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COLUMNIST

3 Ways You Can Rewrite a Bad Work Relationship

You can be the one to take control of the relationship and create those positive relations with others, regardless of the differences you may have.



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IMAGE: Getty Images

See if this sounds familiar: You're working with a business leader who you find to be quite difficult. He's demanding, makes assumptions that are unfair, blames others. As a result you back off from any [relationship](#) with him or her at all.

There is an assessment called the "Influence Assessment" that we use at LRI to help individual managers and leaders understand where they're having a positive impact and where they could have a

positive influence. One of the items on that survey reads: "Has positive relations with others regardless of the differences we may have." What I like about that item is that even though the **relationships** may be partly out of our control, and even though the differences we have with the other person is certainly out of our control, we have the potential to take control of how positive the relationship is. This means taking active ownership for being the one that makes sure that the relationship is positive.

I recently worked with a client who had the same situation I just described: a work relationship with a demanding, unfair, blaming colleague. When we did her influence assessment and she read the item about taking active responsibility for having positive relationships with others, she realized two things. First, she did not have positive relationship with this person. Second, she had the opportunity to change it by taking the lead in a relationship and change the dynamic. She also realized that this particular gentleman may actually have an influence over her career.

So what do you do to improve a relationship with someone when you think it is not as good as it could be?

1. Give yourself the opportunity to reach out.

I know it takes some courage, and it may not be comfortable to be the one to reach out, but you can certainly do it. Most people respond very favourably to someone coming to them and extending a hand in rewriting a relationship. In some cases we may have to apologize for something, or may have to explicitly start a relationship off on a different foot.

For example, you might say something like this: "Jim, I want to get together with you today, as I understand we started off our last discussion on the wrong note. I would really like to start all over again." Or, "Allan, I wanted to sit down with you because I know I was harsh with you today. I owe you an apology. I realized I reacted too quickly, I was unfair and I am sorry. I hope you will forgive me for that so we can start over."

Swallowing your pride and being the first to reach out can be all it takes to erase mistakes in a relationship and start fresh.

2. Assume best intent.

"Assume best intent" means making an effort to believe that the person opposite you is doing the things he or she does for a good reason. Most people have positive motives. They want to do good and be good, but something may get lost in the implementation. I had a client who couldn't seem to click with her manager. She was a real optimist, her manager was a real pessimist. When my client recognized this dynamic, she was able to take control of her own perspective. She didn't want to apologize for anything, and also didn't want to start the relationship all over again. So she instead chose to assume best intent. That simple shift in perspective helped her see that what came across as criticism from her manager was intended to be helpful feedback, and it helped her to quiet her inner critic.

3. Channel their motivations.

People are driven by different motivations. Sometimes you can change a relationship by identifying what the other person wants. One of my clients was constantly locking horns with her direct report. I suggested that she might study him to understand his motivation--or better yet, to ask him. She did. She opened a conversation and said, "You're doing your job very well. I appreciate that, but I sense there are some things you would change if you could. If you could work in the way that was best for you, how would you like things to be different?" He said, "I want to have the freedom to do my job. Just let me do my job." It became clear that this employee's motivation was freedom; he needed more latitude than she was giving him. Having identified the importance of freedom to her direct report, this manager was able to shift *her* way of doing things so that *he* could perform better in his role and contribute to a more positive relationship.

If you want to have positive relationships or a positive career with an endorsement from the people who are important to you, identify those people that you want to have positive relationships with. Who are the people who are influential in my career and who are the people for whom I am influential in theirs? Those are the people to focus on.

Businessmen and businesswomen may find the most influential people to be their managers or key stakeholders in their careers; entrepreneurs may find the most influential people to be their business partners or even their clients. You may never know who in your life is going to have the most influence over your career. But you *can* be the one to take control of the relationship and create those positive relations with others regardless of the differences we may have.

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