

1

Every Working Relationship Can Be Better

Here's How

Michael Bungay Stanier
Author of The Coaching Habit

Okay, perhaps not every working relationship. But *almost* every one.

I know that's a bold statement. It's also an urgent one.

Our happiness and our success at work are deeply dependent on the quality of our key working relationships, not just our bosses, our team, and our collaborators, but also our peers, our customers and clients, and our vendors.

Think of what it's been like to work with those key people. When things are good between you, there's a strong likelihood that the work is good too and you feel at your best. When things between you are off, the work is a struggle, and you feel stressed.

Hope Is Not a Strategy

You know this to be true from our lived experience. And yet, mostly, you do nothing about it. It's in the lap of the gods, you've got your fingers crossed, you're rolling the dice, you're hoping it will be good this time, and then you wait and see.

You start each working relationship with mixed feelings, some balance of hope and anxiety. Your past experiences and to some extent your inherent wiring will determine your own particular blend of optimism and pessimism.

Sometimes you've got lucky and found yourself working with someone who's fabulous. You clicked. You were greater than the sum of your parts. You brought out each other's best, and you managed to step lightly through the tricky moments.

Sometimes you've got unlucky. They wound you up, set you off, and brought out the worst in you (just as you did for them). You were diminished by the experience, "less" not just in the quality of the work you did and the impact it had, but in the way you felt about yourself.

And mostly, the working relationships have been somewhere in the middle. They're mostly okay. There are ups and downs. You can live with it, but it's been defining.

But what if you stopped just *hoping* that you'd get lucky and actually did something about it?

What if you were active in shaping the working relationships you had so that they were closer to what you hoped for? What if each of your key working relationships was the best version that it could be?

What if it could be the best possible relationship (BPR)?

The Best Possible Relationship

Spoiler alert: not every working relationship can be wonderful. Would that it could be true . . . but, no. However, every one of

them could be better. The good, the bad, the ugly: imagine each of them 10% better than they currently are. Can you see the difference that would make on your impact, your stress, your happiness, your sense of self?

The goal is to build the BPR with your key people. A BPR has three defining qualities. It is safe, it is vital, and it is repairable.

Amy Edmondson, Thinker50's 2023 #1 management thinker, has been championing psychological safety for 25 years now. It's become part of our corporate vocabulary, and there's a general understanding that individuals and teams perform better if they feel safe: safe to talk about what's not working, safe to show up as who they are. Psychological safety is table stakes for a BPR. And while it's necessary, it's not sufficient.

I've been in working relationships that were "safe," but they also felt stifling. They were nice, they were pleasant, and they were boring. That's why the second quality of a BPR is vital. This is psychological bravery. It's a willingness to challenge, to provoke, to say the hard truth, to have healthy conflict, to step out to the edge of what's known, to feel your way forward in the half-light.

The final quality of a BPR is repairable. Reading across the work of the doyens of romantic relationships—Esther Perel, Terry Real, John Gottman, Dan Siegel, and others—two things become clear. First, the relationships that thrive and have longevity are ones that get repaired. Second, most of us are not great at repairing relationships. We tend to "fight or flight" it: either we lash out and try and hurt the other person back, or we retreat and suffer the pain in silence.

Each BPR finds its own ideal mix of safe and vital, as the two individuals find the balance in their relationship. Equally, each BPR understands that, even with the best of intentions, there's always a moment where something goes wrong. A misunderstood word, a failed commitment, a lack of blood sugar. So each BPR knows that repair will at some stage be necessary and is willing to do that work.

If a BPR—safe, vital, and repairable—is the goal, how do you get there? What’s the practice that makes the difference?

A Keystone Conversation

The answer is simple but not easy. It’s to have a conversation about how you’ll work together before you start the work. Or if you’ve already begun working with them, a pause, and a conversation about how you might tweak and fine-tune your working relationship to make it better.

The keystone metaphor is obvious enough. It’s the joining piece between two columns, and it’s the stone that allows the arch to settle, to bear stress, and to grow stronger over time.

It’s not easy, and for two reasons. First, because work shouts loudly. It’s there, it’s the main thing, and it’s important—or urgent or enticing. You’ve spent your whole career cracking on with it and getting the work done. You’re measured on your work. Your role is defined by the work you’re meant to be doing. You have deep muscle memory to just get on and get going with the work.

The second reason is that a conversation about how you do the work is an unusual and (somewhat) vulnerable conversation. It’s uncommon, so it’s daunting. It requires you to share something of yourself. It requires you to be willing to see other people for who they are. It requires you to know something of yourself. It can feel risky, and truth is that it can be risky. Anytime you chose to “lower your shield,” to use Brené Brown’s phrase, there’s both danger and opportunity.

What Do You Talk About?

If you simply asked (and answered) the question, “How can we best work together?” that would be fantastic. That would already

put you in a minority of people more actively shaping their working relationships.

But you can go deeper, be more curious, and get more specific. Broadly speaking, you're seeking to exchange information on two areas: what we should amplify and what we should avoid.

The idea of amplification draws upon such established approaches to change as Appreciative Inquiry and Positive Deviance. Both these strategies come from the idea that we should figure out what works and then do more of it. One powerful question, which I first learned from the author and management philosopher Peter Block, is, "What can we learn from successful past relationships like this one?" What was said and done by you and by the other person? What was not said and not done by the two of you? And now, what does that tell you about what's useful for this current relationship?

The flipside can be equally useful, this time in seeking out what to avoid. "What can we learn from past frustrating relationships like this one?" Mistakes were made. Triggers were set off. Irritations were flared. What happened? What was their role? What was yours? And now, how does looking at this past dysfunction help you navigate this current relationship?

You're both figuring out that if we had more of X and less of Y, we're more likely to enjoy working together and more likely to have success while doing it. Beforehand, you would just be guessing at what the X and the Y was, as would that other person. Now you both get to find out for real.

But What About [Name of Terrible Person]?

You've probably got at least one person in your working life who you're thinking, "This would never work with them. They are terrible, horrible, and no good." And yes, you're probably right. Not that person.

But that leaves everyone else.

Every one of those other working relationships could be better. You could make them better. The thing to do is to be the person who moves first. Someone said, “No one likes to be the first person to say hello, but everyone likes to be greeted.” You can be the first person. You can make every working relationship better.

Biography

Michael Bungay Stanier is the author of *The Coaching Habit: Say Less, Ask More & Change the Way You Lead Forever* (Page Two Books, 2016), the best-selling book on coaching this century. He is also the founder of training and development company, Box of Crayons. Michael’s latest book is *How to Work with (Almost) Anyone* (Page Two Books, 2023). He was the recipient of the Thinkers50 2023 Coaching and Mentoring Award.