



HOW TO CULTIVATE WINNING RELATIONSHIPS



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My journey has been long and winding, with plenty of bumps in the road.

I was originally planning to become an engineer—studying physics, applied mathematics, and economics. However, those plans changed in my high school economics class, “How Banks Create Money.” This resulted in a change in direction, and I soon joined one of the largest banks in the UK. My career for the next fourteen years was set. (By the way, banking is nothing like that chapter in economics!)

I thrived in the industry, reveling in the numbers and the predictability of ratios, analyzing the growth strategies for complex businesses, making recommendations, and approving million-pound loan applications. (Some of them seemed to weigh a million pounds, too.)

This wasn't a time when much consideration was given to building relationships across the organization. We were still a traditional, command and control, rule-based environment. This didn't last, though. The early '90s was a time of sweeping change in the UK banking industry. Deregulation was increasing competition. Customers were demanding personal service, and a relationship-based approach to banking.

I felt that a focus on relationship, between employees and toward customers, could differentiate our bank from its competitors. And it did. After leading those change efforts, which impacted both the organizational culture and our approach to clients, I chose to leave the relatively safe confines of the bank.

My next stop was the volatile telecom industry, in the midst of the dot-com bubble, where I joined an American firm that promptly exposed me to a global business environment.

Working relationships became even more complex when time, distance, and national culture were part of the equation. In this fast-paced startup environment, the value of relationships was high. But that didn't necessarily mean the business culture was healthy.

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This opportunity ultimately brought me and my family to the United States, where we needed to build new relationships, both personal and professional, and a new support structure in a new country.

As I reflect back on my career, there are many colleagues I'd jump at the chance to work with again. They challenged me to exceed expectations—not just the expectations of others, but ones I had for myself. They provided “tough love” and feedback when I needed to hear it, and they were there by my side cheering me on in the good times. They were the individuals I could call upon in a time of need, and without hesitation they would do everything within their power to help. Those same people also knew they could call me in their time of need.

These were my allies.

On the other side of the coin were the colleagues who left a different impact. These individuals were examples of what not to do, the person not to bring onto the team, the person around whom you had to watch your back. When they left the organization, a collective sigh of relief was heard. These were adversaries. Thankfully, I can count my adversarial relationships on one hand.

A Toxic Waste

Early in my career, I experienced a toxic work environment—a boss who micromanaged and took credit for my work, along with a peer who was resentful of my promotion. Despite a number of measurable successes, my memory of this time is a lack of fulfillment. There were many days when I was close to quitting.

My friendly colleagues would ask, “How do you put up with it? They should do something!”

We knew something was wrong, but neither this mysterious “they” nor I had the perspective, tools, and approaches to tackle the situation. So instead, I did the “British” thing, keeping a stiff upper lip and working through it.

I epitomized the World War II meme “Keep Calm and Carry On.” In other words, I did nothing, I said nothing, and I hoped the quality of my work would somehow win out.

It did, eventually, but at some cost. I was stressed out, continuously looking over my shoulder, concerned about what might happen. What a waste of energy!

This experience also taught me that relationships at work are the key to our success and our well being, and that they are ultimately critical to the amount of enjoyment we get during office hours.

And, yes, having fun and feeling satisfied with relationships at work are important! For many of us, the hours we spend at work far exceed the time we spend with our families or in social settings. So why not actually enjoy this massive part of our lives?

Working respectfully is not a win/lose power struggle. Nor is it “soft” to have a conversation about how you work together. When you cultivate winning relationships, everyone involved can benefit—especially you.

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Bottom Line Metrics

My business successes aren't only measured in fun-metrics, but there are plenty of financial and competitive advantages to enjoying positive relationships at work—and there are also many real-world liabilities for toxic relationships.

Personally, my self-confidence faltered in negative environments. My focus moved from leading with my strengths to operating from a fear of failure. As I avoided risk and mistakes at each turn, my creativity faltered. I became reactive instead of proactive. I sought permission at each small step along the way, rather than taking the game-changing actions the new role required.

For the organization, the consequences included a slowing of information and decision-making, as my boss insisted upon being consulted on every decision. Others within the team hesitated to work with my boss for fear of coming into the crosshairs. Employees became disillusioned, engagement fell, and individuals (especially the high performers) chose to leave the organization.

In my banking career, I quickly realized that it was not enough to have a detailed business plan, an innovative product, or a leading edge service. To be successful, organizations also needed to focus on the people side of the business; ensuring that employees were working together to deliver on the business plan. We saw too many companies overlook this critical element, and as a result business floundered.

The business plan means nothing. You can have the shiniest new product, but if you don't get people aligned to execute the plan, you do not have a sustainable business. This is why I do what I do. This is why I wrote my book, *Cultivate*. Relationships matter.

The reality is that any relationship—professional, social, or familial—has two participants. As the phrase goes, “It takes two to tango,” and as a ballroom dancer I know this to be true! I owed it to my boss just as much as I did to myself to ask for what I needed. However difficult, I needed to find the opportunity and words to explain the impact of our working relationship on me, on my enthusiasm for her, and on my enthusiasm for the company.

But How?

Leaders and managers end up spending a disproportionate amount of time immersed in resolving interpersonal conflicts of one sort or another. In the best scenario, the relationships we encounter are those that leave us energized for the future—a group of engaged people working together rather than against each other.

Even when people focus on taking established relationships from “ground floor to C-Suite” they don’t address those relationships that are already in the basement—because they simply don’t know how to cultivate them! Most leadership programs focus on the characteristics of high-performing teams and engaged employees, but spend little time on the nuts and bolts of improving working relationships.

I've also come across frameworks that acknowledge the importance of relationship building in the workplace; however, they seem to present relationships as a linear set of experiences—a buy me flowers and I will fall in love with you approach.

Relationships at work are not as neat and tidy as linear models may lead us to believe. Relationships are fluid by nature; people and relationships come and go. I wanted to understand why some stood the test of time and conflict while others crashed and burned or simply fizzled out. We can all be great on our best days, but in times of uncertainty or turbulence, we may have a tendency to throw out the rule book and resort back to counterproductive behaviors.

Small World

If the world is small, the business world is microscopic. This fact should encourage you, but it may also scare the daylights out of you. Good news about your accomplishments will spread, but at nowhere near the pace of bad news. Your reputation precedes you, as the saying goes.

Let's look at the positive side of the smallness of planet earth. I was sitting at the Anchorage airport, having facilitated leadership programs at the North Slope of Alaska. (It's a long way from anywhere!) It was my first trip to Alaska, and I knew no one in Anchorage, let alone anyone sitting at the airport at four o'clock in the morning.

The royal wedding was being broadcast on the screens in the terminal, and the lady next to me started to chat. Apparently I have an accent, and she wanted to talk about my life in England. It was early, and I wanted to see the bride's dress before boarding, so we chatted. Eventually the conversation turned to personal things. I shared that I lived in Colorado. She knew someone in Colorado . . . it turned out that her friend was someone I know very well. We immediately went from strangers with nothing in common to acquaintances with someone in common!

This is just one of hundreds of chance encounters I have experienced in my travels around the world—encounters that only serve to reinforce that we are just one conversation away from reaching our dreams, or at least taking a step closer to them. If we take the time to talk to those around us we can cultivate relationships that result in a positive and lasting impact for both of us.

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Theory Is Not Enough

I've made my own share of mistakes when it comes to professional relationships in the workplace: self-confidence interpreted as arrogance, a fear of having the tough conversations, and not providing others with the feedback they needed to hear to ensure their success.

I've had the opportunity to facilitate hundreds of leadership programs, workshops, and executive coaching programs with organizations across the globe (more than three thousand leaders, in twenty countries, on four continents), from startups to Fortune 100 companies.

To cultivate winning relationships, and assess the health of our working relationships, we must ask ourselves these questions about each person we rely on for success:

1. **Can I count on you?**
2. **Can I depend on you?**
3. **Do I care about you?**
4. **Do I trust you?**

Lose sight of these questions and the health of your working relationships will decline.

And if you really want to start growing personally and professionally, imagine how others would answer those questions about you!

Recognize that not all relationships will start (or finish) well.

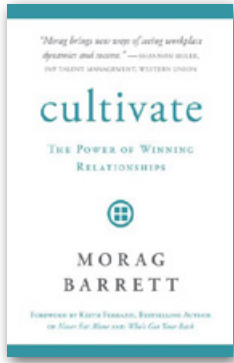
There will be times when things transform quickly; there will also be times that a relationship suddenly takes a step backwards.

Stay in the game, keep asking yourself the four questions, and when necessary, change your game.

It is possible to build an ecosystem of positive relationships that will transform your career and the careers of those around you. But this is more than a “be nice to each other.”

Transforming your business relationships, and workplace culture, takes a personal commitment. But as you grow, you’ll reap the rewards on a daily basis! 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Morag Barrett's experience ranges from senior executive coaching to developing high impact teams across Europe, America, and Asia. She is a sought-after speaker, trainer and executive coach. Since launching SkyeTeam she has had the opportunity to work with clients in a range of industries including: Healthcare, Telecom, Mining, Manufacturing, Engineering, and Technology. Morag earned a Master of Human Resource Management and received the Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) designation. She is also a recognized business coach for the Corporate Coach University and is a Chartered Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in the UK.

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