

Relationships in Your Workplace

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Sometimes workplace relationships are healthy. However, like many families, workplaces can be amazingly dysfunctional.

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

When relationships are less than healthy, I look for underlying causes. Individuals are usually quite willing to share their experiences. Because I'm an outsider who has been given permission to ask questions, people assume I have power to improve their culture.

I've adopted a structure for organizing the information people volunteer. If you are interested in improving your organization's culture--or just your relationships with your boss, colleagues, and direct reports--these three different aspects of workplace relationships may be of interest to you: authority, collaboration, and friendship.

Each of these intertwined relationships may be too strong or not strong enough. Problems occur when there is imbalance. It's so very easy for one of these three relationships to dominate and for one of the remaining two types of connection to be significantly deficient.

Let's take a brief look at each of the three kinds of relationships that healthy organizations have in an appropriate balance for their unique culture.

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, authorizes resources, and holds people accountable. 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. Awareness, 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 internal and external customers and enhancing the long-term health of the organization are the primary motivating factors.

In healthy organizations, every person is continually and intentionally thinking about improvement. Recent successes are celebrated together, and immediately collective thoughts are focused on how to make the latest accomplishments even more spectacular. People ask, "What did we do well?" and "What could we do better next time?"

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. The collective ability of an organization is awesome when these three interdependent relationships are robust and in harmonious balance. When one or more of these dimensions is out of balance, however, 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? What influence could you contribute to improving the balance?

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Editor’s Note: *Dennis Hooper has been writing weekly articles on the topic of leadership for the past nine years. He sends copies of those articles out to interested readers. If his articles in our newsletter have been of value to you, contact Dennis and ask him to add you to his distribution list.*