Relationships at work

by Chris Heunis

When slogans like "winning with people", "our work force – our family", "people are our biggest asset" and "prevent injuries – we care" greet one as one enters the headquarters of trendsetting corporations, one cannot deny that relationship management is high on the scorecard.

These days, nobody questions the value of sound relationships at work. With the support industry cashing in on this evolving market, clients are confused about service offerings that involve coaching, mentoring and team building. Executives with effective soft skills will manage relationships through difficult times and will contribute to soaring productivity and retaining talent. This suggests that leaders with the "soft" knowhow will contribute to organisational stability and growth.

Research conducted by Gottman suggests that there is a strong link between work relationships and one's relationships at home. An abusive person at home will most likely display the same kind of behaviour at work. Gottman further suggests that in a marriage where a husband is not willing to share power with his wife, there is an 81% chance that it will end in divorce. This suggests that autocratic practices are doomed to fail.
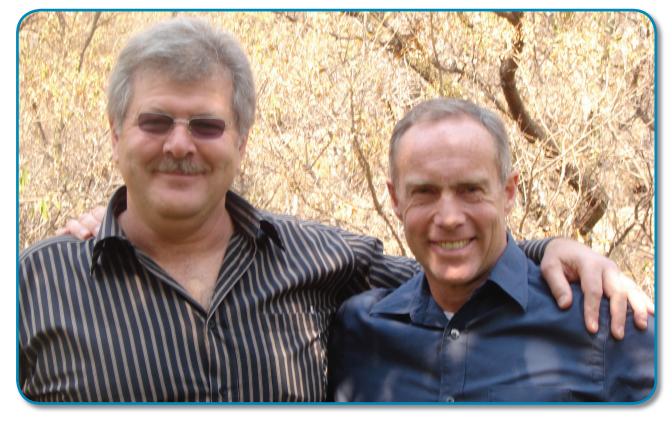
Consider the following:

- Successful relationships accentuate the positive. Try to say "yes" as often as possible. Relationships deteriorate because of the way in which one reasons. Seek to understand.
- Do not be afraid to address a difference in opinion – embrace it and work through it.
- Good relationships are characterised by moments of attachment (vulnerability and intimacy). Do not misunderstand what is meant by "intimacy". This "moment" of intimacy can be characterised by a higher level of connectivity between two people. When both individuals share values like respect, integrity and openness, one should never avoid these moments. If one does, however, feel uncomfortable, check your values!
- Trivial moments filled with fun and laughter provide opportunities for profound connection, according to Gottman. For example, when one gives a small child a bath and he splashes, you can react in one of two ways. If you are impatient and short-tempered, you will miss an opportunity to meet the child in his world and on his terms. If you splash back and clean up later, you will have shared "intimacy" by connecting on a different level.
- Intimacy is the social glue that holds teams together by creating moments of truth between colleagues (through the medium of team building).
- Spread moments of intimacy equally between all your colleagues. This powerful moment becomes distorted when other team members do not share in the same level of openness. Those members will start to compete for your attention. If their attempts are unsuccessful, they will eventually lose interest. Those members who are excluded will group together and will jokingly gossip about this "unhealthy" or "romantic" relationship.

The importance of sound relationships at work will be realised as human resources move higher up the priority list of skills that are required for successful business leaders. ➋

Chris Heunis is the founder and executive director of the Team Building Institute.

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Dr Siebert Benade (left) and Dr Chris Heunis (TBI) (right) celebrating the success of an eight-year business relationship between the GSTM and TBI.

"The programme offered by TBI to our master's students at the GSTM over the last eight years developed into an essential part of their development as people and managers. Participants... specifically gained from right-brain development towards whole-brain functioning."

Dr Siebert Benade - Graduate School of Technology Management, UP

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