

# Failing Business Relationships: Navigating the Relationship Life Cycle to enable more Choice

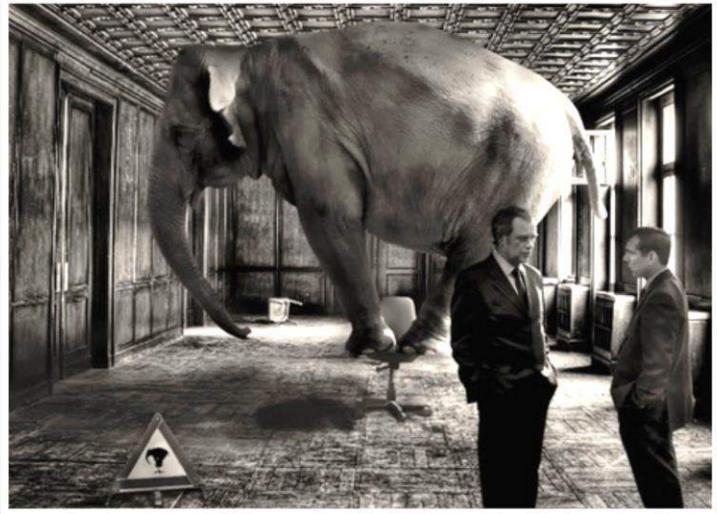
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*Organisational life primarily consist of navigating systems, functions, processes, people, and hierarchies. Relationships at work, at their best, can act as a catalyst to navigation, serving as a resource that propels you forward to achieve a wider goal. Failing relationships, however, detract, drain, and pull you away from the goal. Since the lowest common denominator and highest valued resource in any organisation is its people, second to that the relationships that exist between people, it is impossible to achieve the highest level of organisational success if business relationships are failing.*

While investing heavily in recruitment and retention of the best talent is valuable, if we end here senior leaders are at risk of a massive leakage in value from people. Building and maintaining effective relationships takes work and often requires guidance and support. It's not enough to assume that bright and talented people will 'just know' how to navigate the intricacies of human and system dynamics, or that it's common sense. Great relationships are fundamental to personal and professional thriving and yet many feel disempowered, un-resourceful, or unaware of how to build and maintain effective relationships at work. Without a good level of self- and other-awareness and emotional intelligence, we can get it very, very wrong if we just leave it to guesswork.

Part of navigating with skill involves having an awareness of the general map. That is, realising that relationships have lifecycles with different stages. They have a life-force and dynamic of their own which *both two people are responsible for and have part ownership in*. They are active contributors to the life of this relationship. The dynamic is the direct result of how well we have or are *navigating* the product of our individual characters and what we bring to the relationship.

Relationships also have a shelf-life. That is, some are not meant to last forever, even those that we feel deeply connected to. In fact there is something admirable about ending a relationship with respect and honouring the other. The problem though is that you rarely hear of a great relationship break up. 'Break ups' are often rooted in conflict, disagreement, contempt, and literally 'die' either by a blunt severing to the life chord (a massive blow out) or a slow and painful experience of starvation (withdrawal, avoidance, and distancing to the point where the relationship is starved and dies). Even worse, these break ups have a cost when not done well.



At the personal level, it can elicit anxiety, depression and anger. At the relationship level, there is a lost opportunity to extract the most value out of the investment made so far, despite the decision made to end it. And at the organisational level, the impact of a business relationship break up is magnified (at its worst, a rift between, for example, CEO & COO can lead to a restructuring that affects the entire organisation). Isn't it interesting how little time, focus, and energy we put into building and maintaining relationships- a natural and pivotal part of human functioning that has a massive impact on personal and professional life, especially when they go sour?

## The 5 Stages of Relationships

The first part of learning how best to navigate is by understanding the relationship landscape as a whole. In other words, getting familiar with the 5 Stages of Relationships\*. Relationships work and research has generally been done in the context of interpersonal, romantic, or marital relationships; something that we can all resonate with in some way, shape, or form and at some point in our lives. While the context changes, the coming together of two people for a particularly reason in any relationship, remains true and transcends context. For the sake of value creation and professional and organisational development, it would be foolish to ignore the parallels that can be drawn to the professional business context:

\*as identified by Dr. Susan Campbell during a study of hundreds of couples

**1. Romance Stage-** Often found in 'the honeymoon period' at work. At its best, this stage generates a sense of novelty, peak interest, and curiosity in the other which motivates us to take interest, engage, and connect. There is active exploration and often a neurological basis to accompany it; endorphins, the 'feel good' chemical, are released and create an association that implicitly draws us towards the other. The peril of this stage is that confirmation bias can creep in- we look for evidence that 'you're like me!' and there is hope for a bright future and a perceived mutual benefit.

**2. Power Struggle Stage-** Where workplace break ups happen the most. At this stage, differences and diversity that were once interesting and admirable, are now seen as difficult, challenging, and sometimes weaknesses. There is often an unequal value exchange where 'I' think I am better than 'you' (either consciously or unconsciously) and therefore the perceived cost of the relationship investment outweighs the benefit. It is this stage where navigation often fails and people tend to forget the benefit that conscious relationship-building efforts could have for the sake of a mutually benefiting partnership that moves both people towards achieving wider business outcomes.

**3. Stability Stage-** Where navigation kicks in to help people learn how to leverage personal differences for better relationship, and therefore business, outcomes. There is an effort to make it work, which requires appreciation and acknowledgment of the other and a sense of permission-giving to allow them to bring that into the relationship space. The focus is more present-oriented as two people try and understand how to get the best out of each other.

**4. Commitment Stage-** After some navigation, active choices are continually and repeatedly made around building and maintaining the relationship. Efforts are purposeful rather than out of necessity and the intention is to create a healthy and functioning relationship dynamic.

**5. Co-Creation Stage-** After having reached a healthy level of functioning, the focus turns to the outside world- often a wider common business or team goal where each person will benefit. While the relationship will always need feeding and nurturing, there is a basis of trust and positive functioning that makes it safer to shift the focus in creating something larger than the relationship.

### **Why many business relationships fail**

Business relationships often fail, miserably, when two people are caught in the Power Struggle stage. A reluctance of one or both to let go, show themselves, be genuinely curious and non-judgmental, perspective-take and empathise, is often diminished and judgment is clouded by ego and fixed assumptions.

In the same way that it's impossible to have a high performing team without some sort of personal negotiation or compromise for the sake of the wider team, it is next to impossible to be part of a healthy and high functioning two-way business relationship without each person bringing a certain degree of humility to the party; to be able to let go of the need to always look good and be right; to be able to take the face off and say 'hey, I'm not perfect either nor do I have all the answers- let's see how together we can make this work and learn from each other'.



### **How to gain Objectivity and Perspective to make the right Choices for a better Relationship Impact**

In the world of relationships, the 'do nothing' option is watching and witnessing a relationship die. That is, passively withdrawing, distancing, and avoiding, and interacting only when necessary. Accepting responsibility and making conscious choices around dealing with a failing relationship is far more valuable, honourable, and serving to individual wellbeing and business impact. Seeking perspective and objectivity is key, as when we are caught in the throws, we become subjective and blind to see the choices available. It is only when we can gain more perspective through objectivity that we can really start to see what changes and modifications we can choose to make in order to achieve the relationship outcome we want. So listen to feedback of what the Relationship Impact is having on the wider team or business. Proactively create valuable opportunities or informal chats to 'check out' your relationship waters with the other. Healthily challenge each other to bring honesty to conversations on how to get the best out of each other. Or call in a third party that can act as an objective pair of eyes and ears to offer a new perspective. Importantly, be mindful of the dynamic and impact of your key relationships at work; sweeping things under the rug and just 'getting by' will eventually take its toll and get in the way of achieving your highest ambitions.