

Relationships at Work: Some Biblical Insights- Part 2

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Technology Mediated Relationships

Because of the speed and geographic distribution of organizations and project teams today, many of the relationships and communications at work are carried out electronically. And today there are so many options! How does technology affect relationships at work?

More than 15 years ago, the Institute for the Future created a model for the use of various technologies in supporting teams of people working together.

This is now available through the Grove Consultants International and is published as the Team Performance Model. Basically they consider three types of communications and the appropriate role for each in the development of effective teams. Each type has some internal variation. The three are: physical presence, synchronous (same time, different place), and asynchronous (different time, different place).

Their research showed that physical presence offered the best opportunity for building trust (essential for any team) and dealing with nuance. It isn't just the formal meeting that counts here, but the side conversations that establish deeper relationships. The synchronous communication is needed in clarifying objectives and gaining agreement. These are most effective built on a foundation of trust. They include various levels from video conferencing to telephone calls to instant messaging. The third type, asynchronous communications, can involve emails, document stores, etc. where people can do their work independently but communicate on an as needed basis. Their model suggests that there is a need to start with physical presence, and cycle back to that from time to time to deal with the relationship lag that develops when people don't know each other. It has often been demonstrated that people can become more aggressive electronically than they would ever be personally. The occasional face to face discussions can dampen this behavior.

Pat Gelsinger, at the time [2010] the senior vice president of Intel, and the General Manager of the Digital Enterprise Division discussed how he deals with the challenges of technology-mediated communication:

I have a personal rule. If I go back and forth with somebody in email more than four or five times on the same topic, I stop. No more. We get on the phone, or we get together face to face. I have learned that if you don't resolve something quickly, by the time you get together one of you is mad at the other person. You think they are incompetent since they could not understand the most straightforward thing that you were describing. But it is because of the medium, and it is important to account for this.

The challenge of what to say in writing and what to say face to face is not a new one. In 2 Corinthians 2:3 Paul writes, "I wrote as I did so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice."

It would appear that Paul wrote something so that he did not need to discuss it when he was with them. We see a different angle on this in 2 John. From the TOW commentary:

John ends the letter by saying that he wants to continue the conversation in person. "Although I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink; instead I hope to come to you and talk with you face to face" (2 John 12). Perhaps he realizes that whatever else he has to communicate could be misunderstood if presented in the impersonal medium of writing a letter. This gives us a valuable insight about sensitive communications—some things are better said in person, even if distance makes it difficult to see one another face to face. (Theology of Work biblical article, 1 John, 2014)

As we deal with technology mediated relationships, we need to make wise choices about the role of technology in our communications.

Creating a Healthy Organizational Culture



We have seen the importance of relationships in an organization, and the challenges they create for individuals and for the entire organization. A good leader can go a long way in creating a culture where relationships will thrive more than they destroy, even though the work is still carried out by imperfect

people. Thus it is good to pay attention to creating a supportive culture.

People are messy; therefore, relationships will be messy. Expect messiness. Max DePree, in his book *Leadership is an Art*, argues, “Relationships count more than structure.” Knowing this from the beginning can guide us in creating ways for the organization to honor relationships. When there is a toxic work environment, everything is more difficult. It is also fundamental to safety, to productivity, and to staying in business. Wayne Alderson demonstrated this at Pittron Steel, documented in the book *Theory R Management* (Alderson and McDonnell, 1994). He showed that when you replace fear in the workplace with love, dignity, and respect it shows in productivity and in the bottom line.

Brad Tilden, CEO, Alaska Airlines, was asked about the importance of taking fear out of the workplace related to safety. He said in an *Ethix* (2014) interview,

“We must have a culture where people know not only that they can report a safety issue without any sort of fear of reprisal, but also that they must. Our customers trust us with a big responsibility (getting them safely to their destination), and it’s a responsibility that we all share.”

Ed Catmull, CEO of Pixar and author of *Creativity, Inc.* has a wonderful section on separating fear from failure. Failure is a fundamental part of innovation, but fear dampens this innovation. Catmull develops the case for how a leader can establish relationships which remove fear.

Alan Mulally, CEO at Ford, said it was important to create this culture where people had good and open relationships at work. He said to his people,

If the working together does not work for you ... it is okay. But it is probably best if you just move on, because you are going to be unhappy, we’ll be unhappy, if you can’t subscribe to the behaviors. All we are asking is: working together, developing relationships, communicating clearly, listening to each other, seeking to understand before you seek to be understood, being emotionally resilient, finding a way. We want to enjoy the journey and each other and have fun, but never at each other’s expense. *Ethix* (2010) interview.

And you need to create an environment where people can speak up. When Mulally was asked about how he dealt with bad news, he said:

There is no bad news. It is just the way it is. There is a status, and you must know what the status is. So when we are going through [a review] every red and yellow [people reporting on problems in their area] is celebrated. What’s not acceptable is to cover up the real status, because that just doesn’t work for anybody. You can’t be holding information, not saying that you have a problem, believing you can manage it in secret. You don’t have days, you don’t have hours, you need to know what the problem is right away in this fast-paced world. And this is particularly true in the automotive industry, where a production line of vehicles can pile up very quickly!

You must make it safe to talk the truth. It is not about acting all warm and fuzzy, but you have to know everything to make good decisions, and to get there you have got to make it safe when something goes wrong. If you yell at somebody when they put a yellow up, it is going to be green next week. They are human beings. *Ethix* (2010) interview.

How do you create such an environment? It starts at the top. It means creating a set of values that are not only talked about but lived, starting with those who lead. Don Flow, owner of Flow Automotive, said that to make this work throughout an organization, it must be a part of the promotion process, not just something talked about on the side. He said,

Noncompliance doesn’t work at all. His or her peers will say, ‘This is not how we do business here.’ They either leave or are fired. The next category is Genuine Compliance, where motivation is more external. These people say, “I really like the people I work with here. They pay well, they treat you well, if this is what you have to do to be successful here, I’ll do it.” We call those “good soldiers.” We can’t have them in positions of leadership. Over time, they may begin to see and believe, but they don’t move up if they haven’t made it internal. The next level we call Enrollment. These folks believe and live it out themselves. They can’t imagine not working this way.

We’re very careful that our significant positions of leadership are staffed only by folks in the highest category. Even a very high producer will not be in a significant position of leadership without this internalized understanding of how we operate.

Getting the right values for the organization is also vital. David Gill suggests starting with the Beatitudes of Jesus in Matthew 5. In his paper (Gill, 2013) started with the Scripture and developed values which could be used in any organization which would create the kind of open and honest relational environment that these leaders are seeking. Here is the summary:

- Openness and Humility—Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit
- Accountability and Responsibility—Blessed Are Those Who Mourn
- Freedom—Blessed Are the Meek
- Ethics and Excellence—Blessed Are Those Who Hunger for Righteousness
- Mistake-Tolerance—Blessed Are the Merciful
- Honesty, Integrity, and Transparency—Blessed Are the Pure in Heart
- Collaboration and Integration—Blessed Are the Peacemakers
- Courage and Persistence—Blessed Are Those Who Are Persecuted for Righteousness

But what if you are not the leader and do not have a chance to develop the values that guide your company? We have found that it is possible to do this in small work groups, even if not in the whole company. This can even form the foundation for an individual approaching relationships in his or her workplace.

Dealing with Broken Relationships



In the real world after the Fall, people are sinful. Relationships don't work as they should. In Genesis 4 Cain killed Abel, and the brokenness of relationships continues to this day. How do we deal with such brokenness? The Bible is filled with insight and examples for dealing with conflict and brokenness.

The Roman people struggled over moral issues arising through their work as discussed in Romans 15. The TOW article (2014) commented here:

Moral disagreements can be even more difficult at work, where there is less common ground. An interesting aspect in this regard is Paul's special concern for the weak. Although he tells both groups not to judge each other, he places a greater practical burden on the strong. "We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves" ([Rom. 15:1](#)). Our model for this is Jesus, "who did not please himself" ([Rom. 15:3](#)).

In another example, Abigail used kindness and grace to defuse a very difficult situation involving arrogant parties in I Samuel 25. From the TOW article (2014) we see:

Suddenly David is about to commit mass murder, while Nabal cares more about his pride than about his workers and family. These two arrogant men are unable to resolve an argument about sheep without spilling the blood of hundreds of innocent people. Thank God, Nabal's wise-hearted wife Abigail steps into the fray. She quickly prepares a feast for David and his men, then rides out to meet David with an apology that sets a new standard for courtesy in the Old Testament ([1 Sam. 25:26-31](#)). Yet wrapped in the courteous words are some hard truths David needs to hear. He is on the verge of shedding blood without cause, bringing on himself a guilt he could never escape.

In Matthew 18, Jesus lays out a conflict resolution process that starts with trying to resolve the issue with the person privately. In the TOW document, the process is described this way:

Although Jesus was speaking about conflict with "another member of the church" ([Matt. 18:15](#)), his method is a remarkable precursor to what is now recognized as best practice in the workplace. Even in the finest workplaces, conflicts arise. When they do, the only effective resolution is for those in conflict to engage each other directly, not to complain to others. Rather than play out a personal conflict in front of an audience, get with the person privately. In the age of electronic communication, Jesus' approach is more important than ever. All it takes is a name or two in the "cc:" line or one press of the "reply all" button to turn a simple disagreement into an office feud. Even though two people could keep an email chain to themselves, the possibilities for misunderstanding are multiplied when an impersonal medium such as e-mail is used. It might be best to take Jesus' advice literally, "Go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone" ([Matt. 18:15](#)). (Theology of Work biblical article, Matthew, 2011)

Sometimes, it is important to pause at first to make sure of the nature of the conflict. We are familiar with broken relationships starting with the slightest misunderstanding. Here is where grace comes in as we recognize the other person might not be perfect as I am not perfect. An interesting caution is in order here. When we go into a resolution we may conclude that the other person is in the wrong. Steve Brock, at a recent KIROS talk suggested we check ourselves at this point. If we are too eager to put the other person in his or her place, it suggests there may be a problem with our own attitude, whether or not we are right.

We adapted an ethical decision making model to go through a structured process to start with carefully identifying the problem. It is summarized by these five steps:

What is the relationship issue (dispute, my role, my responsibility, other people's role, the big goal)?

Who is affected?

Commitment to practices, values, and attitudes

Consideration of Alternatives and Potential Consequences

Taking Action

Expanding on these, the first step involves considering these questions to help assess the type of problem we are dealing with:

- My Role
 - What are we trying to do here?
 - Stopping to consider the issue from the other person's point of view
 - About me or something bigger?
 - How can I help?
- Resolving Conflict
 - Tensions, fear, gossip
 - Feeling slighted, being mistreated

After considering the potential affected parties (me, one other person, an organization, customers) helps focus the extent of the relationship issue. Then we consider (3) the practices, values, and attitudes. For example, we may carefully consider the eight values outlined in the previous section and what they have to say about my relationship with the other person and the fruit of the Spirit in thinking about attitudes at play that affect these relationships.

At the fourth step we carefully consider whose issue this is, what it will take to resolve the problem, who else (remembering the Matthew 18 principle) needs to be involved, and what the possible outcomes might be. In the final step, we take action recognizing that our first attempt may not give the result we thought it would.

In the story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50) we notice that even after Joseph forgives his brothers (Genesis 45:4-7) it was not enough. After their father died, they were still terrified of Joseph and he went through the process again. "We shouldn't be surprised if offering forgiveness takes a while to "stick," and our own motivations are misconstrued," *Accidental Executive*. Perhaps this is behind Jesus' instructions to Peter in Matthew 18:22-23: "Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."

Sample Cases



It is often helpful to spend time on sample issues of relationships, testing the model, applying the values, and even role playing in preparation for real situations. We recommend that readers draw on cases from their own experience, but offer these as examples of cases to work on and discuss. While there is no “answer” to these issues, we have included some comments on each case to encourage the discussion.

Beneath my station

You are tired of the work assignment your boss has given you. You believe it is beneath your abilities, and you want a new assignment. You see your boss in conversation with another person in the workplace. How would you approach your boss and what would you say?

Comments: Is this the right place and time to have this discussion? Have you attempted to understand the issues from your boss’s point of view? What kind of outcome are you hoping for, and how might the approach affect the outcome?

Credit where Credit is Due

You thought this colleague at work was a friend. Together you had laid out a great idea for the company. But then you arrived at work and heard your boss talking about the idea, with your friend identified as the creator. Your friend gets a promotion. And there is no mention of your contribution. What do you do? How might Christian values inform your choices?

Comments: It is important to get your emotions under control before saying anything. You probably assume that your friend and colleague claimed credit for the idea, but do you know that? Who should you talk with first according to Matthew 18? Can you see this person (if what you suspect is true) as an image bearer of God? What are your alternatives if things are as bad as they appear?

From Friend to Boss

You have been promoted and now are managing a group of people that used to be your colleagues. A person you had been very close to when you were colleagues is now acting out and rejecting your leadership. What do you do? How might Christian values inform your choices?

Comments: *If the situation had been reversed, how might you feel? Have you tried to see it from the other person's point of view before responding? Can you seek to rebuild the relationship by demonstrating empathy and engaging the other person in a healthy way? How much time should you give this?*

Difficult Boss

You have a boss who is both seemingly incompetent and also puts you down frequently. You find that you dread going to work in the morning. What do you do and how might Christian values inform your choices?

Comments: *Can you see this person as an image bearer of God? What might be motivating your boss, and can you be supportive of his or her mission? When Paul said to slaves that their true boss was the Lord Christ (Col. 3:23), what could you learn from him during this difficult period? Have you prayed about this situation?*

Emoticons Aren't Enough

You are a member of a global team. Lots of misunderstandings develop as you work together on web conferences and via email. Do you have any insights to offer your boss as you try to become part of the solution for a more effective workplace?

Comments: *In a global team with technology mediated communications, what do you know about the culture of the other person? Do you know anything about them as people, or only as workers? Are there some things you could do, or recommend to the boss for all of you to do, that could help fill in the relationship gaps that are there because of the technology?*

Summary and Conclusions

Relationships are often treated as personal and private. We have shown they are much more than this. They are vital to spiritual development, they are fundamentally important in our workplaces, and they even reflect on our relationship with God. In a broken world this side of the final redemption, we cannot expect our workplaces to be free of challenges in this area. In January, 2015 Tim Keller (pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City) tweeted, "People are messy. Therefore expect relationships will be messy. Expect messiness." Whether you are the leader or the subordinate, whether you are right or wrong, whether your colleague understands your commitment to Christ or not, relationships require attention and tuning. We should be both motivated and equipped to address these relationships, not as ordinary things outside the purview of our faith, but as central to our life in Christ.

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