

## Member's Quarterly

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## Feature

## The Six Types of Working Relationships

*Move from dysfunctional to trusted*

**O**ur relationships in the workplace often reflect how successful we will be in reaching our goals. Directed individuals may feel that this is not the case, and they need only to push themselves and others harder to ensure the goal will be achieved. Workplaces are shifting away from this thinking and defining successful cultures as having the ability to achieve a goal while maintaining strong working relationships – the definition of collaboration. Collaboration may not always be possible. It may also look different depending on the functionality of our working relationships.

Consider the different types of relationships that we have with others in the workplace. I developed a continuum to represent this perspective, with relationships on the left side such as dysfunctional (1), avoid/separate (2), co-existing (3), being more fractured and moving to relationships on the right such as transactional (4), collaborative (5), and trusted (6) being stronger.

Many of the relationships I see in my role as a conflict resolution professional may be on the left side of the continuum in the dysfunctional or avoid zone. Sometimes working with a facilitator or conflict coach can support employees on the left to shift their relationship to the middle of the continuum to co-exist or have a more transactional relationship. The organization may intervene and separate employees to ensure that individuals have a psychologically safe workplace. Depending on working roles and expectations, avoiding interactions may not be a feasible solution for the long term. When we have strong working relationships in the collaborative or trusted zone, it is often with colleagues who have a similar perspective or where trust is high, making cooperation easy and straightforward.

There is no right or wrong place to be on the continuum; it is a tool to build awareness of where our working relationships are and where we might want them to be. If we work comfortably in the transactional area and our work only requires this type of interaction, then all is well. If we are in a role that requires constant and extensive collaboration, then we need to reach beyond transactional relationships. But what if we encounter formidable barriers to collaborating or building trust?

Adam Kahane, in his book *Collaborating with the Enemy*, sees it like we are all trying to get something done that really matters to us. To do this, we need to work with others. But these others include people we don't agree with or like or trust, so working with them seems impossible — like collaborating with the enemy. In our workplaces, we don't often get to choose whom we work or interact with. We may need to collaborate extensively regardless of our relationship dynamics to get the job done.

Kahane believes that the only way to get things done when we don't have strong working relationships is to abandon harmony, agreement and control, and to learn to work with discord, experimentation and genuine co-creation. This is a new approach to collaboration — stretch collaboration.

How do we get there? Abandoning control when we don't trust others may be against our human nature and not aligned with how our brains work. Stretch collaboration will require support from others - neutral parties who are not invested in the outcome, but can create the space needed for achieving collaboration. Individuals with training in conflict resolution can bring a process to build understanding and uncover interests and values. These individuals can support participants to find solutions to the complex issues that face our workplaces and society regardless of the type of working relationship they may have. Stretch collaboration is stepping successfully into the unknown and our next important workplace challenge.

"Walker, there is no path. The path is made by walking." – poet Antonio Machado.

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