

Influencing, Assessing and Developing Relationships

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The seminar draws on work on the subject of relationships over thirty years, focused on how policy makers and leaders of organisations can create an environment that enables rather than undermines the development of effective relationships. Our interest in how policy influences relationships dates back to exploration of alternatives to Capitalist and Marxist approaches to land reform in East Africa in the 1970s. Work since then has included:

- International peace building in South Africa, Rwanda and Sudan
- Policy change and organisational development in criminal justice and health and social care
- Launch of Citylife Employment Bonds¹ in Sheffield, Newcastle and East London
- Developing relational audit tools for commercial use with KPMG and Team Focus
- How finance and time influence the relationships that are important for wellbeing
- Alternative company structures.

1. Relationships define policy goals across and within sectors

Many policy goals - including cohesion, inclusion, safety and equality - describe relationships. Improving wellbeing is a goal that cuts across all services, with strong academic consensus on the importance of relationships for wellbeing:

The quality of people's social relationships is crucial to their well-being. People need supportive, positive relationships and social belonging to sustain well-being. Evidence [shows] that the need to belong, to have close and long-term social relationships, is a fundamental human need, and that well-being depends on this need being well met. People need social bonds in committed relationships, not simply interactions with strangers, to experience well-being.

Diener and Seligman²

Such evidence as we have suggests that social connections, including marriage, of course, but not limited to that, are among the most robust correlates of subjective well-being. People who have close friends and confidants, friendly neighbours and supportive co-workers are less likely to experience sadness, loneliness, low self-esteem and problems with eating and sleeping. Indeed a common finding from research on the correlates of life satisfaction is that subjective well-being is best predicted by the breadth and depth of one's social connections.

Helliwell and Putnam³

Relationships also define goals within sectors. Criminal justice, for example, is about resolving the relationships between victims and offenders, as well as between offenders and society.⁴

¹ www.citylifeltd.org

² Diener and Seligman (2004) Beyond Money: Toward an economy of well-being. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 5, 1-31

³ Helliwell and Putnam (2005) The social context of well-being. In Huppert, Baylis & Keverne (eds.) *The science of well-being*

⁴ Burnside J and Baker N (1994) *Relational Justice* Waterside Press

Punishment is not an end in itself. Relationships between prisoners, their families, victims, prison officers, courts, police, probation and third sector organisations are all important in achieving these goals.

2. Relationships are key to achieving policy goals, influencing both effectiveness and cost.

- Transforming lives requires sustained, supportive relationships that breed trust, understanding of needs and potential, and the capacity to change. This is recognised by the Council on Social Action:

'For the child in care, the young family stretched to breaking point, the elderly neighbour entirely alone, strength and hope come not from markets or incentives and commands but from the human touch.'

*'The shiny centre with new computers, the trips out, the orders and the punishments; for the fourteen year old struggling with friends, insufficiently supported at home, repeatedly excluded at school, these are not the answer, though they may be part of it. The one essential element that will turn that young man's life around is another human being. Someone to talk to. Someone to listen to. Week after week. Solid as a rock. It is not only possible for one human being to make a real and lasting difference to another, it is often the only thing that ever does.'*⁵

Success in work with NEET young people, ex-offenders, drug users and a wide range of vulnerable groups depends on the trust and confidence they have in key workers, and the stability of those relationships.

- Performance depends upon partnership. The resources and skills to achieve ambitious outcomes are rarely located within any one profession or organisation. The ability to bring diverse resources to bear on a problem will depend on the relationships between those involved.
- Relationships are a major factor in service failures, such as Victoria Climbié or Bristol heart deaths⁶. Commercial risk management also needs to attend to relational risk. Information and knowledge is lost, not gained or misunderstood. One interaction proceeds with little knowledge of what has preceded it, and unaware of the true nature of the situation being addressed. Mistakes go unchallenged and accountability breaks down. Any risk management system is only as effective as its relational context.
- The demand for, and pressures on, services including health, social care, housing, education and community safety are increased by breakdowns in family and community relationships. Weak relationships also reduce capacity for the co-production of services.
- Efficiency improvement and innovation depend on relationships. The commissioning or purchasing relationship can be viewed in partnership terms. This is a richer relationship than competitive contracting based on price alone, and can facilitate improvements in cost, efficiency and quality. Xerox, for example, estimated that the lack of trust in their buyer/supplier relationships cost them seven cents in the dollar⁷. Partnering has been promoted in the construction industry to save both construction costs and time⁸. Preferred

⁵ Community Links (2008) *Side by Side*

⁶ See Meads G and Ashcroft J *The Case for Interprofessional Collaboration in Health and Social Care* Blackwell 2005

⁷ Carlisle (1999) illustrates the financial benefits from a number of industries.

⁸ Egan (1998).

suppliers can develop a better understanding of their customers' needs and proactively identify ways in which processes can be improved and costs saved to mutual advantage.

3. Personal and organisational relationships are more than interactions

Relationships involve a series of interactions between two individuals who know each other, such that each interaction can be influenced both by past interactions and by expectations of interactions in the future. Robert Hinde⁹

We are interested in both personal and organisational relationships. Our working definition of a relationship is:

- A series of encounters with an 'other', not a one-off interaction (this leads us into an exploration of communication within relationship);
- Which are shaped by the experience (memory) of past encounters and the expectation (imagination) of future encounters (this leads us into exploration of the time dynamic of relationships);
- Where the other is known, or at least knowable (this leads us into exploration of information in the relationship);
- Where the actions of each can affect the other (which leads into exploration of the power dynamic of the relationship);
- Within some shared context (which leads into exploration of identity and purpose).

4. Which relationships?

Policy is concerned with many types of relationship, for example:

- Professions to: own professions, other professions, service users, partner agencies, commissioners
- Within extended families and communities
- Between groups: e.g. ethnic, income, generations, organisations
- Between providers of capital, directors and regulators; employer-employee; customers, suppliers.

5. Despite recognising the importance of relationships problems of ambivalence, pressure and complexity remain

The language of relationships - for example collaboration and the duty of partnership - has been a prominent feature of policy and practice for many years yet problems persist. Three challenges are worth noting:

- There may be ambivalence in motivation - e.g. need to make cost savings may lead to actions that undermine partnership relationships
- Pressure: there may too many relationships too sustain, with tough targets, tight deadlines and limited resources
- Complexity of systems makes assessing the state of relationships and analysing cause and effect problematic.

⁹ Robert Hinde (1997) *Relationships: A Dialectical Perspective* Psychology Press p.48

6. Three strategies for intervention

There are many areas where direct policy intervention in relationships would be considered as inappropriate ‘nannying’, intruding into the private sphere, or being unduly ‘authoritarian’. Yet policy will inevitably influence relationships and should do so intentionally. Three broad types of intervention can be considered appropriate:

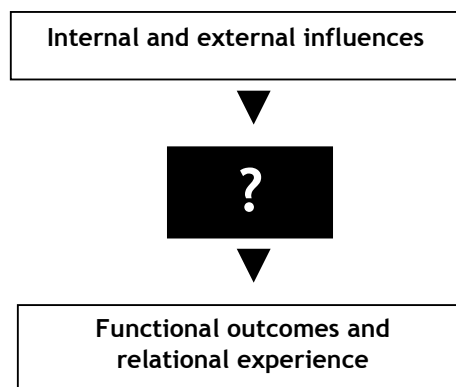
- **Motivation:** The willingness to invest in and sustain relationships may be influenced by incentives or social norms.
- **Opportunity:** The formation or conduct of relationships may be hindered because people are not in the right place, lack the time, or the institutional mechanisms do not exist. Robert Putnam highlights the significance of new institution building in the rebuilding social capital following the early years of urbanisation and industrialisation.
- **Support:** People may lack relationships, or their relationships may be weak. Policy can empower the conduct of relationships; use finance as buffer against stress (rather than financial worries being a source of relational stress); and increase provision of education and advice.

7. Social capital, systems, and other theories need relational models

Although debates on social capital, wellbeing, systems, emotional intelligence and competitive advantage refer to relationships, they don’t provide models for the assessment of relationships. Models designed to focus on specific outcomes (e.g. trust) or processes (e.g. negotiation) or specific relationships (e.g. supply chain improvement) may not have generic application across policy sectors. Psychology-based psychometrics on interpersonal relationships don’t necessarily help policy and organisational relationships.

8. The missing link: how internal and external influences on relationships result in a variety of outcomes.

The conduct of relationships is influenced by factors within the person or organisation and by external factors. There is good knowledge about the range of relevant factors, as well as the desired outcomes. These include relational outcomes such as trust, accountability or participation, as well as financial outcomes. What is less well understood is what happens in relationships that turn influences into outcomes. This can be represented as a missing link.

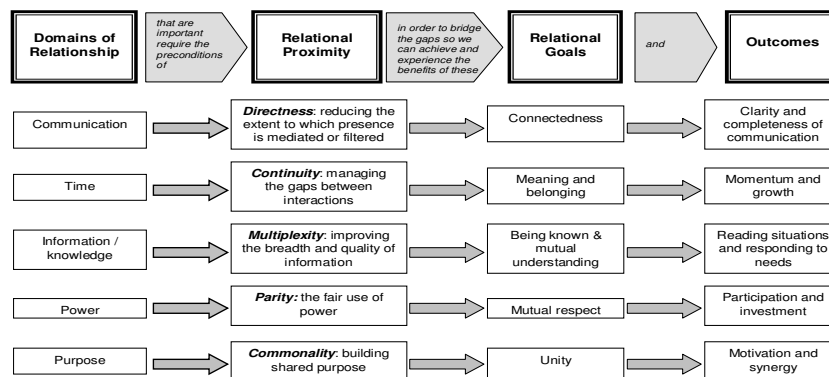


9. The basic approach of Relationships Foundation: managing the preconditions for relationships

Focussing on the factors that create an enabling environment for relationships has three advantages:

- It focuses on things that can be managed and changed
- It can be assessed more readily
- It enables constructive discussion of what can be nebulous and/or threatening issues in a less emotive way.

Summary of relational proximity model



10. Five domains

Communication

When we say that relationships are a series of interactions we mean that there is some contact between the parties. How people communicate, the media they use, and the skills they employ are fundamental processes by which one party to a relationship influences another. Intentions, hopes, desires, fears, needs, and information all need to be communicated in order to co-ordinate actions and generate desired responses. Without at least the potential for communication (even if only the potentially one way communication of relative to comatose patient) there is no relationship as the two parties become wholly disconnected. Wars can be won or lost, businesses thrive or go under, and marriages flourish or break up as result of successful or poor communication. Communication is shaped by external factors (for example the geography of the relationship including size and design of offices) as well as internal factors including both openness and communication skills.

Time

Defining relationships as a series of interactions introduces the time dimension to a relationship. This includes both the overall duration of a relationship and the way in which some things continue from one interaction to another, so enabling us to say that these interactions are part of the same relationship.

Time is the currency of relationships. We save, invest, and spend time. It is often our scarcest resource. It is time that allows relationships to grow, understanding to deepen, and trust to be built. Conversely the lack of time and momentum through interactions is a major limiting factor. The time dynamic of relationships is shaped by external factors such as the demands of other relationships as well as by such internal factors as commitment and loyalty that influence time allocation.

Information

We narrowed our definition of relationship to exclude purely contingent connections with unknowable entities. Part of what continues from one interaction to another is information. The conduct of a relationship is informed by what we know, and the accuracy and completeness of that knowledge. Misunderstandings and missed opportunities result when too little is known, or when knowledge is false. The nature, extent and quality of information about each party to the relationship is shaped by external factors such as whether there is the opportunity to meet in different contexts as well as the openness of disclosure and discernment.

Power

The capacity to influence other parties in a relationship raises the issue of power and the consequences of the way in which power is used. This has particular influence on the levels of participation and investment in a relationship either because of the rational calculation of fairness of return, or the more emotive response to feelings of being used, imposed upon or treated unfairly. There are many forms of power, each of which may be distributed and used differently by the various parties to a relationship.

Purpose

Purpose is often the reason for being in the relationship and informs the desired outcomes of the relationship. Purpose may be influenced by demands of and obligations to others, as well as being the more internally defined product of the things that motivate us. People have different objectives and priorities in a relationship: what matters is the degree of alignment of purpose and the extent to which different purposes can be accommodated.

11. Integrating the internal and external influences

In order to see how both internal and external influences on relationships come together within these five themes and start to create different outcomes we need to introduce another set of concepts.

Present and direct

Why does face to face communication matter? Why are emails sometimes great - but sometimes not? The extent to which either party to a relationship is physically, intellectually or emotionally present effects what is communicated, how it is experienced and what is achieved. The nature and extent of presence is influenced by such factors as time, place and the medium of communication used as well as the communication skills employed and the degree of openness. It is this that enables both the sense of connectedness as well as the effectiveness of the communication process.

The continuity of the story

Teams break down if turnover is too high, but without change there is little growth. Most people prefer to see the same doctor, have the same person cut their hair, or repeat business with people who have served them well. It reduces risks and saves time, while the explicit or implied promise of continuity conveys security and belonging. It's certainly preferable to have confidence that your bank will continue to exist and that agreements made yesterday will still be valid tomorrow.

The way in which interactions string together to create a relationship that has meaning and momentum can be understood in terms of story or narrative. A key element of successful relationships is that they can build on previous interactions (though building on negative experiences can serve only to deepen the bitterness of a feud). Trust, understanding and information is carried through from one interaction to the next enabling more to be achieved. Time is not wasted, or the scope of what can be achieved limited, by having to start over again. The story of a relationship is adopted into the narrative of our life. It becomes part of the process of how we give meaning to events and see our place in the world and in other people or organisation's lives.

Multiplex knowledge

The conduct of any relationship is informed by what we believe we know about the party. We use this knowledge to invite their contributions, assess their needs and interests, judge their character or interpret their responses. The completeness and authenticity of this knowledge is influenced by varied sources of information, or contexts for gaining it, as well as the degrees of inquiry and disclosure that characterise the relationship. Although there are times when privacy is valued and important, or when knowledge can be used against us, the sense of being known is an important affirmation of our worth as well as bringing practical benefits.

Parity and fairness

Our sense of self is shaped, in part, by how others treat us. Our actions are influenced by our beliefs about how they will treat us. The distribution of the various forms of power, and the structures and processes that give rise to it, combine with the way in which people use power and respond to it, to influence the willingness to invest in and contribute to a relationship. Fear of being hurt or treated unfairly is a major disincentive. Confidence that there will be a positive return (whether in terms of finance, reputation, opportunity, pleasure, or in any other currency) encourages participation. The instinct for fairness is deeply hard wired into our make-up and a powerful influence on relational behaviour.

Alignment for commonality

People are different. Different purposes, identities, preferences or accountabilities all need to be managed in a relationship. Difference has many benefits: the variety is both interesting and also more creative. But difference that is poorly managed with very little alignment of purpose - in the sense of person to task, between persons, or between organisations - leads to conflict and friction. In a complex system this process of alignment can be both unstable and challenging, with actions in one relationship having knock-on consequences for others. Yet without successful management of difference any co-operative activity becomes fraught with risks. And without the contribution of other people, the scope of what we can achieve is severely reduced. Human civilisation is built upon the ability to co-ordinate actions with others. It still gives us problems today.

12 Relational proximity - bridging the five gaps

Each of these concepts can be understood in terms of gaps: a separation of presence, a gap between interactions that impedes the story, a gap in knowledge, a difference in power, or an alignment gap. As a general rule, creating the conditions that enable greater relational proximity, bridging these gaps, will enable better outcomes. Inevitably life is not quite so straightforward: there can be a dark side to any aspect of relationships (closeness can be abusive and threatening) and not every factor can be maximised in every relationship. However, these factors can be managed and changed, helping to group the wide range of factors in a way that can enable constructive discussion and actionable solutions.

Building relational proximity involves five main strategies.

- Unmediated communication
- Managing gaps between interactions
- Gaining breadth of knowledge
- Fair use of power
- Aligning purpose

13. Applying the model to adult social care

As an illustration of how the model can be serve as a lens for a policy sector we might consider the following questions with regard to adult social care.

- Directness: What influences the ability of relatives to be physically present?
- Continuity: What risks are increased, or momentum lost, due to high staff turnover?
- Multiplexity: How is sufficient breadth of knowledge for informed personalisation best gained?
- Parity: Is power used fairly in commissioning services?
- Commonality: Are commissioners and providers aligned around service user needs?

Each of the five areas can, of course, be explored in more detail.

14. Applying the model to achieving outcomes

The model can also help to guide policy in pursuing specific outcomes. So, for example, accountability can be increased by:

- Directness: greater commitment to decisions made when physically present, and greater felt accountability for consequences that are seen and proximate.
- Continuity: accountability presumes continuity of legal personality. Accountability is increased when people and organisations are still around when negative consequences of decisions and actions emerge.
- Multiplexity: greater breadth of knowledge means that risks identified in one area can be known in others.
- Parity: dysfunctional power relationships mean that the authority to hold others account or the ability to questions decisions is eroded.
- Commonality: competing accountabilities and divergent purposes.

15. Applying the model to identify risks

Appendix 1 presents a simplified diagram of the organisational relationships involved in the care of Victoria Climbié. It does not include the relationships within and between professions within organisations. The Laming report, like other inquiries, identified many relational failings. These can be considered as leading risk indicators, with better assessment and development of relationships offering the potential to reduce risk and support organisation development. Examples of failures identified that link to relational proximity include:

- Directness: working across sites meant that staff were not physically present for some key decisions. Notes and phone calls were misinterpreted.
- Continuity: individuals were not aware of previous interactions
- Multiplexity: knowledge of family circumstances and dynamics was, at times, limited and inaccurate
- Parity: social worker felt unable to question diagnosis of paediatrician
- Commonality: conflict between child protection and criminal investigation.

16. When to use

Leaders of organisations should be able to answer the following questions:

- Do you know what needs to be done to build more valuable relationships?
- Are you clear about the distinctive quality of the relational experience of employees, customers, partners or service users that is at the heart of your strategy?
- How reliable is your assessment of the state of relationships within your organisation and with key partners? Is it clear enough to inform improvement and reduce risks?
- Does the way in which you seek to influence the behaviour and decisions of individuals, groups and organisations work with the grain of their fundamental relational nature?
- Do you know which relationships within a system it is most important for you to influence?
- Do you know what impact a decision will have on relationships?
- Do you and those working for you have the necessary relational skills? How well are these identified and rewarded?

This model for assessing relationships and online tools developed in partnership with Team Focus¹⁰ can be used to:

- Guide policy formation through relational analysis and facilitated workshops
- Inform policy evaluation and impact assessment
- Strengthen risk management and organisation development
- Improve partnership and collaboration
- Inform service design.

¹⁰ www.teamfocus.co.uk

17. About the Relationships Foundation

Relationships Foundation is the think tank for a better connected society.

We believe that a good society is built on good relationships, from family and community to public service and business.

We study the effect that culture, business and government have on relationships. We create new ideas for strengthening social connections and campaign on issues where relationships are being undermined. And we train and equip people to think relationally for themselves.

We work with a wide range of leaders in business, academia, public services and politics to implement relational ideas. Our approach goes beyond the traditional left-right political distinction and we work with any party or group that wants to engage with us.

Relationships Foundation is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (no. 5191052) and a registered charity (no. 1106460). Registered office 3 Hooper Street, Cambridge, CB1 2NZ.

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Appendix 1: The Relational Network of Care for Victoria Climbié

Source Meads and Ashcroft *The Case for Interprofessional Collaboration in Health and Social Care* Blackwell 2005

