TRANSFORMING PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Practical processes are needed to manage professional relationships to ensure respect, trust, and partnership.

By Seth R. Silver

"By making and keeping promises to ourselves and others, little by little, our honor becomes greater than our mood."

Stephen Covey

Let's face reality: not everyone loves their job. The research over the past several years on employee engagement, voluntary turnover, and career transition all suggest that somewhere between 25 and 40 percent of the U.S. workforce is dissatisfied, and is actively looking to change jobs, or is at least open to other employment opportunities.

Even our fictionalized accounts of work life, seen in such comedies as *Office Space* or *The Office*, portray life at work as frustrating, trivial, and, at times, demeaning. These depictions hit close to home, otherwise they would not be funny. So what is the message?

For all of our supposed progress over the past 40 years on participative management, quality of work life, situational leadership, TQM, diversity, empowerment, customer first, seven habits, good to great, employee engagement, and more, we still have a long way to go before our workplaces are truly characterized by "dignity, meaning, and community." In other words, despite all of the books, seminars, and training on how to improve the work environment, the basic problem remains—a lot of people go home at night and complain about their boss, their colleagues, and their job.

One of the root causes of this fundamental dissatisfaction, I believe, lies in a factor that has been touched on in a few of the above theories and fads but that has never really been the focus. This factor is the quality of workplace relationships; specifically, how they are structured and how they are maintained.

Consider this fact: everyone has workplace relationships that are critical to their success and satisfaction at work. Everyone has a boss; almost everyone has teammates or customers. Groups and departments have relationships too, with other groups and departments. Even organizations have relationships—with partners, suppliers, and customers.

The point is that professional relationships are essential to our work. In effect, workplace relationships are like the threads of the fabric we call organizational life. They are everywhere: interwoven and stitched into what we do, and for whom we do it. For better or worse, workplace relationships greatly influence how we feel about our work, and how effective we are at that work.

The manager-team relationship is key

The one professional relationship that has the most impact on our experience of work is the relationship with our immediate supervisors. Research from numerous sources has demonstrated conclusively that the quality of interaction with one's boss is the single most important factor behind voluntary turnover, employee engagement, morale, work-related stress, our views of corporate culture, and even our performance.

Without question, this one relationship is central to improving the workplace. Not surprisingly, it is also a critical factor to a satisfied home life. When your relationship with your boss is not going well, and by extension, there is difficulty for us at work, the stress often spills over into how we behave with family and friends. Conversely, when things are going well with the boss and with work, it is far easier to be positive and happy at home.

So, given the importance, how do we improve the professional relationship between a manager and his direct reports? It starts with recognizing what goes on now, in most places, most of the time. The answer is: nothing. That is, in most organizations, when a team is given a new manager, or a new team is formed, there is no formal or structured process for establishing how they will work together; what they owe each other behaviorally; or how they will ensure their relationship stays on track and is mutually satisfying.

In most cases, the team simply starts. There may be some initial conversation about group goals or roles, and perhaps a few expectations the manager has of the team. But that is usually it. The accountability is almost always one-way— what the team owes the manager. This is the "manager as customer" model. It is the hierarchical model used in most organizations, and it sets the manager-team relationship off on the wrong foot because it implies that the team's needs or expectations are not important.

This is where the seeds of dissatisfaction, disengagement, and eventually turnover are sown. Strange as it seems, what the staff needs from the manager; what attitudes and behaviors would be helpful to motivate each other; and any practical advice on how to work well together for mutual success, is almost never shared.

A better model for this workplace relationship would be one that addresses the needs and wants of both the manager and the staff. It would be one in which both parties see each other as customers of one another; and where both sides share accountability for the success of the relationship, and achievement of common goals. In this model, both the manager and the staff would see themselves in service to each other, so that both can succeed and be satisfied.

It is worth noting that this proposed "manager and staff as customers to each other" model not only benefits the staff by giving legitimacy to their expectations, it also benefits the manager. As anyone who has supervised others knows, not all teams are highly committed, productive, or self-motivated. Nor, frankly, is every manager always focused on the satisfaction and success of the employees.

In contrast, in this model, the team collectively accepts shared accountability for performance goals and the relationship; and at the same time, the manager commits to her role to help the team succeed and be satisfied. As a result, both the team and the manager become partners on a path to mutual success.

A relationship flight plan

So, again, how do we help managers and their staff, or any two parties in a professional relationship, discuss and structure how they will work effectively together? What is needed is a practical process that enables both parties to identify mutual obligations and expectations; to engage in a safe, nonadversarial negotiation on how to work together; and to

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agree on a routine, professional (unemotional) review of the relationship so as to make adjustments as needed.

In effect, this would be a form of behavioral contracting; where both parties feel equal and respected; where implicit expectations can be openly discussed and made explicit; and where both parties can assess the relationship without embarrassment or retribution.

This plan deals specifically with interdependent professional relationships in an organizational context, and the inherent promises and commitments that are shared, negotiated, and agreed-upon are to be considered inviolable. Regardless of circumstance, the commitments outlined represent what each party promises to focus on, evaluate themselves on, and be evaluated on by the other party.

The covenants then become like a flight plan or compass, indicating the right behavioral direction to be taken by both parties in the relationship. Each party promises to refer to their plan routinely, and use it to stay on course in their interactions with the other.

So what might a manager include in his commitment to staff? In no particular order, some examples of appropriate managerial obligations could be

- providing coaching to help individuals develop
- offering resources and support so the team can do its job
- being a press agent for the team's accomplishments and helping them secure deserved recognition; to be open to input and feedback

- maintaining honesty and communicating information in a timely way
- understanding and being supportive of team members' personal lives
- helping the team determine goals, priorities, and trade-offs.

What might a staff include in its collective commitment to a manager? Some examples of appropriate team obligations could be

- working as a team to achieve agreed-upon goals
- providing the manager with timely information to help her make good decisions
- acting at all times in the best interest of the organization
- using scarce resources wisely
- identifying solutions, not just problems
- respecting and supporting the manager's decisions, even when the team's views differ
- offering helpful input and feedback
- refraining from negative gossip
- treating colleagues as they would customers.

Obviously, depending on the group and context, the list of obligations may be more or less detailed. The point is, these are not simply platitudes, or a list of clichéd best practices. They are a set of firm behavioral commitments that are developed uniquely by each party, then shared

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In effect, they are an explicit psychological agreement, rather than a formal legal contract. Though no one expects perfection, these documented promises are to be taken seriously, and adherence is a matter of professional honor and mutual respect.

In reviewing agreed-upon commitments after a few weeks, both parties come together to assess their own and the other party's adherence. They offer item-by-item feedback and advice, to themselves first and then to the other party, and then agree on behavioral changes to strengthen the relationship. This review becomes, in effect, a check-in to ensure both parties are adhering, and more importantly, to address any problem areas in the relationship that may be surfaced through the feedback. Ideally, a review is conducted every two months.

Who could benefit most?

Having a plan to transform your professional relationships is useful for four situations:

1 | **A manager wants to improve relations with her staff.** This is the "good to great" situation where proactive, continuous improvement is the goal. The process gives both parties the opportunity to clarify what they owe one another and how they will work together going forward. It also provides a structure for the professional exchange of feedback.

2 | **Two departments or groups that need or want to collaborate or communicate better.** Both parties have the opportunity to make their implicit expectations more explicit, and have these expectations understood and accepted. Once again, both parties would have a safe context and structure by which to review their working relationship and make changes as needed.

3 | **Managers who want to keep the momentum going after returning from leadership development.** Often, managers return from training and then lose focus on applying what they have learned. Going through the process would help them put into concrete terms what they can do to improve their leadership.

4 | **An important new team needs to get productive fast.** Most new teams go through the usual time-consuming stages of "forming, storming, norming, and performing." However, it takes most teams months, even years, to develop the levels of trust and cooperation found in the "performing" phase. A process to transform their relationships can save months of trial and error by helping the team get past the early stages in literally a few hours.

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Why the investment is worth it

There are many real benefits to developing and using the process detailed here. First, as suggested earlier, it creates the context and the structure for both parties to see themselves as partners, equally accountable for the goals and the health of the relationship. This is a critical point because, without covenants in place, many workplace relationships will operate based on emotion, perceived power, or personal preference. By default, such relationships will tend to be one-sided, with one party seen as more accountable and in control, and the other party feeling unequal and unheard.

Second, the process ensures the proactive professional exchange of both positive and constructive feedback between the parties. Both parties assess themselves and the other party on the performance of the behavioral items, with the goal of improving consistency and effectiveness. Over time, this helps both parties get in the habit of assessing their own behavior, and unemotionally giving and receiving feedback that is balanced and specific.

In many organizations, in the absence of covenants, behavioral feedback is rare, especially as it relates to professional relationships. And when it is offered, it tends to be negative, emotionally charged, and in response to a perceived problem.

A third benefit is that the workplace relationship is made self-correcting. That is, when issues or misunderstandings do inevitably arise, there is an established process in place, which both parties understand and feel safe with, to address the problem. This reduces the need for outside intervention.

Finally, respect, trust, and partnership are improved. Both parties come to understand the needs of the other, which improves empathy and respect. As both parties keep their promises over time, the level of mutual trust increases.

As feedback is exchanged, and both parties come to see that each is sincerely working to help the other, the levels of cooperation and partnership increase. In sum, the process works because both parties become more aligned, seeing their success and satisfaction as directly related to the success and satisfaction of their partner. **T+D**

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