

RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT. A KEY SKILL IN WORK AND LIFE¹

From experience, and from systems theory, we know that a management team, or a family, works well not only when the individuals that compose it are the "right" ones (professionally and/or on a human level), but above all when the relationships between them, their mutual fit, is "good".

Relationships matter in almost every dimension of life. The African proverb is well known: "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go well accompanied". Accompanied by someone, we might add, with whom synergies and symbiosis are generated, two of the fruits of a good relationship.

The quality of relationships is the factor that most influences personal happiness, health, the smooth running of a family and the functioning of business teams. If we further develop the ability to create good relationships, our life horizon will expand.

The problem with relationships is that they are asymmetrical and therefore fragile. Deteriorating a relationship is much easier than improving it. As a result, we are often surrounded by professional and personal relationships that are far from optimal.

Relationships deteriorate much more easily than they improve in professional settings. In personal settings, the ratio is even more demanding: for every perceived failure, five successes are required for the relationship to be unaffected, rather than three.

Therefore, to paraphrase the expression popularized by Clinton's campaign manager in the 1992 election, we should remember that the key to life "is relationships, stupid."

The elements of a good relationship

The quality of a relationship is based on at least three elements.

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The first is mutual respect. It consists of listening with the intention of understanding and learning. It also implies understanding that it is legitimate for the other party to be, or to think, in a different way.

Without syncretism. Giving space to healthy discrepancy. Simply trying not to prejudge but to understand.

Respect must be mutual; both parties must exercise it so that the relationship becomes symbiotic; that is, so that it simultaneously benefits both parties.

Mutual respect makes the criteria and mental rules of the people in the relationship more convergent. This reduces the number and intensity of dysfunctional conflicts.

Mutual respect allows better decisions to be made through the contrast of criteria as long as there is a minimum common ground for understanding each other. Respect increases peripheral vision and therefore the ability to understand complex phenomena. Today's complexity makes it unlikely that anyone understands or knows everything. From a respectful conversation with people who can provide value comes the opportunity to develop a more complete vision and a more executable plan of action.

Mutual respect is therefore the basis of good governance, whether on boards of directors, management committees or simply in the family.

The second element is mutual trust. Trust acts like oil that greases relationships and reduces friction.

To build trust, a good mutual knowledge is necessary to understand and feel what is important to the other person. This mutual knowledge allows us to gauge the credibility, reliability, empathy and personal agenda (intentions) of the parties. Through these elements we judge whether the other person is trustworthy.

To trust someone is to take a risk since one of the parties has to give first and the other may not reciprocate. Precisely for this reason, trust generates reciprocity. It predisposes one to give first because it is felt that there will be correspondence.

Reciprocity makes it possible to align long-term interests and avoid the inevitable conflicts that arise from the clash of short-term interests. In a relationship where trust is high, abundant synergies can be generated.

With trust we talk about the toothpaste effect. Toothpaste (trust) is "easy" to take out of the tube (lose) and almost impossible to put back into the tube. If you lose trust in someone, it is difficult to regain it.

The third element of a good relationship has to do with mutual care. In this element comes into play the heart that has been present in the previous ones, but not with the intensity of now.

Mutual care consists of helping the other party in his or her needs of various kinds, such as health, time management, purpose, spirituality, etc.

Mutual care is especially valuable when a person is going through a circumstance that causes them to need help, whether or not they are aware of that need.

Respect, trust and care must be mutual, and therefore, for relationships to be stable, they require the cooperation of both parties. Bringing the other person into the game creates sustainability in the relationship. That is why it is not enough to respect; one must also strive to be respected. The same goes for trust and care.

A relationship is parasitic when there is an imbalance between what is given and what is received. This has been the usual modus operandi of those who have held power and used it for their own benefit. Especially if they suffered from behavioral disorders such as sociopathy, Machiavellianism or narcissism. These are the extractive elites that have hindered social and economic progress.

A relationship becomes symbiotic when it is balanced and, above all, when a positive feedback spiral is generated between the parties. This is the great opportunity that is open to us if we work on it

In the three elements we have been talking about there is an emotional bias: the "feeling" that the other person generates in me influences the level of respect, trust and above all care with which one will feel comfortable.

It is once again the pulse between sensations (what makes me feel) and sense (what is good for me and for the other person in the short and long term). When sense wins, not always at the expense of sensations, we all win.

Some of the signs that indicate whether a relationship is working well or not.

Signs that a relationship is working well are as follows:

- Interest in the other person's things,
- Openness to what you can propose,
- Active predisposition to collaborate,
- Sincere friendship and
- What we could call fraternity, that is to say, the expression of an enormous harmony whereby one is willing to do whatever is necessary for the other person.

These five signs go from good to better. With the people with whom you are most interdependent, it is important to build relationships in which these signs are present.

Conversely, the symptoms that a relationship is not working are as follows:

- Ignore,
- Feeling uncomfortable with the other person,
- Habitually rejecting what the other person proposes,
- Feeling resentment toward the other person,