How to Mend a Work Relationship - by Brianna Barker Caza, Mara Olekalns and Timothy J. Vogus

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Workplaces are communities, built around the relationships we have with our peers. When these relationships are strong, they can be a source of energy, learning, and support. But when they fracture, even just temporarily, they become sources of frustration that harm both people and organizations. Left unchecked, even a small conflict can spiral out of control, leading to anger and resentment. That's why managers and employees need to be able to manage and rebound from these conflicts.

We wanted to understand how relationships can be strengthened to avoid potential breakdowns, and the best ways to repair them when breakdowns occur. We reviewed about 300 studies, published in management and psychology in the last 15 years, focusing on workplace relationships, relationship transgressions, and relationship repair. Based on our review, we identified the following three practices that can help you to make your work relationships more resilient in the face of conflict and everyday tensions.

Reset the emotional tone

Conflicts have an emotional impact. Even small issues create tension between ourselves and others, which can cause us to pull away in order to minimize feelings of hurt, frustration, and anger. But rather than pulling away, research suggests that we're better off resetting the emotional tone when we notice some tension. One way to do this is by bringing up positive memories with your colleague, which can strengthen your bond and act as an emotional safety net for your relationships.

This doesn't mean ignoring the negative emotions you may be feeling. Rather, thinking of the positive history you share can help you counterbalance those negative feelings so you can express them effectively. Your goal is to create a supportive environment in which you can express your hurt and anger without further damaging your relationship.

To re-establish a positive emotional tone:

Raise the issue. You want to immediately acknowledge the tension and allow each other to express negative feelings, but it's important you also emphasize your positive feelings about the future of the relationship: *"I know that we are not seeing eye-to-eye on this issue right now, and it is upsetting for both of us, but I'm really optimistic we can work this out."* Ensure that the "rules" of your relationship mean you can express your emotions and ask about your colleague's, knowing that they will listen without becoming defensive.

Suggest a time out. Set a meeting a couple of days out to let your emotions cool off. If time is of the essence, even something like a coffee break can help ease the tension. If there is not the opportunity for a physical time-out, try a brief topic change, which has been demonstrated to reduce physiological arousal during conflict and promote positive emotions. For example, take a moment to check-in with each other about another project that is going well.

Commit to a shared relationship goal. Agree that your relationship is important and that you both want to restore mutual positive feelings. Remind the other person of the positive elements of your relationship, and your desire to have more positive interactions in the future. This may help to keep the current conflict from contaminating the entire relationship.

Craft your shared narrative

Whether and how relationships recover from conflicts also depends on the stories that we tell. Studies suggest starting with a personal explanation of what you see as the cause of conflict, soliciting the other persons' explanation, and then using these as the basis for working together to reach a common understanding of what happened and why. If each person has a different or negative interpretation, and these go unaddressed, there will not be a shared foundation from which to rebuild the relationship. For example, if the other person doesn't recognize the pain they caused, they are unlikely to take the crucial first step of offering an apology.

Part of the goal of creating a shared narrative is that it can increase people's willingness to forgive and reconcile — if they assume the best, rather than the worst, about the other person's intentions. A shared narrative can help both sides recognize that the source of the conflict is not the "fault" of either person but rather a flaw of how they're relating. For example, rather than blaming yourself (I was overcommitted) or your coworker (they didn't prioritize the project) for not meeting a deadline, you can reflect on how both of your actions contributed to the failure (we didn't check in often enough to make sure we were on track). This latter explanation suggests that your relationship needs to improve, but also hints at ways to create a more positive relational process in the future.

As you craft your shared narrative, think about:

What went wrong? Ask for the other person's story about the relationship breakdown, and then offer your own perspective. Be open and listen without getting defensive. If you feel unable to fully listen and reflect on the other person's story without reacting and interrupting, you might try asking for the person's perspective in an email.

It's about *us*, not me or you. Take a step back from focusing on the other person and, refocus on the relationship itself. Ask whether there is something about *how* you interact with each other that contributed to the breakdown. Rather than blaming each other, this focus on your relationship will help you to notice if the root cause of the breakdown is something you can change.

Reflect on your history. Research has consistently linked reminiscing to long-term relationship satisfaction. Applied to the workplace context, this suggests that the more often you reflect on your positive history with your coworkers, the easier it is to craft a narrative in which this negative event is the exception rather than the rule. Remind each other not just of the emotional peaks of your relationship, of your shared concrete successes, but also the valleys and how you worked through them. Doing so illuminates the potential for hard times to serve as growth opportunities.

Build relational agility

When faced with a conflict, it's essential that, in addition to resetting the emotional tone and creating a shared narrative, we are willing to try new ways of interacting with each other — what we call relational agility. We often respond to relationship breakdowns by "digging in," sticking with our interpretation of events and our preferred solution. If, instead, we pause and improvise — look for a different and creative approach to solve the problem — we are more likely to successfully repair the relationship, and may even strengthen it.

Fractures themselves can be a signal that something about the relationship was no longer working, and trying a different approach to interacting may allow individuals to break old patterns and relate to one another in more productive ways. Of course, developing relational agility is challenging, especially when things are tense. Consider these strategies:

Plan to improvise. Good improvisation takes planning. Rather than assuming that your relationships will be smooth, think ahead to potential trouble spots. For example, if you need to renegotiate resource allocations or workloads, don't assume an easy agreement. Instead, think about the reasons your coworker might object and plan for them. Ask yourself whether the other person might feel undervalued, or feel protective of their staff. By thinking through the potential objections, you can be ready to respond in the moment with creative problem-solving.

When the unexpected happens, pay attention and get curious. There will be surprises that pop up in the course of your interpersonal interactions that you cannot control or plan for. If you are surprised by a colleague's reaction, rather than reacting defensively, ask yourself "why?" Can you pinpoint what exactly is triggering for you? Remember that their reaction gives you important information about their interests, and strong reactions tell us that the other person feels under attack. Perhaps you asked a coworker to move to a different office, and they burst into tears. Getting curious about why this happened would lead you to asking why moving offices was so distressing. Once you get to the root of the problem, you can then start problem solving together.

These three moves — creating a positive tone, shared narratives, and relational agility — will help to repair most damaged relationships, but it is also important to realize that not all relationships *should* be repaired. There are times when the best action is to walk away or at least find ways to work around a deeply unproductive coworker relationship. This is the case when a single incident is so egregious (e.g., an instance of harassment)

or behavior is persistent over long stretches of time (e.g., a consistently verbally abusive boss). It might also be the case that the relationship is no longer worthwhile, if you've attempted to take these steps and they're not reciprocated by your coworker. But even then, you can learn from this experience. If a relationship has reached its natural end, use the experience and lessons you have garnered to build stronger foundations for your future relationships.