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Three Myths About Building Powerful Relationships

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Over the past 30 years, we have had the opportunity to observe thousands of coaching relationships in environments ranging from the corridors of business to the world of Olympic sport. We have seen destructive relationships, instructive relationships, and truly great relationships. We have seen relationships so powerful that people would walk through fire to achieve a goal they have set with their coach—and come out the other side stronger, confident, and ready to go after the next big thing.

We have also seen the opposite: coaches who leave their charges hollowed out, disillusioned, and their relationship in tatters. Robert Golembiewski's research with over 4,000 employees diagnosed with burnout revealed that the number one cause of burnout was the relationship the person had with their immediate supervisor.

In organizations, the quality of personal relationships is often perceived as something that may or may not unfold depending on personalities. We'd like to shed light on three myths about relationships inside organizations, and propose some best practices for turning relationships into a driver of great results.

MYTH #1: RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE CONCERN OF INDIVIDUALS, NOT ORGANIZATIONS

So we know that a negative relationship with a manager causes burnout. We also know that a strong relationship between a manager and team creates tremendous motivation enhancing both performance and productivity. To quote the very eloquent coach of the Canadian National Women's Soccer Team, John Herdman: "People do things for people; not for things."

If relationships have such a powerful influence on a team's engagement and ultimately performance, then why don't we treat them like we do other business assets—to be invested in, and cultivated by the organization? And who is in the best position to steward these important assets on behalf of the organization? Managers.

Managers often feel that much of their environment is out of their control. There is a formal environment (organizational structure, job descriptions, policies, etc.) and it's true they have very little control here. There is also the social environment (how we treat one another) over which they have some control. But there's a third environment over which they have the most control: the psychological environment. The relationship a manager forms with his team or direct reports is what creates the psychological environment in which people work.

Psychologically safe environments, combined with high expectations, are what allow people to take risks, fully engage and stay motivated. Indeed, Google's re:work research into their own teams' effectiveness identified psychological safety as the number one factor 'by far' on high performing teams. And nothing else in the organization can create the same sense of safety as a powerful relationship with a manager. Great coaches and managers alike are able to move people beyond what they believe they can do, and handle more pressure than they thought they could handle, because of the psychological safety a powerful relationship creates.

So, rather than leaving relationships to chance, shouldn't organizations arm their managers with the tools to create psychological safety through building strong relationships? Relationships have the potential to create value for the organization if well cultivated (or destroy value if left to chance).

MYTH #2: RELATIONSHIPS REQUIRE THE 'RIGHT' PERSONALITIES TO GEL

One reason relationships may be ignored as an organizational asset is because there's a presumption that they can't be purposefully constructed—that they are a function of individual personalities and personality is hard to influence. As a result, leaders are not given much guidance on how to form or cultivate powerful relationships.

It's not that personality doesn't matter at all. We know that there are certain managers you could put in any department and morale would go up, productivity would go up, and engagement will go up. But it's not about having the right personality. It's about knowing how to work with the one you have.

There are many roads to Rome and there are many different personalities among great leaders. A person's personality does not need to be a block. In fact learning to work with your personality rather than trying to change it or fight it is the best way to go (see Myth #3 for more on this). The best builders of powerful relationships are purposeful about using tools and tactics to enhance their relationships. They constantly monitor the climate they're creating, the level of trust that exists, and they take concerted action to build powerful relationships one interaction at a time.

MYTH #3: GOOD RELATIONSHIPS FORM BY GETTING TO KNOW THE OTHER PERSON

Understanding and getting to know others is critical to facilitating high performance. But the best relationship-builders are acutely self-aware—they get to know **themselves** so that they can anticipate and manage their impact on others. Good leaders fully appreciate their strengths, and they also know their darker sides. Leaders need assistance in gaining insights about their personality and how best to leverage it given their environment. They need tools that increase self-awareness and the ability to connect at a powerful level.

It's an interesting paradox: I learn more about myself so I can focus better on others. And by focusing on the development of others I create high performing environments in which people feel safe, take on more pressure and risk, and grow through the process.

There has never been a time when the power of a relationship has not enhanced performance, engagement and resilience. But what is going on right now that increases the urgency around building powerful relationships at work?

COACHING MILLENNIALS

It has not escaped us that there is a new generation bringing their values into the work environment. And while we aren't fans of labels like 'millennials' that cut a wide swath, we have had a lot of requests for how to engage this cohort. Relationship building speaks directly to millennials. They are often idealistic, socially conscious, achievement oriented, and vocal. We want to make sure we tap into that energy and focus it. The most efficient way to become attuned to someone's deeper aspirations is through a relationship. It is within the context of an authentic relationship that people feel seen and heard.

RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF DISRUPTION

Technology and changing social norms are dramatically reshaping the work environment. Uncertainty and pressure to adapt quickly is going to create, and in many quarters, is already creating, anxiety in the workplace; for leaders as well as employees. As anxiety always decreases the level of productivity in any team, a major task for leaders is to balance the uncertainty of change with increased certainty in other areas—creating spaces where people can feel safe. The relationship a manager has with their direct reports can create a consistent and significant space where safety is experienced.

THE DISCIPLINE OF BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS – FIVE CORE PRACTICES

Our model for building powerful relationships was developed as a result of research with great coaches and extensive experience observing coaches—particularly in environments characterized by significant pressure. Some of the practices we recommend will feel intuitive; others may feel surprising. However, all of these practices are common across the coaches we admire. They allow leaders in any field to communicate respect, excitement, empathy and optimism. This combination of skills enables leaders to imbue meaning, create growth, and foster collaboration in the face of both big challenges and the daily grind.
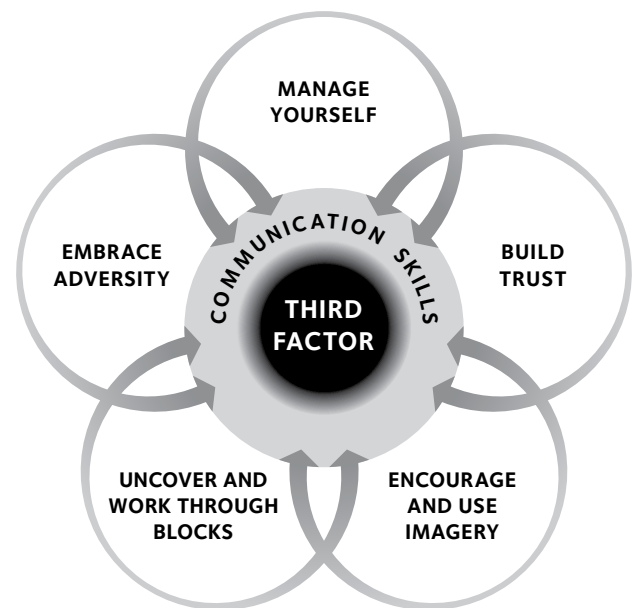
PRACTICE 1: MANAGE YOURSELF

"Manage yourself so others won't have to."
— JOHN WOODEN

Knowing how to manage others, especially when under pressure, requires insight. Individual managers often lack an understanding of the effect their behaviour has on the team. They may see negative results on engagement surveys but they don't know how to fix them. Leaders who are selected or coached to understand how their personality really influences the people who work for them, and are given skills for having conversations that engage people, tend to have a better shot at creating strong relationships; especially with highly motivated people.

"The best way to make a man trust-worthy is to trust him." – HENRY STIMSON

When individuals do not trust their manager they can have a variety of reactions: anxious, cynical, cautious. People go into a protective mode. Trust is something everyone knows is important to a relationship, but very few people develop action plans for building it. People who build great relationships consciously create opportunities to build trust. Here are a couple of non-obvious ways to do that:

1. Respect what team members know. If the people doing the job can't come up with better, more efficient ways of doing their job, then who can? Let employees demonstrate their competence. When you make a conscious decision to show deference and appreciation for someone else's expertise, they let down their guard, feel appreciated and are more inclined to trust you.

2. Plan their progression and stay tuned. When people see you investing in their growth and success, they feel more connected to you. By supporting them to get to the next step—not just the end goal—they will recognize your desire to help them be successful. Make appropriate interventions that do not rescue but rather build competence and resilience.

"Imagery is the language of performance." – PETER JENSEN

How is using imagery connected to building relationships? Again, it's not obvious, but some of the best relationship-builders we know develop the capacity to help others 'see' the possibilities.

Imagination is a form of knowledge. It tells us what is possible. People cannot do what they cannot see. As John Kotter has said, the path to high performance, innovation and change is not 'Analyze → Think → Act', it is 'See → Feel → Act'. People need to see the goal in their mind first. Images are what evokes emotion. Emotion drives motivation, not facts. We need to tell compelling stories and create resonant metaphors. When we interact with someone who can help us 'see' an exciting or meaningful path; that up's our game, we feel more connected—to the goal and to them as individuals.

"What's in the way, is the way." – LAO TSU

Nothing builds relationships faster than our willingness to explore the elusive but powerful ways in which we get in our own way. Create an environment that is conducive to people talking about their blocks. Initiate the conversation. How can we help our employees get better if they are busy hiding what they need to learn from us—and we are busy colluding with them because we don't have the time, or we are scared to open 'that can of worms'? The overarching goal is to build self-awareness and self-responsibility in the performer; to engage them in directing their own development. When they see us willing to invest in that way, their bond to us strengthens.

"The timid are caught as quickly as the bold." – HELEN KELLER

As a leader, when adversity hits, you have a tremendous opportunity to strengthen your relationship with your people. Being the person who helps someone navigate adversity with an eye to growth and wellbeing is a great way to build lasting trust. In a Google survey of over 10,000 Google employees on what makes a good manager—the number one quality cited could be summed up with the words 'even keel'. Standing beside people through adversity with a calm guiding hand is one of the most effective ways to build a powerful relationship.

SUMMARY

When Mercer – Sirota, a global analytics firm measuring and addressing organizational engagement, ran analyses of their data from thousands of entries worldwide they found that "somewhere in the region of 30% of employee engagement is related to the personality of the employee and a whopping 70% is in the hands of the leaders and managers."

Seventy. Percent. If employee engagement is so heavily reliant on leaders and managers, then relationships between leaders/managers and employees should be a top priority in every organization. And here's another paradox: as a leader is supported to achieve goals by focusing on the development of powerful relationships with others, the leader also challenges him/herself to become a better and bigger human being. Now **that's** engaging.

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