

Relationships in the Workplace

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Sometimes workplace relationships are healthy. Sometimes not.

I love working with organizations where morale is high and relationships are robust. Establishments like that are rare, unfortunately.

When relationships are not healthy, I look for underlying causes. I am sensitive to three different aspects of workplace relationships: authority, collaboration, and friendship.

Each of these intertwined relationships may be too strong or not strong enough. Problems occur when there is imbalance—if any of the three dominate or are significantly deficient.

Authority. This is the traditional distribution of power associated with the “chain of command.” Each person knows the hierarchical relationship to each other person in the organization. He or she is either one-up (has direct or indirect authority over the other person), one-down (is directly or indirectly under the authority of the other person), or is at the same level (hierarchical peers).

Most people understand this power distribution intrinsically. “The boss” provides direction, determines priorities, and authorizes resources. The leader determines the unwritten rules that govern interpersonal behaviors and influence the politics of the organization.

Problems arise if the leader underplays this role. Directions and plans are poorly coordinated, inadequate performers are not addressed, needed resources are not available, the organization’s future vision is not championed, and future leaders are not developed and encouraged.

Problems also arise if the person in authority overplays this role. Individuals with good ideas are silenced (and learn to withhold future thoughts), problems are not brought to the attention of the appropriate people, individuals refuse to assume responsibility, and morale suffers.

Collaboration. This is the spirit of teamwork that solves and prevents problems, using cause-and-effect logic. Hierarchical roles are minimized as each individual brings his or her knowledge and skills to address the situation. Education and experience are the power criteria here.

Some specific objective, not protecting one’s turf or hierarchical position, is usually the focus of energy. Desired outcomes are usually associated with seeking improvement through more effective operations, better planning, greater reliability, reduced waste, etc. Serving the customer and enhancing the long-term health of the organization are the primary motivating factors.

Friendship. People who work together for hours a day over a long time period are likely to generate some degree of friendship. Camaraderie is all about shared values and interests, and close alliances often develop in the workplace.

So when there is a social gathering of people who work together, the spouses groan and beg, “Hey, let’s not talk shop tonight, okay?” “Talking shop” occurs because doing good work together is one of the common interests co-workers share.

However, sometimes the chemistry isn’t right. Co-workers don’t have to be friends, but there does have to be mutual respect and cooperation. If downright hostility exists between co-workers, the workplace won’t function in a healthy manner.

Problems also arise if friendships are too intense. For example, many organizations have struggled with how to deal with colleagues dating or with the politics of an overly friendly boss-subordinate relationship.

As a leader, one of your major responsibilities is to create a healthy workplace. When these three interdependent relationships are robust and in harmonious balance, the collective ability of an organization is awesome. When one or more of these dimensions is out of balance, relationships in the workplace suffer, and the organization’s performance deteriorates!

Ecclesiastes 4:12 declares, “A cord of three strands is not easily broken.” How healthy and balanced are the three component relationships (authority, collaboration, and friendship) in your workplace?