration* report released in 2021 examined, for the first time, the behaviors that key actors must engage in to ensure successful integration, and the behavioral barriers they experience. The behavioral component of the report was led by ideas42, which specializes in the application of insights from behavioral science, and was contracted by the Joint UN Transitions Project to contribute its expertise to the review under the overall guidance and direction of lead author Jordan Ryan.

Drawing on data collected through the survey of 260 UN staff members with experience in integrated settings, as well as more than 150 interviews and 20 focus groups with key stakeholders, ideas42 identified nine behaviors critical to successful integration, and seven key barriers preventing staff from adhering to those behaviors—and, consequently, limiting the ability of staff to collaborate in an effective manner.

After the review's findings were endorsed by the UN Executive Committee, ideas42 was asked to help implement the review's behavioral recommendations. This work was led by UNDP on behalf of the Integration Working Group (IWG) and progressed collaboratively, drawing inputs from UN colleagues across the system with a deep understanding of the unique opportunities and challenges presented by integrated UN missions.

The solutions package includes tools that:

1. Curate options and provide guardrails to facilitate quick decision-making for managing and improving decision-making and conflict resolution forums;
2. Encourage two-way communication when discussing integration;
3. Publicly recognize and reward staff who model good practices and champion integration and showcase operational and programmatic successes; and
4. Create opportunities for staff to reflect on common objectives together, interrogate others' points of view, and learn others' "language."

Below, we outline the behavioral insights underpinning these solutions, highlighting the *specific barrier* each was designed to address; the *overall approach* of the design in addressing that barrier, and the *behaviorally informed design features* that make each solution more likely to be effective.

1. TOOLS FOR CURATING OPTIONS AND PROVIDING GUARDRAILS

Behavioral barrier(s)

For successful integration, senior leaders must improve on the existing forums and mechanisms for coordination across UN entities, catering to the unique needs of each integrated setting. The task of deciding these improvements can be complicated, with a multitude of configurations and options to choose from, including the number of participants; the departments and agencies to invite; whether to meet virtually or in-person; how often to meet; and what the agenda should be.

When the number of options is large, people can often fail to choose the best option or fail to make any choice at all. Instead, they experience choice overload, where deciding between too many options can become paralyzing, leading to fewer realized choices. In the context of UN integration, the number of ways to configure forums and mechanisms might be overwhelming to the extent that leaders avoid choosing new or improved forums/mechanisms at all.

This also has consequences for meeting attendees. In conversations with UN staff, meetings were often cited as an example of something that is relatively costly in its use of staff time and attention. UN staff members are busy individuals with limited attention to devote to their many tasks. Improving forums and mechanisms helps create *slack*, alleviating the scarcity of staff time and attention, and helping to create space for people to turn their attention to other tasks.

Approach

The solutions include two tools: a checklist to use for evaluating and improving meetings (*Using Forums to Meet UN Goals*) and a supplementary guide providing examples of the ideal meeting structure for different objectives (*Matching Meetings with Objectives*). These tools provide easy-to-use guidance for tailoring meetings to a purpose. They outline the key decisions that are required and present a curated set of options for each decision, alongside guidance for choosing between them. The tools make meetings easier for conveners to organize and improve, and more useful for those attending.

Behaviorally informed features

The checklist format breaks the amorphous task of improving or structuring meetings or forums into discrete and manageable decisions. Doing so makes the task more actionable and increases the likelihood of impact, as even a partially completed checklist is likely to yield incremental improvements to meetings. In other contexts, checklists have been used effectively to encourage surgeons to take steps to [reduce postoperative infection rates](#) and [increase employer responsiveness](#) to citations for workplace safety violations.

The tools are also formatted strategically to make it easy for time-strapped staff members to use. Content is separated into sections by headings and colored boxes, making it easier to parse. Bolded text is also used to [draw attention](#) to key checklist items. Additionally, content is organized in a loosely “F-shaped” pattern, with key items along the top and left-hand side of the page, [where people typically search](#) for important details.

Finally, additional resources relating to the different checklist items are linked in the text—in many cases, these include other relevant behavioral solutions from this same package—to make them accessible in the moment they are needed and to prevent users from failing to complete their task.

2. FACILITATING TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

Behavioral barrier(s)

Integration is often promoted through one-way channels such as speeches, statements, or through demands in coordination meetings. These channels can leave many staff members with unanswered questions and concerns. To successfully promote integration, leaders must be willing to engage in two-way communication, to discuss the practical ramifications of integration with staff.

While many leaders intuitively understand the need for two-way communication, it may be difficult for them to find opportunities to engage staff. Even if deemed important, messaging integration is a task that can easily be forgotten if other competing and more urgent tasks arise—and in integrated settings, they always do. Coupled with the lack of common services and accessible communication channels across the UN, deciding how to discuss integration and address concerns can be even more challenging.

Approach

The solutions create opportunities for staff to be intentional about engaging in two-way communication. One is a PowerPoint slide (*Slide Template Additions*) with suggestions for ways to foster inclusiveness and facilitate participation in meetings that is meant to be incorporated into the standard PowerPoint templates used by different UN entities. Another solution is a worksheet (*Planning Two-Way Communication*) that guides people who have received a training in two-way communication to develop strategies for implementing their learnings in the future.

Behaviorally informed features

The Slide Template Addition has been designed to be easy to use. Since a key barrier is that two-way communication may not be top-of-mind for many staff members, adding the slide to the standard PowerPoint templates used by UN staff members is meant to make it easily discoverable, and easy to incorporate into any relevant presentation (and consequently, any relevant meeting). Once used in a presentation, the slide is intended less as an educational tool than as a timely reminder to make participants mindful of the need to adhere to principles of two-way communication that they already believe in and are committed to, but which are not always salient to participants in the moment. Reminders have proven effective at bridging gaps between people's intended and actual behavior in a variety of settings including [voting](#) and [parenting](#).

Content on the slide outlines specific actions that are encouraged for more effective participation, with the goal of establishing an explicit norm for how people should conduct themselves, allowing participants to [hold themselves and each other accountable](#) to a standard for behavior. The content is formatted in bullet points, with a strategic use of bolding to make key concepts stand out to participants who may only quickly scan the slide. The slides can also be edited, to personalize content to the needs of different audiences.

The Planning Two-Way Communication Worksheet is a goal-setting and plan-making exercise, guiding participants through the identification of a personal goal—which has [reliably increased people's performance](#) in various settings—for encouraging two-way communication. Participants are then prompted to formulate a plan, articulating the steps they might take to reach their goal—an exercise that [typically helps people follow through](#) on their intentions. Finally, participants are provided with instructions for scheduling an email containing their plan to be sent to themselves in the future as a personalized reminder for their future selves to act if they have not already.

3. RECOGNIZING INTEGRATION CHAMPIONS

Behavioral barrier(s)

UN staff often perceive individual actions—particularly actions to enhance collaboration and increase successful integration—as not being impactful enough to affect real change in the UN system. Most senior leaders interviewed for the Integration Review were not aware of many “champions” of integration, nor were they aware of successful examples of promoting integration. Of the positive examples, many were related to one-time successes or moments of triumph in difficult settings, rather than normalized success. Moreover, in many instances, staff perceived risks to behaving in ways that are critical to successful integration as being more common and consequential than they really are. Their views may have been shaped by a common tendency for people to base their judgement of the likelihood of success of an endeavor on how easily examples come to mind—a phenomenon known as *availability bias*.

People’s perceptions do not always match reality. In many instances, UN staff underestimate the scope of their practical influence—or their locus of control—on UN integration. In reality, individual action can and does tip the balance and move the UN system closer to successful integration.

Approach

The solutions include country-wide awards for staff and initiatives (*Collaboration Award*) or a weeklong activity in which staff exchange tokens to acknowledge help or inputs they received from colleagues at other UN entities (*Celebrating Collaboration Week*). Their aim is to publicly recognize individuals who are strong collaborators and initiatives that have demonstrated successful integration. By raising their profile and drawing attention to the actions that helped them succeed, the solutions encourage individuals and entities to make positive examples of integration more salient and help them understand how to achieve similar successes.

Behaviorally informed features

The activity guides to both solutions aim to make the activities easy for country teams to understand and adapt to their needs. Along the left-hand side of the page, key actions required to organize the award are broken down into three to four key steps. Implementation resources—a rationale for adopting the award, and templates for messaging to announce the award and recognize winners—are included along the right-hand side of the page; while additional resources such as accessible Microsoft Office 365 based nomination forms and rubrics to aid in the selection of winners are also linked.

To maximize impact, both activity guides include prompts to personalize the activities, such as by naming the collaboration award after someone with a meaningful connection to integration or collaboration in that country and highlighting specific behaviors that earn people recognition.

Once adopted, both of these solutions will provide *social proof*—visible examples of successful integration behaviors [are likely to compel others to follow suit](#)—countering availability bias by raising the profile of integration successes and resetting misperceptions about the limited locus of staff members’ control by highlighting the meaningful actions that individuals and initiative can take.

4. REFLECTING ON SHARED OBJECTIVES

Behavioral barrier(s)

In addition to underestimating the potential benefits of their actions, staff often perceive the risks of behaving in ways required by successful integration as being more consequential than they really are. This may be because in most cases, people's perception of risk is not based on any sort of objective calculation. Instead, perceptions of risk are shaped by experiences that stand out.

Notably, integration risks appear to be more salient for staff who work in siloed environments and who are not co-located: they interact mostly with peers and supervisors from within their own UN entity. Risks are less salient for co-located staff or staff that have regular exchanges with counterparts from other UN entities: they have a broader viewpoint in their day-to-day and are, for example, more likely to consider cross-pillar collaboration a norm that already exists.

Approach

The solutions include different approaches to creating opportunities for staff to interact with their peers at other UN entities, develop interpersonal relationships and reflect on their shared goals. Increasing the salience of their commonalities and communal identities can encourage staff to adopt behaviors critical to successful integration. By providing opportunities for staff to meet outside of their professional context (*Proven Team Building Practices*); prompting attendees to discuss their shared goals at the start of a meeting (*Agenda Item Add-Ons*); encouraging teams to host visitors on occasion (*Visiting Days*); and encouraging teams to accommodate participants from other teams on field visits (*Joint Field Visits*)—the solutions attempt to break down staff members' siloed identities that make them wary of integration.

Behaviorally informed features

Proven Team-Building Practices briefly summarizes successful examples of cross-pillar team-building or social activities from integrated settings. The tool is intended to provide leaders with social proof—evidence that activities can be successfully organized in challenging integrated settings—as well as serving as a resource for different types of activities that might be organized to engage staff. Leaders can use the tool as inspiration for identifying activities that are appropriate for their mission's needs.

Similarly, the *Agenda Item Add-Ons* document outlines three activities that can be appended to the agendas of inter-agency or cross-pillar meetings. While the salience of attendees' siloed identities may keep them from collaborating effectively, conducting either of the activities at the beginning of any session that includes multiple UN entities will help build an appreciation for the roles and motivations of different entities in reaching common objectives. Priming participants to see themselves as all playing for the same team in this way should help people behave more collaboratively—identity priming has previously been shown to influence a range of behaviors including [household divisions of labor](#), [charitable giving](#) and [voting](#).

The *Visiting Days* and *Joint Field Visits* activity guides make the activities easy for leaders to adapt to their needs. Following people's typical scanning patterns, key actions required to organize the initiative are broken down into three steps listed along the left-hand side of the page. Implementation resources including a rationale for adopting initiative, and messaging templates are included along the right-hand side of the page, along with additional resources such as accessible Microsoft Office 365 based forms and sign-up sheets to publicize opportunities and allow interested staff members to indicate their interest.

Upon implementation, both of these solutions will counter *fundamental attribution error*—the tendency to blame others’ non-cooperative behavior on their character, instead of empathizing with the challenges of their situation—by helping to familiarize themselves with the operational complexities of different entities, building a greater awareness of others’ relative strengths and strengthening interpersonal relationships to give people opportunities to gain familiarity with language across pillars, and see innovation in action across the UN.

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