

# WORKING TOGETHER: BUILDING STRONG WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

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**“Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.” - Henry Ford**

How much time do you dedicate to thinking about your working relationships? If things go wrong, or there is conflict, the answer is probably - reluctantly - more time than if your work relationships are generally successful. But do you put effort into making those connections successful? What about team dynamics? If you are in a management or leadership position, do you know how to improve your relationship with those who work for you, and to help your teams perform well together?

Unfortunately, it is often when relationships reach an impasse, or teams fail to function effectively, that a spotlight is shone on the causes of difficult dynamics at work. There may be numerous reasons specific to the people or the situation that explain the complex background to tension and conflict. Sometimes, at that stage, it takes enormous effort and significant time to unravel and resolve - if there is the inclination to do so in the first place. It therefore makes sense to understand more about work dynamics, and to learn about the factors that make individual and team relationships thrive from the outset. We could all do with reminding ourselves of these seemingly obvious but often overlooked skills and techniques, particularly given that so much of our time is spent working alongside other people.

## INDIVIDUAL RELATIONSHIPS

There are two principal kinds of working relationship: transactional and relational. Transactional relationships usually involve interacting simply as a means to an end, whether collaboratively or competitively, with a particular task in mind. Collaborative interactions are more likely to lead to further engagement in the future, whereas more competitive dealings may leave those involved with a disinclination to work together again. By contrast, relational work is more centred on meaningful engagement that builds and maintains the working relationship, often with a view to ongoing work together. In these interactions, care and effort will go not only towards the outcome of the task, but into the relationship as well. Sometimes

work involves a combination of the two, but thinking about work engagements in a collaborative or relational way helps us build and maintain healthy, mutually beneficial, working relationships.

The most significant factors which contribute to strong collaborative or relational work are communication, trust, time, self-awareness and open-mindedness:

- Try to communicate in an open and honest manner. This allows you to be authentic with your colleague and encourages the same from them. It also permits an acknowledgment of personal capabilities and limitations, which is important in building credibility.
- Be patient with the time it takes to build trust. Showing commitment and demonstrating reliability are both central to this process.
- Rapport is also built over time, and the pace may depend on the task and timeframe of the work, but – like trust – will lead to confidence in the working relationship. Maintain interest in your work colleague; have conversations that go beyond your work and share information about yourself.
- Try to develop self-awareness. This allows us to observe how we react to communications and actions during the course of our work, and to regulate our emotional responses, particularly when the relationship is in its early stages or where a colleague is at a different level of seniority.
- Finally, aim to stay open-minded, both about engaging in new work relationships and about how others work. There is value in learning from each other, as well as thinking about our approach and contribution to work tasks and relationships.

## **TEAM RELATIONSHIPS**

Team dynamics, and the management of people by a team or organisational leader, are often perceived to be more complex. However, it is important to recognise that there are a few fairly straightforward practices that invariably lead to stronger team relationships. Key to all of these is valuing the people on the team or working for you. The building of relationships is often relegated to second place after the working tasks of the team, but it is increasingly now understood that putting relationships first in fact leads to more effective and productive work, as well as beneficial group dynamics.

There is no great science to building and maintaining strong teams. As with individual working relationships outlined above, it takes the investment of time, care and focus in certain areas, which are so easily and often overlooked:

- Value each member of the team and their contribution, welcoming diversity of membership and outlook.
- Take time to show interest in and communicate with team members. Remain curious about people and their lives inside as well as outside of work, and encourage them to do likewise with each other.
- Encourage honesty and authenticity, as well as personal connection between members of a team. People are often most effective when they can be themselves and bring their full identity to work.
- Strive to build trust and loyalty between team members. This grows faster when there is space for rapport and a personal interest in each other's lives to develop.
- Listen and observe carefully and with focussed attention during conversations with and between team members. This will allow tensions and gaps in communication to be revealed and provide the opportunity for misunderstandings to be resolved. Team members will feel heard and will be more likely to believe the value of their contribution to the team.
- Disagreement and argument within a team happens - allowing it out in the open can be productive (even if uncomfortable), and may encourage the sharing of valuable information about the team's work and dynamics.
- Support team members by encouraging their abilities and praising their successes. Negative feedback should preferably be given privately rather than in front of the team.
- Provide teams with both the resources and the freedom to fulfil their individual roles and their collective tasks.
- Build relationships and community whenever possible. Teams that act as a community, with ties and interest in each other beyond the work setting, are often the strongest, longest-lasting and productive, as well as managing to maintain healthy functional relationships.

Investing time and effort into building strong working relationships reaps rewards beyond merely successful work outcomes. It enables us to fulfil our role at work and to feel fulfilled, to value our place in the organisation and to feel valued, and to engage with work productively while enjoying a balanced and supportive work environment. These relationship lessons in fact go far beyond the workplace, and may indeed prove valuable in our non-working lives too.

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