9 ways to build stronger relationships up and across your organization

Tags: Articles, Building Relationships, Managing Up, Peer Managers

"When I started out as a manager, I assumed the best thing for the company and my career was to manage my team to meet its goals — to nail my specific job responsibilities and let other people do their jobs," says experienced manager Grayson Morris. "But the reality is that the various departments within a company all depend on each other. Your success as a manager is highly dependent on other people in the company."

"Tom? I don't know. We don't run in the same circles anymore."

Don't just wait for strong relationships with your manager and peers from other teams to form and gel organically over time. Proactively build them — your performance and success depend on it.

Build a better relationship with your manager

1. Learn as much as you can about how your manager thinks, works, and communicates.

To have a great relationship — and influence your manager effectively — you need to understand his or her values, responsibilities, goals, leadership style, communication style, strengths, and weaknesses. You'll learn faster if you're systematic about it. Start by filling out our Understanding your manager reflection guide.

If you have gaps in any of these areas, you could ask your manager directly (*"I'm interested to hear more about your goals and priorities and how I can best support them. Would you be willing to discuss that in our next 1-on-1?"*), ask others who have worked with your manager, or make yourself a note to be on the lookout for examples.

Experienced manager Grayson Morris explains how he adjusted his approach to relationship building based on a new manager's priorities.

2. Develop a way of communicating that suits your manager's preferences.

While some bosses may be flexible, ultimately it's on you to try to adapt your style so that your manager feels appropriately informed and that you're making good use of his or her time.

Start noticing how your manager communicates so that you can match that style: Does she prefer in-person contact or email? Short bursts or long discussions? In the moment or at scheduled times? Does she ask follow-up questions for more information? Want to hear about problems as they arise or only after you've tried to solve them but need help?

Use what you uncover to:

- **Devise a status update template that includes your manager's desired level of information**, even if that means you have to edit for brevity or track down more information.
- **Be strategic about when you share information.** You want to match how often and quickly your manager expects information but also deploy it at optimal times. For example, if your manager has an important executive meeting on Friday, you might share your big idea earlier in the week. Or if you know he's stressed about a project, hold nonurgent information for a calmer time.

Also, periodically check in with your manager about your communication (*"Am I giving you all the information you need? How is the level of detail?"*). Regular 1-on-1s are a great time to do so. For more, see 5 ways to get more out of 1-on-1s with your manager .

3. Ask specific questions to clarify your manager's expectations and seek feedback on your work.

Managers don't always take the time to spell out directions clearly and completely — and sometimes they don't even know what they want. To get the clarity you need, ask specific, thoughtful questions.

To clarify expectations: In addition to obvious details like deadlines and budget, ask about these important parameters:

- **Success criteria:** *"What does your ideal outcome look like? What are we trying to achieve with this project?"*
- **Task context:** *"Could you help me understand how this task fits into the big picture and whom it impacts?"*
- **Scope:** *"Would you like me to do a thorough job that will take a little longer, or a quick and dirty version?"*
- **Relative priority:** *"How important is this relative to my other projects?"*
- **Available resources:** *"Is there anything or anyone available to help me get the job done better or faster? Have we done one of these before and, if so, can I see an example?"*

To seek feedback: Rather than asking a generic question (*"What do you think?"*) try a more specific one (*"Would you be willing to share your thoughts on the presentation I gave yesterday, particularly on how I organized and delivered the information?"*). Depending on your situation, you may want to give your manager time to think and prepare. And if you receive vague feedback (*"Your presentation was pretty good"* or *"The last part felt tacked on"*), dig deeper for specifics and ways to improve (*"Could you explain what you mean by 'tacked on'?"* or *"Do you think if I do X, that would be more effective?"*). You want to walk away from the conversation with practical suggestions and a plan for applying them.

4. Balance giving your manager reinforcing feedback and sharing tough truths.

Everyone needs feedback in order to do their job well, and your boss is no exception.

When it comes to reinforcing feedback, praising your boss about something unrelated to you could be perceived as awkward or sucking up. Instead, focus on a behavior that has a direct effect on your work, and be specific about how it has helped you — this gives your boss important information about what you need to do your job well.

For example:

- Poor (unrelated and vague): *"I loved your company-wide presentation."*
- Better (relevant and specific): *"Thank you for spending extra time with me yesterday to map out the deadlines for this project. It really helped me understand how I need to prioritize my team's time."*

When you disagree with your boss about something, think of yourself as a valued partner or advisor — someone who respectfully provides a dose of truth or plays devil's advocate when necessary. The key word is *respectfully*. The best approach for giving this kind of feedback depends heavily on your boss's personality and style. But often, using questions to highlight potential oversights is a great way to go. People often respond less defensively to questions than imperatives, and asking a question lets you feel out the issue with curiosity in case you're off base.

- Poor (confrontational): *"I think that's a lousy idea. It could really anger our customers."*
- Better (curious): *"How do you think our customers will react — and what do you think should be our strategy for responding to them?"*

For more, see Give your manager reinforcing feedback this week and Zipp's tips: 6 things I ask myself before giving feedback to my boss.

5. Be solution-oriented whenever possible.

When you just point out problems or what's wrong with ideas, you could easily get tagged with labels like "complainer," or "whiner." When you raise problems and offer potential solutions, you send the message that you're inclined toward action and improvement, and in the process, you'll be showing off your creativity and critical thinking skills — traits important for any leader who wants to have an impact on and move up in an organization.

So when you encounter a problem, think through and offer three potential solutions. Try to develop a range of options — from quick fixes to longer-term solutions — and a good rationale for why you think each might work. Note: You won't always come up with good solutions, but that shouldn't stop you from raising important issues. In those cases, try leading with the fact that you don't have the answer to show that you're not just complaining (e.g., *"I don't have a solution, but thought you might have ideas or that we could work on some together"*).

Beyond snags in your own work, consider your boss's biggest challenges and how you can help, whether it's offering ideas or volunteering to help with tasks you know matter to him or her. After all, part of your job as a manager is to help your boss strategize and troubleshoot, not add to the chaos.

Build a beneficial peer network

6. Make a list of colleagues whose work links to yours, and focus on building or strengthening key relationships.

Often, the best managers have strong working relationships with the *right* connections, rather than just lots of connections. So, do you have the right ones?

To find out:

- **Spend 15 minutes brainstorming and writing down a list of colleagues whose work could impact yours.** As management experts Linda A. Hill and Kent Lineback write in their book *Being the Boss:* "If your networks don't extend beyond the location where you work or the people you see often, if they don't anticipate future needs, you almost certainly aren't reaching far enough."
- **Consider which relationships to build.** Some good candidates: Weak or nonexistent connections who are important to your team's current functions, who could potentially help you with a future initiative, or who can offer insights about your organization or industry (e.g., someone in research who can help you better understand customer behavior or someone in marketing who can explain your industry's competitive landscape). Be sure you're considering each person's relevance to your work and not picking people to connect with just because you like them personally.

Start building these relationships now, rather than waiting until you need something from them. To begin, select two or three and reach out in a way that seems appropriate to start building each relationship. For example, you might invite your peer to coffee or lunch or give the person well-deserved recognition this week. For more, see How to start a relationship.

7. Be proactive in sharing mutually beneficial information.

By assembling bits and pieces of information gleaned from colleagues, you'll gain a better understanding of how your team fits into the company's big picture and build a powerful knowledge base that'll help you set the right priorities for your team, pitch better ideas, and get the resources your team needs to succeed.

But you don't just want to seek information and never offer it. Instead, think proactively about how sharing information might help others. Ask yourself, *What information do I have that could enable a peer to make better decisions?*

Hear about another team that's starting a process your team already knows? Offer to share best practices. Is your project running behind schedule? Loop in other departments dependent on your work as soon as possible to explain why and what you're doing to troubleshoot. Is a newly hired manager starting in another department? Take the time to sit down with her to give important context on how your company operates, how your teams depend on each other, and to talk through ways you can work together.

8. Take advantage of brief or chance encounters to spark creative conversations.

Teams have a tendency to fall into idea ruts. But people whose networks span into other groups "are at higher risk of having good ideas," writes sociologist Ronald S. Burt. "This is not creativity born of genius; it is creativity as an import-export business. An idea mundane in one group can be a valuable insight in another."

To start generating the kinds of sparks that lead to breakout ideas, take advantage of short interactions with peer managers to go beyond "How was your weekend?" small talk. In the five minutes before a management update meeting or during a chance encounter at the elevator, try asking questions like these for a quick conversation that could lead to fruitful ideas:

- *"So, what are you working on?"*
- *"What are you most excited about right now?"*
- *"What's your biggest challenge these days?"*

9. Actively seek feedback about your ideas and projects — but only if you genuinely want the input.

Just as peers and colleagues can help inspire creative ideas, they can also offer valuable outside perspectives on your work in progress. By seeking others' views and opinions, you could end up with a better finished product and are more likely to get greater buy-in from colleagues, especially if you frame your request in terms of how the feedback may benefit their own interests. For example, if you're in sales, you could run some new messaging by an engineering manager to be sure you're not overlooking a key feature: *"Joaquin, would you be willing to take a look at some new messaging I'm working on? I want to be sure it truly captures the benefits of the new feature your team built."*

That said, don't ask purely to ingratiate yourself with a peer — ask because you really want the person's feedback. Asking and then ignoring what someone says (or at least not explaining why you didn't take the feedback) could end up doing more harm than good.

And, before you ask, determine what kind of feedback you're seeking (quick reactions or an in-depth critique) and be sure to ask for that level of input when you approach the person. For more, see How to ask for feedback.