

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 largest foundation backer should continue providing 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 distracted 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. The extent of incivility in the workplace is disturbing: 90 percent of respondents in one recent poll believed workplace incivility was a serious problem, and 75 percent of respondents in another survey said it was getting worse. According to another study, one-third of 600 nurses had been verbally abused during their previous five days at work.¹

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,

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his assigned mentor showed him his office and walked away without a word – no tour of the office, no introductions to co-workers, 'in short, no information,' the consultant says. Later, 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.'"²

Experiences like this are more than just unpleasant. Disrespectful engagement or nonengagement depletes energy, eating away at employee reserves of motivation and commitment, increasing burnout.

The key to transforming the workplace experience is to build and nurture what I call "high-quality connections" – marked by mutual positive regard, trust, and active engagement on both sides. In a high-quality connection, people feel more open, competent, and alive.³

One of the best ways to foster these connections is by encouraging respectful engagement between co-workers. When co-workers engage each other respectfully, they create a sense of social dignity that confirms self-worth and reaffirms competence.⁴ Respectful engagement empowers and energizes, giving individuals a heightened sense of their abilities.⁵

There are five major strategies nonprofit leaders can employ to foster respect, and thus encourage quality connections, in the workplace: conveying presence, being genuine, communicating affirmation, effective listening, and supportive communication. Used in tandem, these tools can help eliminate the corrosive relationships that sap nonprofits of their creative zest.

Conveying Presence

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."⁶

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."⁷

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 tutor 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 expressed interest in her as an individual, providing her with dozens of personal contact points.

Being Genuine

To engage respectfully, bosses and subordinates must remove "fronts" by speaking and reacting honestly – in part because people are generally good "authenticity detectors."⁸

When people act nice by edict, 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 those within five feet, and to smile at all those who passed within 10. Rather than foster mutual respect, the regulation bred disrespect and cynicism.⁹

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 formalized 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 minimizing 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 program 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 breeding grounds for high-quality connections. This means going beyond simply being present to searching for the "divine spark in another"¹⁰ – that is, their positive core – and recognizing it publicly.

For most leaders, the notion of recognizing worthy employees 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.¹¹

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."¹² 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 this 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 routine 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.

"To make it work, 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."

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.¹³ 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 "bulleted" points ("So you need more resources, more time, and more direction to finish 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 communicators express views and opinions while minimizing defensiveness and maximizing clarity.

Contrast that with unsupportive speech: sarcasm, 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

one person to prompt another to complete a certain task. But when people make demands, they send the signal that blame or punishment will follow if the demand is not fulfilled. "Once you hear demands, your options are submission or rebellion,"¹⁴ wrote Marshall Rosenberg, founder and director of educational services for the nonprofit Center for Nonviolent Communication.

Requests only work if you genuinely believe the other person can freely choose a response. Furthermore, requesters should employ positive language: Say what you want ("I'd like you to check with me once a week"), not what you don't want ("I don't need you to check with me so often"). Make requests specific, avoiding the hazards of misinterpretation ("I need updates from you on a weekly basis regarding our progress on fundraising goals" is more effective than "Keep me posted").

Another thing to look out for is evaluative judgment, which seeps easily into communications and undermines the possibility of respectful engagement, inviting defensiveness. The tendency to use judgmental language is a particular hazard for managers.

Supportive communication is descriptive, rather than evaluative. Consider these two statements: "You need to shape up in responding to client requests" versus "Three clients have complained to me this month that you have not responded to their requests."¹⁵ The first is a prejudgment; the second is a description of facts. Taking it a step further, supportive communication focuses on the impact of behavior, and is solution-oriented ("It's not acceptable to have three complaints a month, because these clients are sure to go

elsewhere. We need to win back their confidence. Let's do this by offering more than our contract calls for").

Roger Nierenberg, conductor of the Stamford (Conn.) Symphony Orchestra, sees supportive communication as a vital part of his job. He uses direction, as opposed to criticism, to build trust and enable musicians to perform at their best. For example, instead of saying, "The per-

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cussion section is playing too loudly," which is a judgment, he issues descriptive direction: "The audience needs to hear the woodwinds."¹⁶

It's a subtle difference, but one that helps Nierenberg connect to his orchestra, and it empowers the orchestra to connect as well – to the audience. ■

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9 Employees agreed to talk to me about their experiences on condition that the hospital not be named.

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12 Names used in this anecdote are pseudonyms.

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