



Strengthening Relationships at Work

There are a number of things managers can do to strengthen relationships with workers. Strengthening connections with workers can lead to a win-win situation, in that workers may feel respected and valued, and can become much more engaged and productive in their work. And, managers may find that it is much easier to deal with a worker's negative emotions or psychological health struggles when the foundation of their relationship with the worker is strong.

We can effectively build connections with workers by verbally or nonverbally seeking contact with them (i.e., making what psychologist Dr. John Gottman calls "connection bids"). A connection bid is an attempt to create connections between two people, and is essential for building, maintaining and improving relationships. A connection bid can be anything that we do to seek contact with another person:

- **Asking for information:** e.g., asking a worker how to solve a work problem. *"Would you mind helping me with interpreting this spreadsheet? I'm struggling to get my head around the numbers."*
- **Showing interest:** e.g., asking workers about their hobbies or recent holidays. *"Have you been doing any hiking lately?"*
- **Expressing affirmation and approval:** e.g., complimenting a worker on his latest accomplishment. *"Your presentation yesterday was excellent!"*
- **Expressing caring or support:** e.g., demonstrating concern about a worker's health condition. *"Your cough sounds awful. You should think about going home to recover."*
- **Offering assistance:** e.g., offering support to a worker who is overloaded with tasks. *"Would you like me to ask Jocelyn to help you with that project?"*
- **Making a humorous comment:** e.g., lighthearted joking with a worker about a mistake you made. *"Sometimes the hurrier I go, the behinder I get!"*
- **Sending non-verbal signals:** e.g., a smile, a wink, a wave, a pat on the back or a thumbs up.

Responses to Workers' Connection Bids

In the same way that we reach out and connect with workers, workers make connection bids themselves. The way we respond to workers can also impact the nature of the relationship. When someone seeks contact with us, we can either *turn toward* them (a more effective response), or we can respond by *turning against* or *turning away* from them (less effective responses).



<p>Example: A worker is asking his manager for feedback. <i>"I would appreciate it if you could let me know how you think my presentation went yesterday."</i></p>		
More Effective Response	Less Effective Response	
<p>Turning Toward We respond in a positive way. We show interest and convey affection, acceptance, agreement, encouragement or excitement.</p>	<p>Turning Against We respond in a rejecting way. We appear argumentative, critical, sarcastic, irritable, hostile or dismissive.</p>	<p>Turning Away We respond in an ignoring way. We show disinterest and avoid a response (e.g., by acting preoccupied).</p>
<p>Example: <i>"Of course. Why don't you come by my office in half an hour?"</i> or <i>"Great idea! Come to think of it, I should give you feedback more regularly."</i></p>	<p>Example: <i>"You know I'm swamped today preparing for the big meeting tomorrow."</i> or <i>"Why don't you ask one of the other team members what they thought?"</i></p>	<p>Example: <i>"Sorry, but I'm swamped. I should go prepare for the meeting tomorrow."</i> or <i>"I don't have time to chat right now."</i></p>

The way we respond to workers has a sizable impact on the nature of the relationships that result. If we repeatedly turn *against* or turn *away* from workers, they may eventually stop reaching out. On the contrary, if we turn *toward* a person as often as we can, the relationship can be strengthened and become more positive and supportive.

References

Gottman, John. (2002). *The Relationship Cure*. New York: Three Rivers Press.