

Building Effective Working Relationships

Building effective workplace relationships is an extremely important skill for any employee. The strength of our relationship-building skills can affect our ability to negotiate effectively, deliver projects and meet deadlines. Here we outline the fundamental aspects of successful working partnerships and offer some practical suggestions on how to further develop your existing relationships at work.

Respect

A mutual respect between individuals should underpin all working relationships. Demonstrating respect is fundamental to gaining trust and will form the foundations of a relationship in which ideas and opinions can be shared openly. Respect can be earned in a number of ways:

- **Treat one another as equals.** Even in relationships in which individuals have different levels of organisational seniority, colleagues should treat each other equally. 'Pulling rank' can make others in the relationship feel less valued.
- **Share your knowledge** with your colleagues. Offer them the benefit of your experience and encourage them to do the same.
- **Recognise the achievements of others** and make them aware that you value the contribution they make to your working relationship.
- **Be honest.** Committing to unrealistic time frames, or making promises that can't be kept can be very damaging to working relationships. Be upfront with your colleague if you face constraints on time or resources, and suggest an alternative solution that is more achievable.

Understanding

Taking the time to understand your colleagues can be of real benefit to your working relationships. This means taking the time to learn what motivates and drives them to achieve their goals. Understanding can be developed in a number of ways, for example by:

- **Arranging an introductory meeting** when you start working with someone for the first time to establish what you can expect from one another in the working relationship.
- **Establishing shared objectives** when embarking upon a new project or initiative to allow you to work towards a common goal.
- Using **active listening skills** during meetings and discussions. Active listening means listening intently to what someone is saying and making it clear to them throughout that you have heard and understood them.
- Finding out what each others' **strengths** are so you can agree on how best to share responsibilities when approaching tasks together.

External working relationships

In many organisations, developing relationships with people who do not work in the same location as you (e.g. colleagues based elsewhere, clients and suppliers) is a key aspect of working life. In these situations, face-to-face contact is often limited, or simply not possible, so it can take a little longer to build relationships. Suggestions for conducting successful relationships in this context are outlined below:

- Where possible, try to arrange at least one **face-to-face meeting** at the beginning of the relationship, to establish rapport.
- Without visual cues, it is easier to misunderstand someone when you are communicating by phone or email so ensure you maintain a **straightforward communication style** and avoid making comments that could be misinterpreted.
- **Check understanding** and any agreed actions at the end of phone calls. Make it clear in emails that you are available if further information is required.
- **Maintain regular contact** to keep the relationship on track. A short 'how are things?' email or quick courtesy phone call can work wonders in helping to maintain a healthy working relationship.
- Always apply the same levels of **professionalism** as you would to internal relationships. Your conduct reflects your organisation as well as you.

Addressing differences

It is inevitable that, at some point, you will encounter challenges in your working relationships. When a difficult situation occurs, it is important that it is addressed promptly. There are number of ways you can do this, for example:

- Have an **open conversation** with the person concerned. This may seem awkward at first, but failing to address problems can lead to more serious issues. Outline your concerns concisely, supporting your points with examples. Stress your commitment to the relationship and your wish to find a solution that works for you both.
- **Listen carefully** to your colleague's point of view and take their comments on board. Clarify any actions you or your colleague might need to take to help the relationship get back on track.
- **Avoid the temptation** to badmouth your colleague or approach the issue with their manager before you have discussed it with them personally. If you are unsure whether speaking to your colleague directly is the right thing to do, take the advice of someone you trust in the organisation, such as another manager or director.

And finally ...

There are a number of things you can do to make your existing working relationships even more effective. These can include:

- **Establishing a set of values** or 'ground rules' for yourself and applying them to every working relationship you develop. Adopt a consistent approach and aim to achieve the same degree of trust, respect and understanding with every person you work with.
- Asking the people with whom you work most closely to **provide you with some feedback** on your working relationship and highlight anything they might like you to do differently. Agree on steps you can both take to improve the relationship, if necessary.
- Identifying someone within your professional network who has strong relationship-building skills and asking them to **coach or advise** you on how you can improve your own approach to developing relationships.
- Strengthening your relationships by aiming to **get to know your colleagues** better outside the workplace. Attend social events and group activities, when you have the opportunity, to build rapport and spend time with your colleagues in a more relaxed setting.

Conclusion

Whether you are working with someone who sits next to you or someone who works on the other side of the world, building relationships is crucial to achieving your objectives and those of your organisation. A successful relationship is built on trust, respect and understanding, and requires ongoing investment from both parties. When difficulties arise in the relationship, they should be addressed openly and in a professional manner to ensure the relationship continues to develop.