The power of relationships in leadership

‘The meeting of two people is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.’ Carl Jung

Introduction

During the Leadership programme at Henley we encourage participants to develop their personal leadership skills, to motivate and influence others through a deeper understanding of themselves and the people they work with within the context of the challenges that they face. One important dimension of leadership is the relationships we have – and I believe there are both business and personal benefits to building really powerful relationships. Beyond leadership though, it is only through strong relationships between all employees that value is created.

My own career experience bears out this finding. I spent 21 years of my career working in a large global organisation with multiple points of contact in different parts and across more than 150 countries, each with different cultures. I always worked hard at building relationships (becoming known, affectionately I hope, as ‘Mr Networker’), but it was only later in my career that I learned how to ensure that the working relationships I had were really effective. There were two main drivers of my learning: the first was some feedback I received from two senior executives I worked closely with. They pointed out that I could take greater risks with the relationships I had with them and others because my opinion was respected and, if I were to challenge their decisions or points of view, the strength of our relationship would enable this to be received in a positive way. In other words, I could be more direct at putting my own point of view across without fear of damaging the strong relationship we already had.

The second was some individual work I did during an internal capability development programme, which provided time to reflect and helped me clarify my leadership purpose: to have a positive impact on everyone I come into contact with and help them to become everything they know they can be. It was the combination of feedback from others and taking time for personal reflection that helped me clarify my leadership strengths and become more successful at building strong and effective working relationships.

I was also fortunate that my company placed a great deal of emphasis on building and sustaining strong relationships as part of the standard it expected of its leaders. This focus continues to this day as part of their leadership performance assessment and development processes.

I believe that if you have a strong relationship with someone, it doesn’t mean that you have to be ‘buddy-buddy’ with them all the time – when there is a need to be direct, the strength of the relationship enables that to happen without harming it. My contention is that we all need to be excellent at building, nurturing and sustaining great relationships, both inside and outside our organisations.
The purpose of this paper is to share some points of view and learning about relationships at work. Although this covers any relationships we may be involved in, the audience for this paper is mainly leaders, therefore I will emphasise the leadership aspects of relationships. I will also share a useful model and a practical approach, which can be used for diagnosing relationships and identifying areas for improving them in order to produce performance breakthroughs in one’s own working environment.

**Some thinking about why we need strong relationships**

Robin Dunbar, the evolutionary anthropologist, talks about the way we interact socially, and the reasons for this (Dunbar, 2010). He says that the way in which our social world is constructed is part and parcel of our biological inheritance. Together with apes and monkeys, we are members of the primate family – and within the primates there is a general relationship between the size of the brain and the size of the social group. We fit in a pattern. There are social circles beyond it and layers within it, but there is a natural grouping of 150, which is the number of people you can have a close relationship with involving trust and obligation. He calls this the ‘Dunbar Number’.

These 150 close relationships worked well in community sizes designed for hunter-gatherer-type societies where people weren’t living on top of one another. Our problem now is the sheer density of communities. Our networks aren’t compact anymore – we have friends scattered around the world who don’t know one another, and we don’t have an interwoven network. This leads to a less well integrated society. The challenge is how to recreate that old sense of community in these new circumstances. Dunbar maintains that although technology can help us keep in touch, in the end we actually have to get together to make a relationship work.

Forming interpersonal relationships is a basic, inherent and inescapable part of being a leader. As Goffee & Jones (2006) say, we need to recognise that one of the three foundations of leadership is that it is relational. Leadership is not something you do to others; rather you do it with others. They point out that one cannot be a leader without followers – leaders are actively engaged in a complex series of relationships that require cultivation and nurture.

Bains et al (2007) maintain that the companies they would regard as iconically successful all have organisational cultures that are both demanding and relational. They believe that they have recognised the importance of a relational culture and are reaping the benefits by being ahead of the curve.

They also list the following business benefits when relationships are great:

- **Consistency without process is possible.** Process is important, but companies that excel in this area use relationships as much as possible to substitute for process.
- **Strong relationships and trust are the preconditions for nimbleness, risk-taking and innovation.** In all the companies that are leading edge, their relationship cultures create permission for people to take risks.
- **Great relationships are the key to effective execution – they are not the only enabler, but they play a huge part.**

There are also a number of personal benefits:

- **Relationships create a platform for your own personal growth.** When relationships are great, people give you the gift of feedback, which can help you grow.
- **Relationships can energise you and provide a sense of support.** When you have great relationships, the burdens are shared.
- **Great relationships create a sense of belonging.** We are a relational species and have a need for attachment. Work provides many people with this sense of belonging.
- **Relationships sustain us, and make our journeys enjoyable and fulfilling.**

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*Other people aren’t just a part of our environment, they are our environment. We are the most relational species on earth... Everything runs through relationships. Bains et al (2007)*
Bains et al (2007) also point to the importance of businesses partnering with external stakeholders. We all have important external relationships, and making these relationships powerful is critical to maximising value. The key is to find common purpose and mutual advantage.

We are social beings – working in a culture where there is a sense of belonging brings out the best in us. Robert E. Quinn, of the University of Michigan Ross School of Business, points out that within organisations, there can be a tendency to pay attention to the technical contribution of employees while ignoring their emotional outputs. This can be very costly because human beings exist in networks of relationships and, as they make connections with each other, the quality of the connections matter to them. A high-quality connection results in more energy and capacity to produce performance breakthroughs. High-quality connections can withstand more strain and are more likely to bounce back after disruption; they can absorb conflict and still continue.

Robert L. Cross, Salvatore Parise and Leigh M. Weiss, in an article in McKinsey Quarterly (2007) emphasised how companies should not focus so much on formal structures that they ignore the informal ones. The boxes and lines of organisation charts mask myriad relationships in networks that criss-cross the borders of functions, hierarchies and business units, and define how work gets done. By understanding networks that employees use to get work done, executives leading the organisation can harness them, rather than bump up against the power of invisible but highly influential webs of relationships.

Lynda Gratton, Professor of Management Practice at London Business School, in her book Hot Spots (2007) points out that we spend a good deal of our life working, and it is at work that we make friends, learn about ourselves, grow, develop and become innovative, energised and stimulated. We are able to create the positive energy that adds value to our companies by working co-operatively with others. She defines hot spots as places and times where co-operation flourishes, creating great energy, innovation, productivity and excitement – any place or time where people are working together in exceptionally creative and collaborative ways.

The issue of trust in relationships

Bains et al (2007) highlight the importance of trust in business leaders and of workers feeling that they operate in environments where trust exists. They suggest that trust within business has declined due to the prevalence of organisation changes – downsizing, restructuring etc. This has created a great deal of job insecurity, and resulted in a more competitive and potentially impersonal climate. The impact of this has been for people to deliberately distance themselves from their colleagues because of the competition for jobs, and the fear this produces. This is another reason why organisations should be placing more focus on ensuring they have trusting organisation cultures and are emphasising the building and nurturing of strong relationships among their people. Trust is a huge issue and can only be built through relationships. A major driver of trust is authenticity, which Goffee & Jones (2006) define as consistency between words and deeds. They believe that leaders who do what they say are more likely to be seen as ‘genuine’ and therefore authentic.

As Bains et al (2007) point out, people have learned to be inauthentic and so have those around them. An overly competitive working environment in which friendships fail to develop is one of the major sources of stress at work and one of the key reasons why talented employees leave a company. The leading-edge relational companies work hard to create belonging cultures that allow people to be authentically themselves, and they reap substantial rewards in the process. They also focus on developing people’s ability to develop strong, trusting relationships. This enables them to create alignment, execute effectively and instil the confidence in others to take risks.

Trust is a huge issue and it can only be built through relationships.

HR director
A model for diagnosing relationships

How has a deep relationship unlocked great performance for me and/or my business?

During the Henley Leadership programme participants are given the opportunity to reflect on their key relationships and the 360° feedback they have obtained. They also have the opportunity to receive some one-to-one coaching to help them think through the issues they feel they need to address in order to build their relationships and further strengthen their leadership skills.

There is a simple but useful model that views the elements of relationships as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. This model can be helpful whether we are starting a relationship, diagnosing the current status of a relationship or trying to identify opportunities for breakthroughs in a relationship. We can use it to think about the status of the relationship in each dimension. The four pieces of the jigsaw are interdependent – all four components have to be there – and we need to connect genuinely with people on all of the four dimensions to have a chance of a great 10/10 relationship. The model can be applied to all our relationships – internal, external and outside of work.

Real relationships

There are four dimensions: understanding and empathy; respect; positive intent; and trust and candour.

Understanding and empathy

This requires a deep appreciation of the other person and their context. We find it difficult to really step into another’s shoes, and rarely see the world from another person’s point of view. We sometimes decide what somebody is like without probing their deeper motivations and goals, and can be dismissive of people whose emotions, feelings and reactions are different to our own.

The core assumption to have in this area is that people are difficult to understand. We must work hard to empathise with feelings that we ourselves don’t experience. The reality is people are very quick to intuitively judge people, very quick to put people in boxes.

Respect

People are really quick to pick up on the amount of respect we have for them. In psychology they refer to it as the ‘waiter test’, which is to look at how somebody treats a waiter in a restaurant. We should ask ourselves how we relate to the vast bulk of people – do we show that we respect people? We should remember that respect has to be earned.

A further dimension of respect is that relationships can be difficult if we do not feel good about ourselves – so the respect is not only towards others, but to ourselves.
Positive intent

The core assumption behind this mindset is that relationships are not about winning and losing. We should go into relationships with the positive intent of creating mutual advantage, of seeing the possibility in the other person, seeing what you can do for them, and being there for them.

Trust and candour

When you have deep understanding and respect, you’re in a position to be very open with your views and emotions. In real life we often hold back from it, don’t want to take the risk or face differences directly. So candour is an incredibly powerful aspect of real 10/10 relationships. The other critical factor here is the consistency between agreed and actual behaviours. Trust is built not through words but through actions. It is difficult promises kept in difficult situations that build trust.

So the core assumption behind trust and candour is: do you care so much that you put everything on the table? And do you behave consistently – do your behaviours match your actions?

In summary then, using this relationship jigsaw we can go beyond the work content to understand one another’s circumstances, motivation and feelings. We can demonstrate respect for the person, not forgetting that it’s a two-way street – for them to feel confident in you, you need to demonstrate you feel good about yourself. And the hardest of all is to care so much that you don’t care what you say, and put everything on the table.

So if this model resonates with you, it can be used when you consider the quality of any relationships you have. You can use it to think about the relationship by asking yourself where you think the relationship stands against each of these dimensions, where you think they should stand in order to have a really strong 10/10 relationship, as well as what can be done to improve the relationship.

An approach for diagnosing and improving our key relationships

I am sure we can all think of examples of how a strong relationship has unlocked great performance for us or for our business. Let’s look at how we can take the model and look at our key relationships to see how we can evaluate them and either understand what makes them strong, or identify where they may be improved. This can be done as a private, individual exercise to decide which areas to target for improvement in relationships and what actions to take. Alternatively, if the model is widely used in your organisation, it can also be used to prepare for a discussion with each individual about the quality of your relationship as you both see it, and to agree areas for improvement.

The starting point is to prepare our relationship map – this is a list or diagram showing the people critical to effectiveness and success in our roles. In times of rapid change, relationships may become more important, disrupted or unclear, so relationship mapping helps to identify key relationships, examine what they are like currently, clarify their ideal state and develop plans to improve them. Write down the names of the most important relationships (normally 6 to 10) and record the current state of each relationship by assigning a score out of 10 to each relationship, considering the four dimensions of the model individually and then together, using the scores below:

- 1–2: really can hardly talk/interact with this person
- 3–4: basic courtesy and can discuss just top-level stuff
- 5–6: have some meaningful interaction but mostly transactional
- 7–8: can share my thoughts and feel safe
- 9–10: committed to each other and able to be really vulnerable

Imagine having 10/10 quality relationships with each of the people on your relationship map. The motivation, the learning, the performance opportunities that this will unlock are for me the most inspiring outcome we can achieve together.

General manager
Anything scoring less than 8/10 probably needs some work. Consider how you feel differently about a relationship that is 5/10, 8/10, 10/10. Where does the relationship sit against each of the dimensions of the model and when you consider the relationship as a whole? Describe what each relationship will look like when it is working well and what actions you plan to take to develop each relationship.

The following two questions may help you as you consider each relationship:

1. What are the barriers I face in building a real relationship with this person?
2. How can I accelerate breakthroughs in this relationship?

Working through each dimension of the model can help us identify barriers and focus on areas to work on for improving each relationship. We can ask ourselves, ‘Do I appreciate this person and their context? Do I show this person that I respect them? Do I put everything on the table with this person and keep my promises to this person? Do I approach this person with positive intent?’ In each case we can also ask what it would take to improve the relationship.

Having done this preparation it is then possible for us to start taking actions from our side that we feel will improve the relationships, or even have discussions with people to share our views and jointly identify areas for improvement. Having shared our view, we can ask, ‘Where do you think our relationship is against the dimensions of the model? Do you trust me? Do you feel we are aligned? How do we take our relationship forward to 8/10, 10/10? How can we continue to enhance our relationship?’ Recognise that you may need to ‘give’, as you may be on someone else’s list!

If you do have some relationships that are rated lower, do not feel that you have to get them to 8/10 or 10/10 immediately. You can build the relationship by initially moving, for example, from 5/10 to 6/10, and then continuing in small steps. Also bear in mind that it is only your own behaviour and perceptions that you are in control of – the other person will pick up on the shifts they see you make.

It does take some courage and potentially risk-taking to enter into this dialogue with people, particularly where there may not be a strong relationship currently, but the payoff is huge in terms of relationship and performance breakthroughs.

**Final thoughts**

Relationships are two-way streets – it takes two to have a relationship and both need to be equally invested. It takes commitment – you need to invest not just for the short term, but also for the big outcomes. It will not be a smooth journey – there will be moments of tension as well as hard-to-have conversations. There can be no pulling of punches with regard to difficult conversations. We have to translate all the benefits of great relationships into breakthrough performance. Great relationships that don’t deliver great performance aren’t great relationships.

There is no limit to how great a relationship could be when there is positive intent – and it doesn’t necessarily take a long time to create a great connection. There is also the possibility of re-evaluating people of whom you may have formed a poor impression in the past. The key is having the courage to really connect with the person.

The power of an organisation committing itself to having amazing relationships internally and externally is something to give careful thought to. Imagine the potential for unlocking performance breakthroughs and growth if everyone is focused on the breakthrough outcomes that can be achieved together for mutual advantage, and on bringing out the best in everyone they come into contact with.

Leaders have a major role to play not only in maintaining their own relationships, but also in stimulating the creation of personal networks and friendships that encourage others to value the relational element of the organisation and the maintenance of networks within and beyond their organisation.
References

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Further reading on relationships:

- Bolton, B & Bolton, D G (2018) People Styles at Work... and Beyond, 2nd edition. AMACOM
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Graham also runs his own independent coaching practice, which focuses on individual and leadership development, building on his many years of experience coaching senior leaders in the corporate environment. He has a BA Hons in Industrial & Organisational Psychology and is a Graduate Member (MBPsS) of the British Psychological Society (BPS).

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