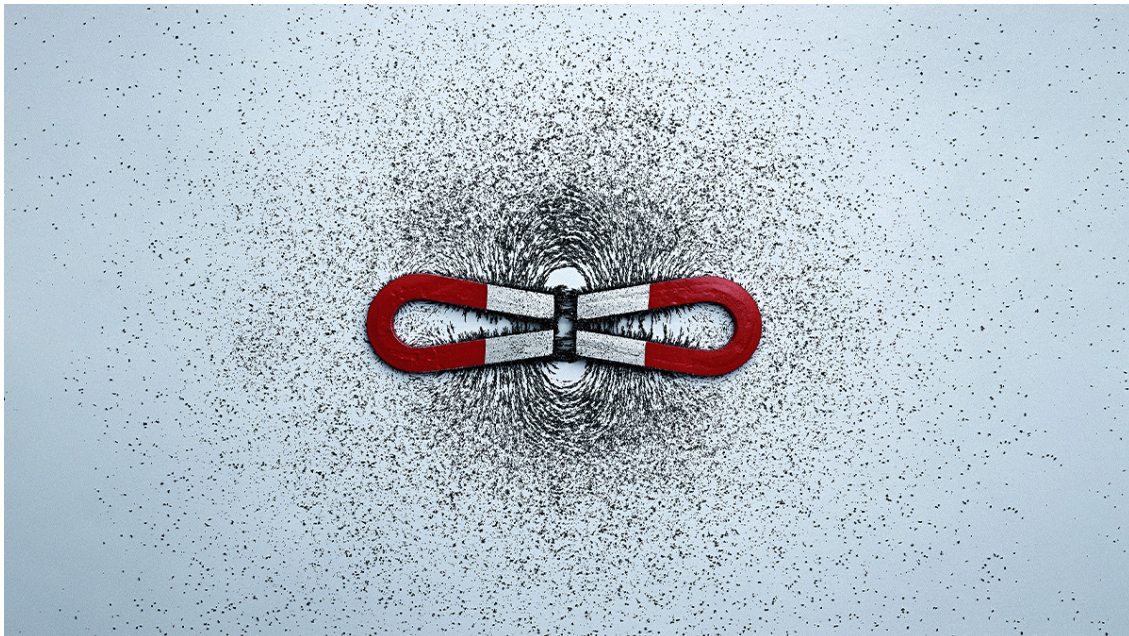


3 Traits of a Strong Professional Relationship

by Darin Rowell

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Summary. Positive work relationships have three traits in common: Colleagues understand what the relevance of their relationship is; they understand whether, and why, they are transactional or transformative; and they are committed to maintaining the relationship... [more](#)

If you haven't yet built powerful relationships at work — the type that can be trusted both to endure and to deliver results when needed — it's time to start. Research shows that your ability to empathize with, connect with, and influence others is a pivotal skill for success. But time and again in my work with leaders across industries and geographies, I've seen people struggle with how to build those relationships.

I recently worked with an executive who had been asked to lead a major change initiative in her company. Although she was well known and well regarded in her organization, she had given little thought to exactly what she needed from her professional relationships. “I was always mindful of the importance of healthy relationships, but I never invested the time to really think through the mutual value in a relationship or how to achieve it,” she told me.

She then described how developing three traits — a shared relevance, an understanding of the type of relationship needed, and a commitment to pursuing it even when times get tough — shifted how she interacted with her colleagues. “Once we had a common vision of how the relationship was important to us both, it made it much easier to remain intentional — the interactions seemed to just flow more naturally,” she said.

I’ve observed these traits again and again and have seen how powerful leaders use them to cultivate powerful relationships. But doing so takes intentionality and repetition.

Let’s look at these three traits more closely.

A clear purpose. Our relationships are based on how we are connected, related, and specifically relevant to one another. Rather than leave this open to assumption, leaders must develop the confidence and the skill to discuss and establish a clear basis and intent for their relationships. Having a shared understanding of why the relationship matters provides a critical foundation that can be built upon and used as a touchstone when difficulties inevitably arise.

An understanding of the type of relationship needed. Just as it’s important to recognize that relationships need a clear basis, it’s also important to realize that relationships can take many forms. It’s helpful to think about relationships along a spectrum. On one end of the spectrum are transactional relationships, where a minimum level of interaction, interdependence, or familiarity

are at play. As an example, think about stopping into a convenience store to buy a bottle of water or a pack of almonds. You and the cashier both have a minimum set of requirements and expectations. Even if you stop by the same store on a weekly basis, a simple transaction can fulfill the needs of the relationship.

Along the middle of the spectrum are interdependent relationships. These include a higher degree of expectation in areas such as shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect. Examples of interdependent relationships include members of surgical and post-operative care teams or sales engineers and manufacturing teams. In these examples, each side of the relationship depends on the other for individual and mutual success.

Still further along the spectrum are transformational relationships. Transformational relationships are characterized by the level of influence, mutuality, and vulnerability that is allowed and nurtured. In these relationships, we need to be sufficiently curious and open to the other's point of view, and to the possibility that their beliefs will directly impact our own. Each person needs to be willing to hold the other person accountable to higher standards, even when it's uncomfortable. That can mean being willing to initiate what might be a difficult conversation. But it also means being open to being on the receiving end of the same types of conversations.

It's important to remember that no one type of relationship is better or more important than another. The key is to become adept at identifying and developing the type of relationship that best fits a given circumstance.

A commitment to pursuing the relationship even when times get tough. Powerful relationships do not emerge overnight nor are they destroyed overnight; they are robust and resilient. Powerful relationships still have their bouts of discord and disagreement. The difference, I find, is that each person remains

mindful of the overall significance of the relationship and is willing to give the other person the benefit of the doubt. For example, a client of mine recently told me about a disagreement he had with a peer from another division. “There are times when she and I could not be more on opposite ends of an issue,” he said. “I’ve gotten so pissed at her that I had to wait 24 hours before I reengaged. And I know that she’s had to do the same with me. But at the end of the day, we’ve developed a lot of pocket change in our relationship. I value the relationship a lot more than a disagreement on any one issue.”

Further into the conversation with the same client, he made the point that sometimes the balance of investment may be unilateral, or there may be a situation where one person is investing more in the relationship than the other during a given period of time. The difference, he said, is that through the good times and the bad, “You have to remember why the relationship is important and always assume positive intent. I always know at some point [the relationship] will balance out.”

The executive I described at the beginning of this article also found a lot of value in discussing future conflict with her colleagues. Once they agreed on the type of relationship they would co-create and why it mattered, they focused on how they would stay committed, even during disagreements. “We started with the assumption that at some point we may get sideways on an issue. So rather than waiting until that happened, we went ahead and discussed how we would handle future disagreements. I think that talking through this up front left us both feeling like we had established a much stronger foundation for the future.”

Identify the five relationships that have the most influence on your success. For each relationship, ask yourself three questions:

- Have you and your colleague discussed and agreed on a clear purpose for your relationship?

- What type of relationship (transactional, interdependent, or transformational) is most appropriate?
- How does commitment or the lack of commitment show up in the relationship?

Now that you've reflected on your relationships, consider which ones need work. Are there specific actions you can take to strengthen the relationship? Are there missing conversations that you need to initiate? Taking the time to strengthen your weaker relationships will help you deliver strong results even in difficult circumstances.

Darin Rowell, EdD, is a senior advisor and executive coach who helps individuals and teams thrive in high-demand environments. His clients range from CEOs of high-growth companies to Division I head coaches. In addition to his advisory work, Darin is an active researcher in the area of executive performance and resilience.

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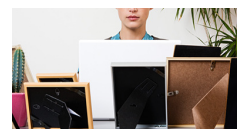
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