

The Deblieux Report

MAY 2016

THE COLLEAGUE RELATIONSHIP

YOUR SUCCESS AS A WORKPLACE LEADER DEPENDS ON YOUR ABILITY TO DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN EFFECTIVE WORKING RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR LEADERSHIP COLLEAGUES THROUGHOUT YOUR ORGANIZATION.

Tempting as it may be, you do not live on an island. Your team needs you to have relationships with other managers that give you ready access to valuable information and resources. They cannot afford to be stymied by your lack of relationships with other managers or your poor relationship with a colleague.

Your team cannot succeed by itself. It is one piece of a larger puzzle which, when pieced together, meets the expectations of customers or clients.

Your team expects you to make sure that their piece fits properly into the organizational puzzle. It depends on you to coordinate its work with the work of other departments. It expects you to work with other managers to stay abreast of current developments, implement new programs, and solve problems. In short, your team succeeds when you succeed at building and maintaining collaborative relationships with your leadership colleagues.

It is one thing to say that relationships with your colleagues are important. It is quite another to develop them and maintain them. First, these relationships often come with competing interests. The Sales Manager wants to make a sale. The Production Manager wants to keep the line move efficiently. The Finance Manager wants to terminate a poorly performing employee. The Human Resources Manager wants to prevent a lawsuit. These conflicting goals are the harbinger of relationship conflicts.

Second, much of your communication with your colleagues is through e-mail. E-mail is efficient. It is not necessarily effective. Misunderstandings abound through electronic communication. The message sent is too often not the message received. Little miscommunications lead to bigger misunderstandings that color the relationship between colleagues.

Third, and most importantly, much of your communication with your colleagues is about problems. You can go hours, days, or even weeks, without connecting. When you do connect, one of you is focused on resolving a problem in your path. Without realizing it, your body language, your words, and the tone of your voice communicate frustration or irritation. Your colleagues feel every bit of your irritation. They tread cautiously in your path.

YOU HAVE TO WORK HARD TO AVOID THE BUMPS IN THE RELATIONSHIP ROAD AND SMOOTH THEM OUT WHEN YOU ENCOUNTER THEM.

The first step in creating an effective relationship with your colleagues is recognizing that you speak different occupational languages. The language of the Warehouse is different than the language of Purchasing. The language of Nursing is different than the language of the Laboratory. The language of the day shift is different than the language of the night shift. You do not have to speak the language of each of your colleagues, but you do have to understand how it differs from the language of your profession. You have to slow down once in a while to ask your colleague to explain what they are saying. In turn, you have help your colleagues understand the language of your department or profession.

Once you recognize the differences in your occupational languages, you have to work hard to respect the professional expertise of your colleagues. None of us like to admit it, but we all like to be an expert in the field of our counterparts. If you are the Quality Manager, you like to think you know as much about HR as the HR Manager does. If you are the Maintenance Manager, you like to think you know as much about Customer Service as the Customer Service Manager does. You don't, but you like to feel it. Feeling more knowledgeable than you are, causes you to jump ahead in discussions. It lets you draw half-baked conclusions about complex issues before you completely understand them. Most importantly, it causes tension that gets in the way of true collaboration and teamwork.

This dichotomy can make a leadership team strong. It can also tear it apart. It is your responsibility to help it do the former, not the later. You add to the team when you take responsibility for helping your colleagues understand your specialty on their terms. You add strength when you help your colleagues help you understand their specialty by asking questions and learning

from the answers. This is not a story about blind allegiance. It is about understanding the problem before you jump into finding a solution. It is about giving and expecting reliable insights into each other's knowledge and experience base. When it works, you have open, collaborative discussions that lead to creative and innovative solutions. When it doesn't, you argue, you avoid each other, and you suffer through long painful debates and endless counterproductive meetings.

BEING AN EFFECTIVE COLLEAGUE REQUIRES A UNIQUE ABILITY TO ADMIT WHEN YOU ARE WRONG AND ACCEPT SINCERE APOLOGIES WHEN THEY ARE OFFERED.

You and your fellow workplace leaders deal with a dizzying array of issues at an unprecedented pace each day. You are bound to step on each other's toes. It happens. It just happens. Each of you has to have the emotional maturity to understand how your words, actions, and behaviors affect the other. Sometimes, you have to walk down the hall to say, "I was wrong. I jumped to a conclusion. Please accept my apology. I will work to be sure it does not happen again."

Likewise, you need to recognize an apology when your colleague offers one. You have to be humble enough to give him or her the benefit of the doubt. You have to believe that they did not set out to make your life difficult. Rather, they made an honest mistake that led to a misunderstanding, but not to the end of the world. If you expect your colleague to do it for you, you have to do it for him or her.

YOU MUST DISAGREE WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES PRIVATELY, BUT SUPPORT THEM PUBLICLY.

There is a myth out there that paints a picture of leadership colleagues always getting along with each other. It is just that – a myth. It is impossible

to find the best answers if you always play nice – or worse yet, always play at playing nice. Successful leadership colleagues feed on the energy of a good debate. They thrive on their ability to hold each other accountable for keeping commitments with each other. But, and it is a very large but, they do it all behind closed doors. They focus on the business problem, not the character, of each other. They do not pout. They do not sulk. They say, “We need to confront this issue. We need to put it behind us. We need to do it now.” When they fail to resolve it, they agree to disagree without a grudge. They take the issue to a higher authority to find a solution. They accept the solution, because they know they will both benefit from it in the long run.

YOUR TEAM WILL NOT TELL YOU DIRECTLY, BUT IT HAS LITTLE PATIENCE FOR YOUR INABILITY TO GET ALONG WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES.

Apekcha learned this lesson the hard way. She returned from a meeting one day more than a little frustrated with Steve, a Manager in another department. She announced to her team over the low walls of their cubicles that, “Steve is a complete idiot. I can’t stand having to work with him.” Theotus spoke for the team when he said, “I am glad I don’t have to do your job.” Apekcha continued to share her frustration after each meeting that involved Steve over the next several weeks. Finally, Theotus walked into her office and closed the door. He sat down, looked directly at Apekcha and said, “I hope you take this for what it is worth. We are tired of you complaining about Steve. You are always telling us we have to get along with each other. We don’t understand why you don’t have to get along with Steve. Your little battle is beginning to affect our relationship with his team. There is more than one person on this team thinking about leaving because of it. I am one of them.”

Most of us are not lucky enough to have Theotus on our team. We lose him and other good people before we find out what we did wrong.

COLLEAGUE RELATIONSHIPS ARE ONE LEG OF THREE RELATIONSHIP STOOL THAT YOU MUST KEEP IN BALANCE TO SUCCEED AS A WORKPLACE LEADER.

The first leg of the relationship stool is your relationship with your boss. We discussed it in the January 2016¹ issue of The Deblieux Report. Your relationships with your direct reports is the third leg. We will discuss it in the next issue.

Each leg of the stool is a reminder that successful Workplace Leaders constantly look into the reflection of their “selfie-stick” to diagnose the impact of their words, actions, behaviors, and decisions. They use what they see in the reflection to determine if what they are doing and how they are doing it is working for them, their boss, their, team and their organization. The good ones make adjustments. Are you one of them?

Mike Deblieux, SHRM-SCP
mike@deblieux.com • 714.293.9156

¹ <http://www.deblieux.com/the-deblieux-report/>