Chapter 1

MAXIMIZING THE GOOD AND MINIMIZING THE BAD: RELATIONSHIPS IN ORGANIZATIONS

Helena D. Cooper-Thomas

School of Psychology, The University of Auckland

Rachel L. Morrison

Management, AUT University

Abstract

In this chapter we introduce the complexities of relationships in organizations, and outline why they are important to study. We discuss the main themes of this book providing a brief overview of the chapters and making links between them. The chapters canvas a wide range of organizational relationships, both positive and fruitful, and dysfunctional and damaging.

Like them or loathe them we cannot escape the people we work with. Working adults spend around a third of their waking lives at work, and much of this time interacting with colleagues either directly or virtually. Further, our colleagues can become key players in our social life, through romantic liaisons, family links, or guanxi relationships that bridge organizational boundaries. Our colleagues can provide us with social support and advice, but they can also be a source of negative behaviors such as bullying. Thus, while we may seek to establish relationships with our colleagues, these work relationships will vary greatly in how and why they develop as well as in the outcomes they produce. Workers will form strong bonds with some colleagues that are enjoyable and mutually beneficial, while with other

colleagues they may form more neutral or even negative relationships, and may try to avoid interactions where possible.

Our book has two main purposes. The first purpose is to present an up-to-date review of key issues around relationships in organizations, including both positive and negative elements of relationships, and also the context of relationships, including cultural and technological aspects. This follows on from the 2009 book *Friends and Enemies in Organizations: A Work Psychology Perspective* and widens the focus beyond friendships and enemyships to all manner of organizational relationships, from romantic liaisons to virtual relationships, from relationships with leaders to those with family members. The second purpose of this book is to have a positive impact for future relationships in organizations, through inspiring relevant future research to further explore these topics, as well as by encouraging best practice in achieving optimal workplace relationships. With regard to further research, there is plenty of scope for academics, researchers, and students to explore the myriad issues around workplace relationships, with the richest opportunities identified in each chapter. On the practical side, because relationships with colleagues are so pervasive to our experience of work, translating research knowledge into practice can have broad benefits to organizational members. This volume is relevant to both practitioners who may put policies or procedures in place to optimize workplace relationships (and minimize harmful ones), and also for individual employees looking for ideas on how to manage and ameliorate their relationships with colleagues, direct reports, and supervisors.

Why relationships in organizations are important

As we noted above, full-time employees spend a great many of their waking hours at work, often interacting and collaborating with colleagues to get their work done. For individual employees, the experience of work can be a source of happiness, engagement, and even joy, with colleagues often influencing each other to shape how enjoyable work is

(Bakker & Xanthopoulou, 2009; Fisher, 2010). Moreover, how we feel about the experiences and relationship we have at can work spill over into our time out of work (Sonnentag, Mojza, Demerouti, & Bakker, 2012); time spent with friends or family, or in leisure pursuits. Thus positive relationships at work may bring far reaching benefits.

Yet relationships may not always progress as we might hope. We may not establish the good working relationship with our manager that we want, or we may find that a particular colleague is persistently petty and undermining. Research on bullying shows that negative behaviors can have detrimental effects on individual employees leading to absenteeism, depression, and even suicide (see Chapter Ten by Gardner and colleagues). Clearly there are serious risks to bad workplace relationships.

For organizations also, positive relationships between colleagues have benefits. They may attract employees in the first place (Tews, Michel, & Bartlett, 2012), and can support employees to act more supportively and collegially. The impact that friendships have on individual's experiences of work can be profound; improving satisfaction and commitment, increasing cohesion and reducing intentions to leave (Morrison, 2004; Morrison, 2009).

Organizations will also suffer when workplace relationships go sour. Colleagues who witness negative behaviors are affected by this, and experience lower wellbeing and report lower performance (Cooper-Thomas, Catley, Bentley, Gardner, O'Driscoll, & Trenberth, 2011). For those on the receiving end of negative behavior within relationships, they are more likely to be absent, to feel disengaged, and eventually to leave the organization altogether (Morrison & Nolan, 2007), all considerable costs to organizations.

There are also new challenges to organizations, such as how virtual relationships develop and may be managed, as well as how supervisor-direct report (subordinate) relationships can best be improved, since it is at this level that individual performance is kept on track. With increasing numbers of women at all levels of the workforce, gender issues

continue to be increasingly salient. The globalization of work also makes it important to develop productive relationships with colleagues from different cultures, for example when colleagues are immigrants, or when we are working away from our home culture.

Overview of the book

Our chapter contributors come from around the globe including Europe, the UK, China, Australasia and North America. This provides a rich banquet of evidence-based ideas from diverse perspectives. All authors are successful academics and leaders in their field. Their expert summaries provide different perspectives on relationships in organizations.

In Chapter Two Fiona Wilson tackles the often gossiped about, but seldom researched, topic of romance in workplaces. Romantic liaisons in the workplace are discussed in the context of organizational culture, power, and gender differences. Fiona then discusses the causes and effects of workplace romance; exploring why people are motivated to begin a romantic relationship at work, and the impact that these relationships can have on others in their social environment, she also looks at how organizations might respond to romance before outlining future research directions in this fascinating field of enquiry.

Chapter Three explores the relational and organizational implications of *guanxi*; a construct that forms the basis for all social relationships in China but remains foreign, intriguing, and often confusing to outsiders. Kevin Lo, Shaohui Chen and Marie Wilson collaborated on this chapter, and discuss how, why, and when *guanxi* impacts on organizational relationships and organizational functioning in a predominantly Chinese context. The authors both link and differentiate *guanxi* from concepts such as networking, relationship marketing, and mentoring. They discuss the ethics of *guanxi* and outline the practical implications of *guanxi* in doing business in China, providing useful insights for those in work relationships with Chinese colleagues. They highlight future research directions

for *guanxi* including the impact of technology, as well as changing types and targets of *guanxi*.

The chapter on social influence and political skill (Chapter Four), by Darren Treadway and colleagues, introduces new ideas into this topic. Politically skilled behaviors are positioned as being socially astute when done well, and as necessary within many relationships. Treadway and colleagues introduce new ideas from other fields of psychology regarding how relationships develop, with an emphasis on dyads, bringing a fresh perspective to our understanding of political behavior. Using the two examples of performance management and leadership, Treadway and his colleagues outline how colleagues influence each other. These practically illustrate the intriguing and pervasive influence of political skill in workplace relationships. In a subsequent section, this chapter outlines how a greater consideration of politics can help deepen our understanding of various aspects of workplace relationships, including gender, ethnic minorities, motivation, and abuse. Importantly, they also provide practical suggestions of how to gain from the positive aspects of political behavior as well as how to reduce negative aspects, for team members and leaders.

Susan Geertshuis, along with the volume editors Rachel Morrison and Helena Cooper-Thomas describe the "influential subordinate" in Chapter Five, exploring how, why, and when subordinates can or should exert influence over their bosses or line managers. A review of relevant literature on social hierarchies and power in organizations precedes an analysis of subordinate-superior relationships. There is much to be learned by subordinates from their explanation of alternative sources of power and the ways in which subordinates can use these to influence others. An engaging vignette runs through the chapter and practically illustrates tactics that subordinates can employ to achieve behavior change in others.

Jennifer Farrell and Karoline Strauss tackle the role of proactive behavior in workplace relationships (Chapter Six). Proactive behavior is defined as being self-starting, change

oriented and future focused. Farrell and Strauss first discuss how relationships at work lead to psychological states of *can do, reason to,* and *energized to*, that lead to proactive work behavior. They then critically examine how relationships can influence perceptions of proactive behavior. As an example, a supervisor may negatively evaluate proactive behavior by a direct report if the proactive behavior is badly timed, seen as irrelevant, or perceived as threatening the supervisor's competence. On the flip side, when employees are viewed as prosocial, proactive behaviors are viewed as intended to benefit the collective and rated positively. Farrell and Strauss go on to discuss how proactive behavior can affect relationships, for example when new employees are proactive and begin to build relationships with colleagues. Towards the end of this chapter the authors discuss how to create relational contexts to support and enhance proactive behavior and its benefits, providing practical, research-based suggestions as to how to encourage proactive behavior and reap the rewards.

In Chapter Seven Barbara Winstead, along with her co-author Valerie Streets, revisits her excellent chapter on gender differences in organizational relationships, which appeared in the 2009 book *Friends and Enemies in Organizations* (to which this current volume is a sequel). Not only do these authors update the research which is presented on gender as it relates to social networks, friendships, mentoring and negative relationships, but they extend the content considerably. Winstead and Streets look at gender as it relates to the focus of several of the other chapters in this book. They examine gender and romance in the workplace, with content linking nicely with Fiona Wilson's chapter (Chapter Two) and go on to consider gender as it relates to leader/member relations; linking to Flora Chiang's chapter on leadership (Chapter Eleven). Gender differences in virtual work relationships are also examined and, again there are links with Darl Kolb's analysis of virtual work and perceived proximity (Chapter Eight). Finally the impact and implications of gender and gender roles

within family business is presented, and relates to the discussion of relationships in family firms by Marcus Ho and colleagues (Chapter Twelve).

In Chapter Eight, Darl Kolb introduces ideas that are likely to be new to many readers, around the influence of technology on relationships. The mediums through which we communicate have a profound influence on what we communicate, with whom, and how often. It is fascinating to discover how virtual technology is influencing how we work with others. The model that Kolb presents is intriguing, with social and technical connectivity combining with context to determine choice of communication type (media, frequency, quantity) and, via connection and connective gaps, influencing perceived proximity. Kolb ends the chapter with practical suggestions for how to work across distance, and these are likely to be relevant to most readers who will have at least some relationships with colleagues where communication is principally electronic rather than face-to-face.

Misty Bennet and Terry Beehr explore collegial relationships in organizations in Chapter Nine, focusing on the social support provided to and by organizational members. They begin by giving a theoretical background and defining the construct of social support. Bennet and Beehr go on to describe both individual and work-related outcomes of working in a supportive (or unsupportive) environment, as well as considering support in the context of individual differences such as age, gender and culture. The authors conclude with practical implications for social support interventions within organizations.

In their chapter on bullying at work (Chapter Ten), Dianne Gardner and colleagues start with the stark details of two true bullying stories. In one case, the target of bullying took her own life; in the second case, as a result of bullying, the target experienced mental health problems including severe depression. From the outset, it is made clear that bullying is something that we should be concerned about, reflecting extremely relationships between colleagues. Gardner and colleagues note that, to be classified as bullying, negative behaviors

have to be repeated, often involve an imbalance of power, and the target must feel unable to defend him- or herself. They go on to highlight that, while some people may deliberately engage in bullying (the "predatory bully"), others are ignorant (the "unaware bully") or focused on results (the "purposeful bully"). Importantly, rather than just blaming individuals, they outline how the situation can encourage negative behavior, with leadership having a key role. In line with this, the best solutions focus on improving the situation through policy, training, mediation and counseling, and improving leadership and workplace climate.

In their chapter on ethical leadership (Chapter Eleven), Flora Chiang and Thomas Birtch outline the centrality of leaders relationships both with their direct reports (subordinates), but also with a range of other colleagues inside and outside of their employing organization. Drawing on notions of leadership, Chiang and Birtch outline how leader behaviors unfold both vertically within organizations, and also horizontally and externally. Throughout their chapter, they use the astonishing story of an unethical manager to illustrate some of the key ideas, alongside a direct report who displays highly ethical behaviors. The unethical manager manipulates information and, toward the end of the chapter, acts illegally to try and undermine his direct report. They helpfully outline many directions for future research.

In Chapter Twelve Marcus Ho and his colleagues Chris Woods and Deborah Shepherd explore paradoxes that exist in family run business. They use the real-life case of Pacific Wide Group to describe the conflicts and tensions that are created by merging the roles of "family member" and "colleague". For example, the paradox of trust and commitment is described where, on the one hand, family business are seen as more trustworthy and often rely on trust as a governance mechanism but, on the other hand, they can also breed negative consequences such as nepotism, rivalries and jealousy; with members feeling imprisoned in their roles. Ho and his colleagues go on to describe ways to address the paradox in the family

metasystem and provide four clear methods for working with paradox, relating the strategies

back to the case of Pacific Wide Group.

Collectively these chapters bring together a plethora of new ideas about relationships at

work, covering a wide range of situations and types of relationships. There are many new

ideas here, which we hope both established researchers as well as newcomers to the field will

find stimulating and useful. Enjoy!

References

Bakker, A. B., & Xanthopoulou, D. (2009). The crossover of daily work engagement: Test of an actor-partner interdependence model. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 94*(6), 1562-1571. doi: 10.1037/a0017525

Cooper-Thomas, H. D., Catley, B. E., Bentley, T. A., Gardner, D. H., O'Driscoll, M. P., & Trenberth, L. (2011, June). *Is there a double whammy from being an observer and a target of workplace bullying?* In C. Caponecchia (Chair), Symposium conducted at the 9th Industrial and Organisational Psychology Conference, Brisbane, Australia

Fisher, C. D. (2010). Happiness at work. *International Journal of Management Reviews, 12*, 384–412. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2370.2009.00270.x.

Morrison, R. (2004). Informal relationships in the workplace: Associations with job satisfaction, organisational commitment and turnover intentions. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology, 33*(3), 114-128.

Morrison, R. L. (2009). Organisational outcomes of friendships. In R. L. Morrison & S. Wright (Eds.), *Friends and Enemies in Organisations: A Work Psychology Perspective*. London: Palgrave McMillian.

Morrison, R. L., & Nolan, T. (2007). Negative relationships in the workplace - a qualitative study. *Qualitative Research in Accounting and Management, 4*(3), 203-221.

Sonnentag, S., Mojza, E. J., Demerouti, E., & Bakker, A. B. (2012). Reciprocal relations between recovery and work engagement: The moderating role of job stressors. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 97*(4), 842-853. doi: 10.1037/a0028292

Tews, M.J., Michel, J.W., & Bartlett, A. (2012). The fundamental role of workplace fun in applicant attraction. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, 19*(1), 105-114. doi: 10.1177/1548051811431828