

When relationships at work, work (and don't work!)

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Introduction

Before you read further, take a moment to think about your relationships with your work colleagues. Who do you consider a friend and why? Who do you dislike? Do you have enemies? What are the best and worst things about your relationship with your boss? Like them or loathe them we cannot escape the people we work with. Working adults spend around a third of their waking lives at work, and much of this time interacting with colleagues, either directly or virtually, to get their work done. Beyond the workplace, our colleagues can become key players in our social lives, through romantic liaisons, family links, or guanxi relationships that bridge organizational boundaries. For individual employees, the experience of work can be a source of genuine happiness and engagement; arguably our colleagues have the most profound influence on how enjoyable work is. On the other hand, workmates can also be self-centred, unaware and preoccupied, or (at their worst) manipulative, undermining, and abusive. Given that work experiences permeate our lives outside of work, the positive and negative effects of workplace relationships can be far-reaching. In our book *Relationships in Organizations: A Work Psychology Perspective* [1], we explore some of these themes with contributions from leading researchers. Below we outline some key research findings with regards to workplace relationships, in terms of friends, enemies, and “frenemies” (those colleagues who can be both supportive and undermining), and then explore two salient topics relating to the use and misuse of power at work – bullying and influence tactics.

Workplace Friends

Generally individuals who perceive that they have friends at work report higher job satisfaction, greater commitment to the organization, increased cohesion, and lowered intention to leave. Researchers have consistently found that employees who are friendlier work well together, and a link has been found between relationship factors such as cooperation / social support and team productivity. Empirical studies on friendship generally

highlight the positive outcomes of these relationships, including improved worker wellbeing, increased communication, support, trust, respect, cooperation, and influence. These in turn positively affect work-related attitudes and behaviours such as job satisfaction, commitment to the organization and remaining with the organization. Thus, friendships developed within the workplace represent a key element in the informal structure of an organization, potentially facilitating organizational effectiveness.

Gender differences in workplace friends

There are interesting differences in the way that men and women generally conduct their relationships outside of the workplace, and research shows that these differences also translate into the workplace context. Women's friendships have been described as communal, and tend to involve more self-disclosure, supportiveness, and complexity than do friendships between men. Women are more likely to seek emotional support at work when stressed, and to both receive and provide more emotional social support than men in times of work-related unhappiness or distress. In contrast, men's friendships can be described as instrumental; they tend to be organized around shared interests and activities, the exchange of tangible rewards and favours, and be "action-oriented" rather than "person-oriented" [2].

The downside to friends at work

Although having friends at work can bring socio-emotional rewards (such as pleasure in sharing experiences) and instrumental rewards (such as exchanging favours), there are downsides too. In a study of managerial attitudes to workplace friendships, while the majority of manager respondents felt that friendships generally improved productivity and communication, over half believed that these relationships caused or contributed to gossip and distraction, resulting in less work being done [3]. Interestingly these same authors differentiate between "close" friendships and "casual" friendships at work. Casual friendships tend to require less maintenance and involve fewer distractions than close (or best) friends. Thus casual friends may provide a sounding board, promote teamwork and help to accomplish work-related tasks without the distraction or felt obligations that are associated with "best" friends. It is possible that the very close friends in one's social network, though they may provide the greatest enjoyment and support, also contribute relatively more to the time and energy an employee spend in off task, non work related activity.

Workplace Enemies

Workplace relationships will not always progress as we might hope. We may not establish a good working relationship with our manager, we may find that a particular colleague is persistently petty and undermining, or we ourselves may be less tolerant of a

colleague's quirks. Research on negative behaviours such as bullying shows the detrimental effects on individual employees which can include stress, depression, absenteeism, and even suicide [4]. In their milder yet still unpleasant form, employees may be targets or senders of sleights, negative comments, insults, rudeness, and other lapses of common courtesy that may or may not be intentional. While less intense than overt aggression or violence, these relatively mild forms of incivility are nonetheless distressing, distracting, and disruptive. There has been a great deal of scholarly attention given to issues of negative relationships and this also links with practitioner recognition of the costly toll of problematic workplace interaction, and the need for intervention to prevent and/or curtail it.

Beyond the impact on employees who are targeted, witnesses to these negative behaviours also suffer; reporting lower wellbeing and impaired performance [5]. For those on the receiving end of negative behaviour within relationships, they are more likely to be absent, to feel disengaged and eventually to leave the organization altogether, all considerable costs to organizations.

Frenemies

Between these two extremes of friends and enemies is a potentially more difficult kind of relationship – the *frenemy*. Think about that person in your network or workgroup who is generally friendly, helpful, and supportive but *then* unexpectedly belittles you, spreads a rumour, gives you incorrect information, criticises you, or makes you feel incompetent. These indicators of “social undermining” characterise the ambivalent relationships that frenemies offer; relationships characterised by both positivity and negativity, and which are among the most stressful to manage. Although it would be nice to think that supportive and friendly relationships would not also be undermining, research suggests the opposite. In fact people often experience both support and undermining from the same person. When interactions with others in your social network are inconsistent this can result in perceptions of relational insecurity as well as a lack of control, trust, and predictability [6].

A recent study investigated undermining in the context of envy in the workplace [7]. When employees experience envy they are much more likely to engage in undermining behaviours; this will occur so long as they do not identify strongly with the colleague they envy, and are not prevented by strong organizational norms discouraging undermining. This followed on from previous research [6] looking at the effects of undermining. In this earlier study, police officers filled out a survey about how often their closest colleagues undermined and/or supported them. Officers who felt undermined were, unsurprisingly, less committed at work, more stressed, experienced more physical health problems and were more likely to take

unauthorized breaks and be absent from work. Interestingly, however, when the underminer was also, at other times, supportive they experienced even *lower* commitment, had *more* health issues and missed comparatively *more* work. An explanation for this is that when a colleague is consistently selfish or undermining, individuals know what to expect, and can devise strategies for minimising interactions and avoiding collaboration. But if that colleague undermines in some situations and supports in others, it is harder to avoid the relationship altogether. For this reason such relationships are among the most exhausting.

Further insights on workplace relationships

As should be evident from the above, the “slices” that one can take when discussing interpersonal relationships at work are many and varied, and there are several recent books devoted to this fascinating topic [1, 8-10]. Below we briefly focus on two currently topical issues in the workplace relationship literature; first, a look at what can happen when these relationships turn sour, as occurs with workplace bullying, and second, an aspect of what is arguably the most important relationship in an employee’s work life; the subordinate-supervisor relationship, and how employees can, and do, influence their line managers.

The bullies at work: Who are they and what can you do?

Our colleagues, led by Dr Dianne Gardner, have contributed a chapter [4] to *Relationships at Work* that reveals the issues underlying workplace bullying. Researchers define bullying as repeated exposure to negative acts over a prolonged period, usually six months, with these acts being difficult to defend against. The extended nature of such negative acts, as well as the power imbalance which means that targets are unable to defend themselves, results in bullying having a severe impact on targets’ health and wellbeing. Bullying causes self-doubt, anxiety, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and depression; and these effects can last 5 years or more. Bullying is also associated with negative outcomes to employers and organizations, including lower work motivation, lower commitment to the organization, lower performance, and a higher likelihood of leaving.

Who are the bullies?

Three types of bullies have been identified: predatory, purposeful, and unaware [4]. The predatory bully intends to do harm, wishing to display their power and gain compliance from others. The purposeful bully acts in harmful ways to achieve personal or work goals – anything that gets in the way is trampled down as the bully determinedly achieves their aims. The unaware bully, on the other hand, often does not realise the harm caused by their behaviour to others.

When does bullying thrive?

Predatory bullies thrive regardless of the work context and therefore are best eliminated by not selecting them in the first place. For purposeful and unaware bullies, it is often the elements of the work situation that facilitate bullying, such as those rewarding results without focusing on process (e.g., performance goals reached, regardless of the damage to others), or ignoring bad behaviour (e.g., in time-pressured environments where no-one is willing to take the time to stop and question such behaviour). Good policies, their fair implementation, and effective leadership can discourage bullying. It is notable that, as organizational change is becoming more normal, these often stressful transitions are times when bullying can thrive. This is because such transitions can lead to confusion, and may lead to feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. In such chaotic conditions, a bully may be able to terrorise colleagues with no-one willing to take responsibility to step in, especially if they feel their own job is at risk.

The practical implications are as follows. For leaders: take responsibility for role modelling appropriate behaviours, be courageous in identifying bullying and other negative behaviours that you see, and take action to remove the opportunity for bullying to continue. Introducing and supporting appropriate anti-bullying policies can be a useful adjunct to this. For those witnessing or experiencing bullying: seek help from your peers, leaders, and the HR team. Ultimately though, bullying is hard to escape from and, if leaders will not take responsibility to stop bullying, the best action may be to move to a new workplace.

The influential subordinate: Can you change your boss' mind?

Our own research chapter [11] in *Relationships in Organizations* reviews the research on how subordinates can influence upwards. The relationship that an employee has with their line manager is an extraordinarily salient one for many people, but not all supervisor / subordinate dyads are equally successful in how they influence each other. One of the key factors affecting the degree of influence is the level of trust within the relationship. Not surprisingly, the greater the trust a subordinate has in their superior, the greater the level of influence the subordinate will accept. And, in fact, this works both ways; with subordinates who are trusted more, exerting greater influence on their superiors. It seems that subordinates who establish trust-based relationships with their bosses will find their superiors more amenable to influence attempts.

Additionally, successful upward influencing attempts (attempts by the subordinate to influence their manager) are associated with favourable attributions of subordinates. In good relationships, partners accentuate the positive and attenuate the negative. That is, they are attuned in their perceptions to evidence that sits comfortably with preconceptions. Thus in a good relationship, subordinates could benefit from a virtuous cycle where their target of

influence is open to influence, allows them opportunity to influence and is likely to interpret their messages in a positive way, and then regards the subordinate still more favourably. Of course credibility can be lost and subordinates who are unsuccessful in influencing, or use overly assertive tactics, may damage relationships and thus, appraisals of their performance.

Subordinates and their superiors use various behaviours to influence each other. These behaviours, commonly known as “influence tactics”, are aimed at achieving specific goals.

Tactics that subordinates may use to influence their boss include:

Assertiveness: demanding, ordering and setting milestones.

Ingratiation: showing humility, attempting to increase one’s likeability and making the target feel important.

Rationality: explaining and developing plans.

Exchange of benefits: offering to make sacrifices in exchange for desired outcomes.

Upward appeal: seeking the support of more senior staff.

Coalition: efforts to attain an objective through garnering the support of co-workers and subordinates.

In good quality relationships members use softer tactics and are less inclined to be assertive. Thus rational explanations and polite, friendly encounters are more likely to characterise communications when relationships are good. It seems that having a good relationship with one’s boss goes some way towards protecting an individual from unpleasant exchanges, but the effect of tactic use extends well beyond the moment of an encounter. It is reported that the use of rationality by subordinates is associated with improved performance assessments and supervisor liking. Other tactics however have a damaging effect on performance evaluations. For example, the ingratiation tactic of self-promotion has been found to have a positive effect at interview but a negative impact on subsequent supervisor ratings.

The take home message here is that while flattery and self-promotion might get you a job, they are unlikely to keep you in it! However, making sure you form a good relationship with your boss, remain good at your job and communicate using logic and evidence (rather than self-promotion and flattery) should put you in a strong and influential position [11].

In our book *Relationships in Organizations [1]*, we present research by leading authors on the full gamut of workplace relationships, from friendships to romance, family firms and guanxi, virtual relationships and collegial relationships, as well as more detail on the topics we have discussed here. The latest research can help build our understanding of how relationships develop, and either go right or go wrong. Moreover, the practical advice provided can help to create work relationships that are both productive *and* enjoyable.

Note: A full list of references and sources relevant to this article can be found within:

Morrison, R.L. and Cooper-Thomas, H.D., *Relationships in Organizations: A Work Psychology Perspective*. 2013, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

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