Fostering High-Quality Connections
How to Deal with Corrosive Relationships at Work by JANE DUTTON

You’ve sweated to prepare a grant report, working hard to make the case that your latest foundation offering will provide critical support. Your nonprofit desperately needs the grant renewal, but this time around, the competition is unusually stiff. You've put in late nights, lots of coffee. You can't help but feel nervous as you enter a meeting with the foundation program officer.

The officer acknowledges you with a disinterested nod. Seemingly preoccupied, he asks you to start your presentation. While you’re talking, he barely makes eye contact. When you finish, he offers a perfunctory “Nice job”—though you're not even sure he’s heard you.

If this scene sounds familiar, you are not alone. For many organizations, disrespectful engagement such as this is the norm. Extent of incivility in the workplace is disturbing. A recent poll believed workplace incivility was a serious problem, and 1 in 5 respondents in another survey said it was getting worse. According to another study, one-third of 500 nurses had been verbally abused during their previous five days at work.

Often, the telltale signs that an organization is not a good place to work appear the moment a new employee takes a job. Consider the experience of an executive sales consultant, reported recently in the Wall Street Journal: “The day he hired on, he was told, ‘I’m putting you on a new hire, the partner said, ‘I don’t know if he’s any good. Somebody try him out and let me know.’”

In a meeting, a partner treated him like a piece of furniture. Pointing him out as a new hire, the partner said, “I don’t know if he’s any good. Somebody try him out and let me know.”

Conveying Presence is being present with another person.

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means being psychologically available, turning one's attention to another. Attention is a precious commodity—it is easily consumed, deflected, or distracted.

When individuals direct attention toward each other and away from distractions, they activate an energizing sense of mutual connection. A five-minute conversation can make all the difference in the world if the parties participate actively," wrote Edward Hallowell, psychiatrist and author of the book "Connect: 12 Vital Ties That Open Your Heart, Lengthen Your Life, and Deepen Your Soul.

"To make it work," Hallowell wrote, "you have to set aside what you're doing, put down the memo you were reading, disengage from your laptop, abandon your daydream, and bring your attention to bear upon the person you are with."

When people converse at work, the positive emotion doesn't come from the talking. "The delight in conversation comes not from making sense," says social psychologist Joost Meerloo, "but from making contact."

One organization that understands the value of conveying presence is the Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine Research, The Ann Arbor, Mich.-based Institute, founded in 1998 with a National Institutes of Health grant, investigates alternative therapies for cardiovascular disease. When my daughter Cara arrived for her summer internship in 2002, she was greeted by an assigned "advocate," a personal organizational tutur of sorts, who was available to help her decipher the institutional culture. The advocate ensured that Cara would have access to interesting work, in part by introducing her to the "right" people. With the advocate at her side, each person Cara met encouraged her to provide input, and express interest in her as an individual, providing her with dozens of personal contact points.

**Being Genuine**

To engage respectfully, bosses and subordinates must remove "frosts" by speaking and reacting honestly—in part because people are generally good "authenticity detectors." When people act nice by edit, it does not foster quality connection, no matter how well intentioned. At one Michigan hospital, for example, administrators implemented what they called the "five feet, 10 feet rule": Employees were required to say "hello" to three within five feet, and to smile at all those who passed within 10. Rather than foster mutual respect, the regulation aired disrespect and cynicism.

Contrast this with the experience of employees at the Foote Hospital in Jackson, Mich. Several years ago, when a hospital employee lost three close relatives, her colleagues spontaneously banded together and lobbied to change personnel rules so that they could donate vacation and personal time. Administrators agreed, and eventually formulated a time donation program, allowing employees to give their vacation days to one another in times of need.

**Five Ways to Foster Respect in the Workplace**

**TOOL**

**Convey Presence** by focusing attention on your co-workers or employees.

**Be Genuine** by signaling to employees that you truly care.

**Communicate Affirmation** by searching for and acknowledging an employee's positive core.

**Listen Effectively** by blocking out distractions and being responsive.

**Supportive Communication**—express views while minimising defensiveness, threats, or negative comparisons.

**APPLICATION**

Assign a personal advocate to greet new hires and "show them the ropes."

Adopt a personnel policy allowing employees to donate vacation and personal days to colleagues in need.

When pulling a team together, take time during introductions to talk about each person's unique strengths.

When someone has finished speaking, paraphrase the main points, seek clarification, and solicit feedback on how well you have listened.

Say what you want, not what you don't want. Keep requests specific, rather than evaluative.
The progress signaled that the hospital and its employees were genuinely caring. In organizations that have such programs, respectful engagement often thrives.

Communicating Affirmation
Organizations that affirm employee value are breathing grounds for high-quality connections. This means going beyond simply being present to searching for the "divine spark in another" — that is their positive core — and recognizing it publicly.

For most leaders, the notion of recognizing worthy employers is hardly groundbreaking. Yet, according to one study, more than half of North American workers say they are never recognized for a job well done. A similar percentage report they don't get any recognition — even for outstanding performance.  

Organizations offer endless opportunities for genuine, transformative affirmation. One of the most creative I have seen took place recently at an Internet startup in Ann Arbor, Marty Johns, head of product development, took the occasion of a team's first meeting to have "introductions." But rather than having colleagues introduce themselves, he introduced each team member personally, offering his take on their unique talents, perspectives, and human qualities. He spoke about what he appreciated in each person, saying about one team member, "I brought Devon on to the team because of his deep insightfulness about our customers, as well as his quick wit and humor — critical resources for us when we are on deadline." About another, he explained: "We are privileged to have Jocelyn on our team. Her standards are impeccable, her integrity a beacon to us all." The introductions took 20 minutes, and left several people visibly embarrassed, but it turned an ordinary welcome into a foundation for respectful engagement.

Effective Listening
Listening is a form of respectful engagement, but effective listening requires effort — especially at high-energy nonprofits, where distractions are the norm.

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While people can comprehend an average of 600 spoken words per minute, speech usually flows at 100 to 150 words per minute. The gap is one of the reasons people at work have a hard time listening. Their minds search for other things to keep them busy. In addition, listeners too often focus on their own goals for a given conversation, instead of hearing what another person is saying. Many people listen as if waiting for an opportunity to make their own point.

Listening that engages respectfully has two features: It is empathetic and active. Empathetic listening is centered on the speaker, with the aim of learning about his or her point of view. Active listeners, meanwhile, are responsive listeners. There are several ways to listen responsively. First, paraphrase — expressing in your own words what you just heard someone say ("Are you saying that we are not going to meet our fundraising objectives this quarter?"). Second, summarize, or try to pull together the complicated flow of a conversation in a few "bulletted" points ("So you need more resources, more time, and more direction to fin- ish the strategic plan?"). Third, clarify, asking questions and inquiring to ensure you understand the full picture ("What do you mean when you say you want to be more engaged in our programming?"). Finally, solicit feedback ("Do you get the sense I'm hearing you?").

Supportive Communication
Respectful engagement also depends on how we communicate — what we say, how we say it, and how well we are understood. Supportive communication expresses views and opinions while minimizing defensiveness and maximizing clarity. Contrast that with unsupportive speech: screams, negative comparisons, threats, dragging up the past, or framing debates as "win-lose" interactions. These forms of communication hinder a person's ability to tune in and understand a message. One way to ensure that communication is supportive is to make requests not demands. This can be tricky, because in the workplace, the goal of communication is often for

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4 Maguire, L.J. "Response to a Key Organizational Concern," Business Ethics Quarterly 11, no. 4 (October 2001).
9 Employer agreed to talk to me about their experiences condition that the hospital that he named.
12 Nazarian and the source are unknown.
16 Rozanski, J., "Lamb Stily, but Has a Big Heart, Anx Congress (July 2001)."