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For a Human Being, Press "1" 3 Ways Managers Can Improve Work Relationships

We live in a world of immediate gratification. Punch numbers on a cell phone and the connection appears, type on a keyboard and the results show up on screen, swipe a card and the money is magically transferred, set a deadline and the project will be done.

Well, maybe. The last item involves a commodity far more complex than the first three—human beings.

Yet managers are often so pressured to reach production goals that employees and colleagues often become little more than tools; objects used to facilitate the completion of projects and the meeting of profit projections. Placed in separate boxes on organizational charts, individuals are connected to other individuals by lines of alleged channels of communication that, much like a well-drafted machine, are supposed to work smoothly and efficiently. If told what to do, given a specific part to play, and enticed with external rewards, surely every worker will perform optimally, and if he doesn't, he'll be replaced with someone better, which, according to this philosophy, is as simple as swapping out a light bulb.

It's an easy mindset to fall into. After all, productivity is the key to an organization's success and to a manager's own career. "You evaluate your subordinates on how much they produce," say business authors Tony Alessandra and Phillip L. Hunsaker, "because you are evaluated on how much they produce. Under this one-dimensional system..., it's easy to slip into the point of view that people are similar to such other resources as material and money, which are to be exploited as much as possible for the company's good."¹

The problem with this approach is, despite our infatuation with technology, we are still first and foremost human beings, and human beings thrive on relationships. Failing to tend to these relationships leads to eventual slowdown—lowered productivity, high turnover rates, even decreased profits. And according to research, the most important relationship is the one between a manager and her subordinates. "The talented employee may join a company because of its charismatic leaders, its generous benefits, and its world-class training programs," say authors March Buckingham and Curt Coffman, "but how long that employee stays and how productive he is while he is there is determined by his relationship with his immediate supervisor."²

Still, some managers may say, there's only so much time in a day. I wasn't promoted for my social skills, and things are getting done well enough. Is it really that important?

"Management, by definition," say Alessandra and Hunsaker, "is getting the work done through the efforts of other people.... No matter how ambitious or capable you are, you cannot be an effective manager without knowing how to establish and maintain productive relationships with others."³



Employees Say a Good Supervisor:

- Discusses problems with me and listens to what I have to say.
- Lets me know how he/she feels about my work, good or bad.
- Means it if he/she gives me a compliment.
- Is always ready to listen to me.
- Tries to help me do a better job.
- Tells the boss when we do well.
- Will go to bat for me.

Source: Umiker, William O. Management Skills for New Health care Supervisors. Jones & Bartlett Publishers, Sudbury, MA. 2005.

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Relationship Management Can be Learned

It's a sad truth that the majority of managers are never taught how to create strong relationships. Most are promoted because of past performance in a job or technical expertise, and many took the promotion mainly because of the salary increase or because they felt obligated to do so. "Mid-level managers often end up in their positions because they were good at detail-oriented performance, not because they were trained as managers," says Professor David Antonioni. "The skills that boosted them into management may not be the ones they need to be successful in their new roles."⁴

Whatever your skill level, improving work relationships is something you can learn to do—or learn to do *better*. "Building business relationships that last is a skill virtually anyone can learn," say authors Jerry Acuff and Wally Wood. "The more high-quality personal and professional relationships we have, the more easily we will sell our products, our ideas, ourselves."⁵

Make Relationships a Priority

Before you can be more effective at relationships, however, you must make them a priority. According to business advisor David Maister, "If your subordinates feel that you are prepared to work at a relationship with them,... they will give you more of what you want. But if they think that you are just trying to get out of the deal more of what you want from them..., [t]hey will view you as you are viewing them—useful only to the extent that they can get out of it what they want in the short run. There will be no long-term loyalty and no commitment."⁶

Maister suggests it all comes down to your viewpoint. Do you see relationships as transactional or relational? (See table, "Transactional vs. Relational Points of View.") If you tend to be a more logical, analytical person, you may prefer most of your interactions to be more transactional, but experts say this will not foster long-term loyalty, respect or success. "A good manager demonstrates through their actions that they care about people as individuals and about the work they do," says Steve Bennett, president and CEO of Intuit. "They create a psychological contract with each employee that includes mutual expectations that deliver benefits to both the employee and the company."⁷

How do you fit relationship-promoting activities into your busy day? Narrow it down to three key activities: Communicate, adjust your approach where necessary, and become a beacon of positive emotions.

Transactional vs. Relational Points of View

The transactional approach allows you to remain detached and unengaged. Growing relationships is more personal and intimate.

Transactional	Relational
Opponents	On the same side
Short-term benefit	Long-term benefit
Suspicion	Trust
Goal is to make yourself look attractive	Goal is to understand the other party
Negotiate and bargain	Give and be helpful
Preserve opinions, avoid obligations	Make a commitment
Focus on the present	Focus on the future
Main goal is to prevail	Main goal is to preserve the relationship
Style can be impersonal, detached	Style must be personal, engaged
Listen to what they're saying	Listen to what they're feeling, why they're saying it
Usual feeling during the interaction is tense, enervated	Usual feeling is relaxed, comfortable
Interactive style is defensive, protective	Interactive style is open, inquisitive

Source: Maister, David. Do you really want relationships? 2005, davidmaister.com. Accessed 10/20/08 at: <http://davidmaister.com/articles/2/80/>.

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Communicate

In countless writings about good relationships, “communication” comes up again and again. We all know we need to communicate, but it can be easier said than done. There are busy schedules to manage, problems to be solved, and meetings to attend. To increase team productivity, what sort of communication must we absolutely make time for?

Probably the most important is *listening*, and unfortunately, it’s a skill many managers lack. Something about being in charge translates into *telling* others what to do. According to researchers, when a relationship is hierarchical, many bosses walk around thinking they know more than they do, and subordinates say what they think the

boss wants to hear. In the end, the corporation is the loser. The solution, according to authors Samuel A. Culbert and John B. Ullmen, is to create a situation where subordinates can clearly say what’s on their minds.⁸

Author A.J. Schuler, Psy.D., suggests going on a “listening tour,” an open-ended approach to learn what your direct reports like about their work, what they don’t like, what they hope to achieve in the long run, and what they see as potential problems for the organization.⁹ You may do this informally, or through a series of one-on-one meetings. Another approach is the coveted “open-door” policy, where subordinates and colleagues are encouraged to walk into your office and talk to you about things they feel are important. For some managers, this approach is so distracting that nothing gets done, but experts insist it’s the best method for encouraging good relationships within the organization, as well as bringing issues to life before they get out of hand. You may want to close your door during certain hours of the day, when you need to concentrate, and let it be known what hours you are usually available.

“It’s difficult because you have other things to do,” says J. Guillermo Villar, CEO of Mercantil Commercebank N.A. “But have an open-door policy that people feel that they can come to you, and if people talk to you, make sure you pay attention, you take a minute.” If you act like talking to the person is a pain, Villar adds, you’ll quickly find that you won’t be talking to anyone.¹⁰

Of course there are other facets of good communication that are important to remember, such as being clear about your expectations, giving regular feedback, asking for feedback yourself, and praising sincerely and often. Make each of these a part of your everyday routine, and you’ll soon be privy to the information you need to improve your department while fostering an atmosphere of openness with your team and your colleagues.

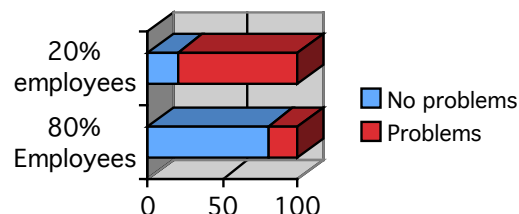
Adjust Your Approach

Maister says, “When I conduct workshops on managerial topics, those who pose questions want to know how to get *other* people (partners, subordinates, employees) to change their behavior. The very questions suggest a...viewpoint with the implication that we are just fine, it’s THEM who need to change.”¹¹

We all, at one point or another, have passionate—and often, legitimate—complaints about those we work with. But we can change only ourselves, and our reactions to other people. Therefore, one of the best ways to improve relationships is to forget about controlling the other person and to change our own approach.

Managers Wallowing in Negativity?

According to business writer Charles McConnell, 80 percent of a manager’s problems in employee relations arise from 20 percent of the employees. This means the majority of the team—those performing adequately to optimally—is usually ignored.



Source: McConnell, Charles. Effective use of praise and criticism. Small Business Toolbox. Accessed 10/20/08 at: http://www.nfib.com/object/IO_38139.html.

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Manager Self-Assessment

Rate how much you do the activity now. Use the following scale:

1=very infrequently/never

2=infrequently

3=a moderate amount

4=frequently

5=very frequently

- 1. Facilitate and support my employees' efforts in meeting their goals.
- 2. Provide ongoing coaching and counseling on ways to improve each employee's effectiveness.
- 3. State and demonstrate my commitment to customer satisfaction.
- 4. Clearly articulate performance expectations to my employees.
- 5. Set clear performance goals.
- 6. Provide my employees with all relevant information for doing their jobs.
- 7. Create an environment in which candid communication is the norm.
- 8. Create an environment in which teamwork and collaboration is the norm.
- 9. Create an environment in which each employee feels valued.
- 10. Be sensitive to the personal needs of my employees.
- 11. Own up to the commitments I make to my employees.
- 12. Encourage and value my employees' ideas.
- 13. Provide opportunities for my employees to make decisions on their own.
- 14. Provide meaningful and timely performance feedback.
- 15. Highlight episodes of good performance.
- 16. Explain areas for performance improvement.
- 17. Address developmental needs of marginal performers.
- 18. Explain career opportunity available in the organization.
- 19. Coach employees on what they need to do to achieve their career goals in the company.
- 20. Shun favoritism and give all employees equal opportunity.

Source: London, Manuel. *Job Feedback*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, New Jersey, 2003.

How do we know what needs to be adjusted? This requires a bit of emotional intelligence, namely, the ability to empathize with the other person. Where is he/she coming from? Could there be a hidden agenda you could attend to? Is there any way you can see his/her point of view? "This is probably the single most important relating skill..." says Reg Connely of Pegasus NLP. "If you were in their shoes, with their feelings, beliefs, values, background, etc., how would the situation look to you?"¹² Once you've determined what the person needs, doing your best to satisfy that need will go a long way in improving your relationship—and encouraging that person's support for your needs in the future.

Impact Factory, a communications and leadership training organization, cites this example. They worked with an individual (we'll call him "Ed") who ran an IT help desk for a large company. Whenever a crisis occurred and the computers crashed, the department head naturally wanted to know when it was going to be sorted out. Ed would explain in detail what needed to be done, who needed to be called in, where the problem originated, and what the ramifications were. The department head would get angrier and angrier, convinced Ed was giving him the run-around. Meanwhile Ed believed the department head had no sympathy whatsoever for the challenges involved in fixing the issue.

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After some work with Impact Factory, Ed realized he needed to change his approach. The next time the problem occurred, he simply gave the department head an estimated date and time when the problem would be solved. He gave up the need to be understood, and instead, attended to the department head's need to know when he'd be back in operation. They got along much better after that.¹³

People are different. Adjusting our approach to these differences can go a long way toward fostering smooth operations. Remember this when you're working with your subordinates. It's tempting to follow the adage, "treat everyone equally," but different people respond to different motivations. Some want to learn new things; some don't care as long as they're paid well. Some want regular attention; others want to be left alone. A one-size-fits-all approach is rarely successful. Learn what your people need by listening and asking questions, then do your best to meet those needs. Doing so will establish relationships you can count on.¹⁴

Exude Positive Emotions

In their book, *First Break All the Rules*, authors Buckingham and Coffman quote a restaurant manager named Michael: "A manager has got to remember that he is on stage every day. His people are watching him. Everything he does, everything he says, and the way he says it, sends off clues to his employees. These clues affect performance. So never forget you are on that stage."¹⁵

From the vantage point of that stage, you can inspire many things. Perhaps the most powerful is emotion. One good word from the boss can set off a chain reaction of positive emotions that elevate productivity. Conversely, one negative word can bring the whole room down. "For bosses it is particularly important to be a beacon of positive emotion," says Myra White, CEO of Work Intelligence, Inc. "People key in on their boss's moods. When a boss fails to keep the emotional temperature in the positive range, it can have a significant impact on performance."¹⁶

Negative emotions breed negative emotions, which can shatter concentration and rob us of energy. Fortunately, positive emotions are equally as likely to build on themselves, enhancing the atmosphere in the office and igniting interactions between people.

How are we to help ourselves stay positive? Tending to our own health and fitness is a good place to start. Employ relaxation techniques like deep breathing, muscle relaxation exercises and meditation. Smile. Science says our brains don't know the difference between a spontaneous smile and a self-directed one, and that both release the same "happy chemicals." Try sitting up straight, taking a walk outside, lifting your head and dropping your shoulders.

To spread these positive emotions to your subordinates and colleagues, start the day by greeting everyone warmly. Ask how people are doing. Offer a smile. Enjoy interacting, if only for 10 minutes. Compliment someone. Above all, don't manage by e-mail. Take a few minutes each day, preferably a few times a day, to circulate amongst your team and spark some feel-good energy.



It Takes Just a Little Effort

Executive Education's Robert Shaver says, "The best bosses don't happen by accident. They were willing to get the skills they need. They are willing to expend the extra effort. They are willing to say, 'It's not just all about me.'"¹⁷ In the midst of all a manager is required to do, building strong relationships may seem like a low priority, but when considering overall productivity and long-term profitability, one can agree that fostering good interactions between people is the best way to increase energy and motivation, which in turn, increases the odds for success. Besides, having good relationships with your co-workers just makes life a lot more enjoyable.

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Coaching Change from a Subordinate

Correcting a subordinate can be a tricky issue. How do you do so without harming your relationship? Business coach Karen Fishler suggests you ask questions to help the subordinate come up with her own solution to the problem.

Sample conversation:

1. Make it clear what the purpose of the meeting is.
 - a. I'd like to talk to you about X.
2. Say why.
 - a. It's a problem when X happens because...
3. Say what you want.
 - a. I'd like X to improve, so let's talk about why it happens and then discuss some ideas to solve it.
4. Ask what the person's view is.
 - a. Why do you think X happens?
5. Wait for him/her to respond.
 - a. [This is where you make quiet eye contact, keep your hands and body still, and wait.]
6. Clarify and repeat back until you and the subordinate agree on the facts.
 - a. If I've understood you right, you see the situation this way: [describe]. Is that accurate?
7. Provide your own observations and compare notes.
 - a. What I saw was [describe]. How do you think that fits with the situation you described?
8. Go back and forth, repeating and clarifying, until you and the subordinate agree on the facts.
 - a. So it sounds as if such-and-such happened at this point, and blah-blah happened at that point. Do you agree?
9. State what has to happen and ask for his/her suggestions.
 - a. Now that we're clear on what's been going on, in order for the project to move forward, we still need A and B to happen. What do you suggest as a solution?
10. Using the subordinate's ideas as a springboard and adding your own, make an agreement about what will happen next.
 - a. I think your idea of doing D and E is really good. It would be helpful if you could also do F. What's feasible for you to complete over the next couple of weeks?
11. Make an agreement to meet again for a follow-up discussion.
 - a. Let's get together two weeks from today and follow up.
12. Provide feedback on the meeting.
 - a. This was a good discussion. It made the situation a lot clearer and it's good to know you're going to be doing D, E, and F. Thanks for coming in.
13. Document the meeting and the agreement.
 - a. Dear Joe/Jane: Thanks for coming in today to talk about X and Y. It was a helpful discussion. Your idea to move the project forward and resolve the X and Y problems by doing D and E over the next two weeks is a good one. I'll look forward to meeting with you two weeks from today at 2 p.m. in my office to follow up. Regards,
14. When you meet to follow up, provide feedback.
 - a. It's great that you did D and E, congratulations. The X and Y issues have improved a lot just over the last couple of weeks.
15. Then you can make a new agreement for even more improvement.
 - a. Let's talk about what you can do next.
16. If the subordinate hasn't carried out the agreement, you've documented your efforts, laying the groundwork for counseling him or her.



Source: Fishler, Karen. Ten Tips for Managing People Well. Karen Fishler Coaching. Accessed 10/20/08 at: <http://www.fishler.com/managingpeople.html>.

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