

The Culture of Checking-In at AIESEC: A Case Study

A presentation of | The logo for "My Emotions Matter" features the word "Emotions" in a large, elegant script font. Above it, the word "MY" is written in a small, sans-serif font. Below "Emotions", the word "MATTER" is written in a small, all-caps, sans-serif font. A vertical line separates the text "A presentation of" from the logo.

(Please email us at info@myemotionsmatter.com to get a free copy of the facilitator's guide)

I think I have heard of AIESEC – What is it?

AIESEC is an international not-for-profit, non-political and independent organization which is run by students and recent graduates of institutes of higher education. The members of AIESEC are interested in world issues, leadership, and management. Through affiliation with UNDP and United Nations Economic and Social Council, AIESEC works towards the fulfillment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

AIESEC is known to develop leadership in its members through an extensive focus on four qualities – having the ability to empower others, being solution-oriented, identifying oneself as a world citizen and working on self-awareness.

The fourth component of self-awareness got things interesting for us – as we at My Emotions Matter also work towards emotional intelligence, an important component of which is self-awareness.

In the component of self-awareness, the one really interesting thing that we found was the culture of checking-in.

Now you may ask – What are check-ins?

The other similarity that we found in between our organization My Emotions Matter and AIESEC is that we both believe in the power of checking-in.

Checking-in is basically a process through which all the members present in a commonplace are asked certain questions that help them reflect and analyze what emotions they are feeling at that particular point in time.

At My Emotions Matter, we always begin our sessions by asking the question ‘How are you feeling?’.

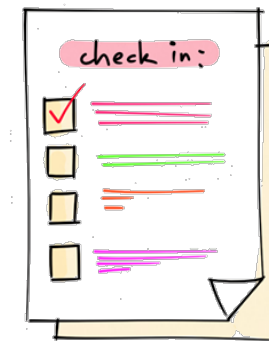
Likewise, at AIESEC, during the beginning of every working day, all the internal team members are asked to rate their happiness levels from 1 to 10. At the end of the working day, the team members are again asked to rate their happiness levels from 1 to 10. This process is called checking-in and checking-out.

Alongside having the happiness meter, the team leaders at AIESEC all use their own personal version of reflective questions that they ask their team members. Asking such reflective questions, on one hand, helps the team members become aware of who they are as a person and what emotions they are being guided by. On the other hand, the reflective questions help all the team members understand each other and their emotional states better.

Though the source of this culture of checking-in is not known clearly, members of AIESEC believe that this culture was started from AIESEC in Europe and then it got transferred to AIESEC in India too. After that, this culture got promoted in other regional offices of AIESEC and it is in place at AIESEC in Nepal as well.

The level with which this culture has been promoted in all the AIESEC regional offices itself shows how important AIESEC considers this to be. The team of My Emotions Matter got in touch with AIESEC Nepal members to know more about this culture of checking-in and to understand how it is benefitting the organization.

We got in touch with Mr. Manik Kamra, the Country Director of AIESEC in Nepal, Ms. Dollie Shah, the Head of Public Relations & Events at AIESEC in Kathmandu and Ms. Ishika Pathak, the member of Public Relations & Events at AIESEC in Kathmandu.



Why check-in?

Based on the discussion we had with them we have come up with three major benefits of the process of check-in.

1. Helps track a member's emotional journey
2. Helps transform the culture from being just work-oriented to relationship-oriented
3. Clarifying expectations and measuring the fulfillment level

Let's discuss each of these in detail below:

1. Tracking the Employee's Emotional Journey through Checking in:

As stated by Ms. Dollie Shah, the culture of checking-in helps their organization track the emotional journey of its members. For instance, at AIESEC, some of the team leaders use the happiness meter to check-in. In the happiness meter, they have a rating of 1 to 10 and each of the team members verbally state a number depending on how happy they are feeling at that particular point in time. The number 10 indicates feeling extremely happy whereas the number 1 indicates a lower level of happiness.

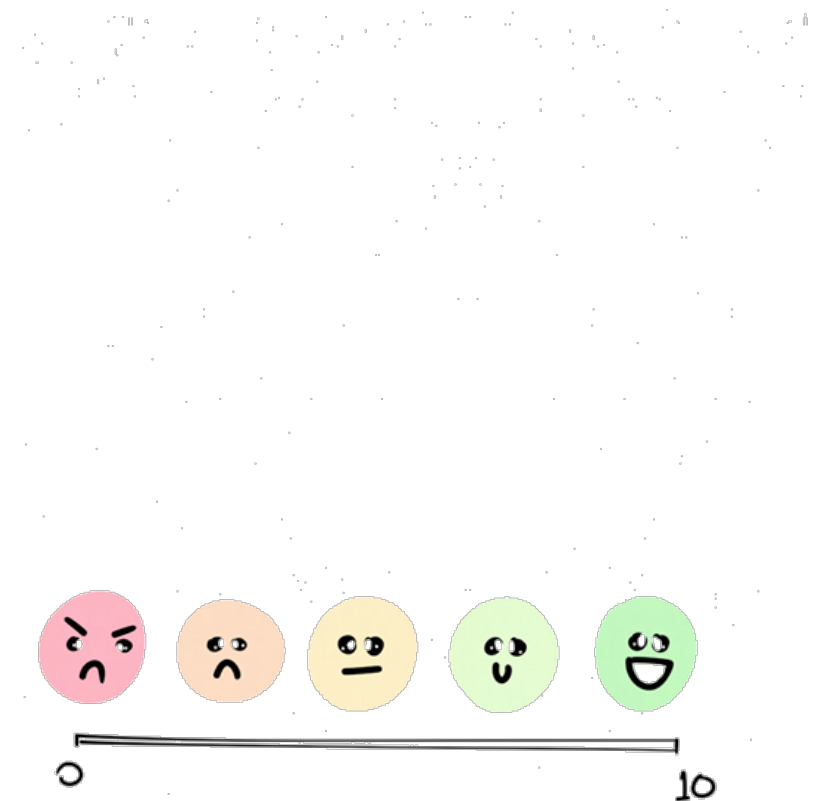
Supposedly, if someone gives a rating of 10/10 in the happiness meter in the morning but only gives a rating of 1/10 in the evening, it helps the team leader understand that something must have happened in the course of the day which left the member feeling upset. After knowing this, the team leaders can then sit down with their members and find out what led the happiness level to become so low. This helps the team leader in two ways – on one hand, it helps the team leader become more socially aware and understand what leads to their team members feeling happy or sad. On the other, it helps nurture an environment where people support each other.

Most of the time, when people feel sad, it can be observed in the patterns of their behavior. However, since people don't talk about such things openly, what happens is that when someone is feeling sad, people take it personally. People start believing that it is something they did which led the other person to become quiet or arrogant suddenly and due to such assumptions, relationships only become worse.

When people openly state how they are feeling, they are allowing others to know that something is not right with them and they also help in clarifying that it is nothing that has to do with the social circle around him/her. This helps in creating an environment of support and empathy without taking things personally.

Mr. Manik Kamra, Country Director of AIESEC in Nepal, himself told how one of the AIESEC members had to shift back to his hometown due to some personal issues. A few days before shifting, he always gave a ranking of 2 or 3 in his happiness meter. This helped his team members understand that he was feeling sad because of his personal issues. Had the culture of checking-in not been there, it was highly probable that his team members would consider it to be his arrogance that he was demonstrating at the time when he was about to leave the organization.

The culture of checking in helped him be in motion with his emotions without people assuming different kinds of things about the sudden change in his behavior.



Being Open about Emotions

At AIESEC, one distinctive feature of their organization is a culture where people openly express what emotions they are going through. They have a culture where at the start of every working day and before any meeting they ask all the members present to express their current state of emotions. This is called checking-in at AIESEC. They even freely express heavy emotions like resentment or anger they might have towards their organization and other colleagues during their check-in sessions.

For instance, Mr. Manik Kamra stated how when their team had been given the responsibility for AIESEC in Nepal and their term had just begun, there was a lot of performance pressure that their team was experiencing.

During this time, almost all the team members were involved in field work extensively and they were not getting any time for check-ins. As a result of the pressure that was lingering around, a lot of frustration was building up among the team members. Only when their team sat for a proper meeting and did their check-ins they realized they needed the space to vent out. So, on that day, all the team members, put aside all the other work and vented out all the frustrations they had. And as Mr. Manik said, the rest is history. The productivity level of all of their team members increased to 94% from 75% after this venting out session took place.

The Business Case

The culture of checking-in at AIESEC has had visible support of all the members of the organization. The way this culture began at AIESEC in Europe and the way it has been transferred to AIESEC in Asia, and even the local chapters of AIESEC in Nepal clearly shows how this culture is being accommodated well among all the regional offices and is being transferred as an important cultural aspect.

Getting Started

- It is important not to ignore or skip such cultures as per the organization's convenience. The organization should rather come up with ways to make these cultures flexible so that they can be well-accommodated in the organization even when there is a change in contexts.
- Even when everyone in the organization is involved in field work and in their own individual projects, the organization should come up with a way to bring all its members together so that they feel connected. Avenues like online meetings can be used to do so. It is important for the team members to feel connected to each other even when leading individual projects. Organizing meetings to help the team members connect with each other is a way through which the feelings of social belongingness can be fostered within a team.
- It is important to create a culture where people can speak out about their heavy emotions as well. The leaders could initiate this by acknowledging and expressing any heavy emotions they may be experiencing. When the organizational members will look at their team leaders being open about their heavy emotions, it shall pave a way for them to be open about such things too.

Critical Elements

- *Reduce the monotony.* At AIESEC, they have come up with unique ways in which they have molded their culture of checking in. They do a variety of different things – sometimes they use the happiness meter, sometimes they use storytelling questions, and sometimes they ask people to share their memories. Introducing variety in their regular tradition, makes it less monotonous and thus less boring for the members to be doing same thing day in and day out.
- *Break the stigma associated with negative emotions:* At AIESEC, they have developed a culture where they acknowledge even the negative and heavy emotions. They gauge the vibe in their environment and if they feel like the environment is really low on energy level, they use terminologies like 'sadness meter' where people give a rating on a scale of 1 to 10 regarding how sad they are feeling. Doing such simple things, reduces the stigma among the members regarding heavy and negative emotions and it makes the members feel like 'It is okay to experience negative and/or heavy emotions' every now and then.
- *Learn to listen.* At AIESEC, not only is the culture of checking-in a way for people to vent out but the team members make it a point to actually listen actively to whatever their team members are saying. Active listening is equally important for such cultures to be effective. When you actively listen to what your members are saying during such situations, you start understanding your team members better and this helps improve team bonding.

Why check-in?

2. In the Transformation from Work-orientation to Relationship orientation Checking-in helps!

In case of the same team member who was going through some personal issues at his hometown, Mr. Kamra stated how he actually felt connected to this team member right before he went back. The team member and Mr. Kamra were flat mates and when Mr. Kamra came to know about the emotional turmoil that his teammate was going through, he extended the shoulder of support towards his team member which led to their emotional bond becoming stronger.

The culture of checking-in actually provides team leaders with important information about their team members. This information can be used by the team leaders to then lend a hand of support towards their team members when they need it. Having the culture of such support strengthens the bond between the team leader and his/her members.

Mr. Kamra emphasized on the fact that at AIESEC, they prioritize relationships over work. They acknowledge the emotions of their team members. For instance, during the morning time check-ins, if any of the team member states that s/he is not feeling good, then s/he is approached in a very different way while delegating work to them. The approach while delegating work changes from “Let’s get this work done before 5 pm today!” to “Will you feel comfortable doing this work today? If not, that’s okay too. We will take care of it.”

Doing so gives the team member the opportunity to prioritize their emotions over work. They can do the work if they feel emotionally fit to do so or they can choose to decline it if they feel they need some time out to acknowledge their heavy emotions.

The culture of checking-in thus has helped the team leaders at AIESEC understand that in order to generate greater impact towards the mass, the first step is to keep the members happy and productive!

3. Clarifying and Measuring Expectation Fulfillment through the Process of Check-ins:

AIESEC, as an international youth based NGO, organizes various conferences every now and then. The team of AIESEC fully dedicates themselves to such conferences so that the objectives of the conference are fulfilled really well.

When organizing such conferences too, one check-in question that is asked among the team members at the beginning itself is, “How do you expect the various teams to work during the conference?”

Every member in the organizing committee answers this question which helps in the process of expectation setting and clarification. The process of stating such expectations verbally makes it clear among the team members as to what is everyone supposed to do and how is everyone supposed to work.

After the end of the conference, a checking-out meeting again is held to check how well all of the expectations were met. This also helps the organization understand the operational challenges which might have occurred during the plan execution process as well understand the positive highlights which occurred during the conduction of the conference.

Hence, through the check-in sessions, expectations and objectives are set out clearly and through the check-out meetings, the assessment of how well these expectations were met is done.

AIESEC, in these terms, has set a proper example of how people can not only express their emotions and their stories through the culture of check-ins but they can also explain both their personal goals and their expectations from their team members when they work towards a greater organizational goal, like organizing national and international conferences.

Expectations Management through Check-Ins

One very interesting aspect of check-ins at AIESEC is that when they organize big conferences/events which could impact their brand image and the impact they make, they bring a little tweak in the process of their check-ins. In the initial phases of the organization of the event, they have a check-in session, which is similar to expectations management meeting. In this meeting, every member of the different organizing teams clearly express their work expectations from other teams and their members during the process of event organization.

They clearly express how they expect their other team members to work during such conferences. They also make sure that such expectations from all the team members are documented well and later on, these documented expectations becomes a measure to see how well each of the teams worked while organizing the event.

The Business Case:

AIESEC believes that having the expectations management meeting helps all the organizational members be on the same page regarding the work everyone is supposed to do. Before the event/conference is conducted, every team member and each team understands what is going to be their metric for successful work. After the conference execution is completed, AIESEC looks at the before-and-after work progress to measure the performance levels of each of the teams and team members.

Prioritizing relationships has always been a core value at AIESEC – the organization believes that the relationship that AIESEC members share with each other and the external clients ultimately determines the impact that they are going to make in the society. Expectations management is one key component through which AIESEC members can flourish the relationship they share with each other.

Getting Started:

- While working towards any major project/agenda, it is important that all the team members who are going to be involved in the project/agenda are clear about what they are expected to do.
- Organizations might want to document these expectations in written format and might want to send it out to individual members so that they can clearly see what are going to be the performance metrics to measure their work performance.
- It is important to be realistic about the expectations that are set upon each of the employees and members. There is only so much which a team member can take upon himself/herself. Hence, during such expectations management meetings, if it does seem that there is immense pressure or a large variety of expectations which are set towards one team or one person, it might be important to narrow down the scope of such expectations as well.
- While checking-in sessions are important for the process of expectations management, checking-out sessions are also very important. In the checking-out meeting, all the members can share their feedback on their individual performance as well as the performance of their colleagues. Such a checking-out meeting can also provide a platform for all the members to express their acknowledgement for the good things that happened and vent out the frustrations towards things that bothered them during the process of executing the plans for the event.

Critical Elements:

- *Documentation is preservation.* At AIESEC, what makes expectation management meetings so fruitful is the documentation portion. The documentation becomes a point of reference for the members to see how they are supposed to work and for the team leaders to assess the work progress of their subordinates.
- *Reviewing helps.* While the checking-in session during the expectations management phase helps set the benchmark for performance of employees, the checking-out meeting helps provide a review against the set benchmarks. Such meetings can help understand what went well and what didn't and what can be done from next time to ensure that mistakes aren't repeated.

Modifying check-ins!

While the process of check-ins and check-outs might seem very beneficial, asking the same type of questions to the employees’ day in and day out might get them bored and lead them to become disengaged with the whole process.

At AIESEC, this thing is kept into consideration and there are two ways through which the process of checking-in is modified to make it more interesting!

Let’s discuss about these two modifications in detail below:

1. Little tweak in the check-in goes a long way!

A very interesting component that we found in AIESEC was the little tweaks they make in their check-in questions.

So, Mr. Manik also stated that alongside having the happiness meter, they also have built a culture where they can ask various questions to their team members and the team members answer such questions.

An example of one such question is, “What are some of the physical scars that you have and what led to the development of such scars?”

These questions help the team members understand each other intimately by helping them know each other’s backgrounds, lifestyle, childhood stories etc. Once this emotional intimacy is shared between the team members, they understand each other better which helps them deal with their own issues and insecurities in the professional environment even better.

For instance, Mr. Manik Kamra shared his own example. Due to the emotional comfort they had in their organization, Mr. Kamra had informed his team members about his background. He came from a rural village of Punjab in India and when he had just joined the organization, both his English and Hindi weren’t that good. Also, he didn’t feel confident while speaking in front of masses. He shared both of his weaknesses in front of his team and this saved him from any sort of future embarrassment.

Having said that, his team also gave him enough opportunities whereby he could improve his English and Hindi speaking skills and his ability to speak in front of the public. Through such opportunities, he could transform his weaknesses into strengths and now when we listen to Mr. Manik’s English, no one can tell that he used to be weak in this language during a certain point of time.

Not only that, having known about the weaknesses of Mr. Manik, the team made sure that they didn’t comment in a way which would trigger his insecurities.

Hence, asking deep questions to the team members during the check-in/check-out times helps the team understand each other better. This helps the team members understand ‘Where is the other person coming from’ so that they don’t do or say such things, which would unintentionally disrupt the bond that they share.

2. Doing Check-ins: The Efficient Way!

Checking-in and checking-out every day are beneficial to the organization and might seem fun on a day when there is only limited work on the plate. However, on days where everyone is running on a tight schedule, the culture of checking – in and out might seem like an additional burden to take.

To avoid this process from being burdensome to the members, AIESEC has found a way out. They have introduced the concept of ‘One word check-ins’. On days, when they are running out of time, they just conduct one-word check-ins and describe their current state of feeling in one word without any description.

This shows how important it is to conduct everything regularly. Once, people start eliminating or skipping such things on days with tight schedules, the underlying message that goes around among the members is that this culture isn’t important and hence it can be easily skipped upon. However, nothing could be further from the truth.

Hence, rather than skipping such components, AIESEC has found a creative way to accommodate these components even on days when the first instinct would be to just skip it!

Learning Lessons: The AIESEC Way!

One very important lesson that we can gain from this is that it is the small things that we do that matters. In a working day which lasts from 8 to 10 hours, segregating as little as 30 minutes every day to help members become aware of their emotions and express it in their team, helps the team become closer and share a fond bond with each other.

In the 21st century, where strong team work is considered to be one of the most important assets for any organization, it is crucial that the organization invests its time and efforts in building a culture where both self-awareness and social awareness are considered to be a top priority by every team member.