



**The Chartered Management Institute's Short Course Programme
in association with ProSeminar**

Getting support and cooperation

Everybody working in an organisation needs to be able to get things done through, with and for other people, but how do we build co-operative relationships and persuade people to support our initiatives and ideas?

Philip Moon, ProSeminar's MD, focuses on the importance of taking a pro-active approach to building working relationships and provides some practical tips.

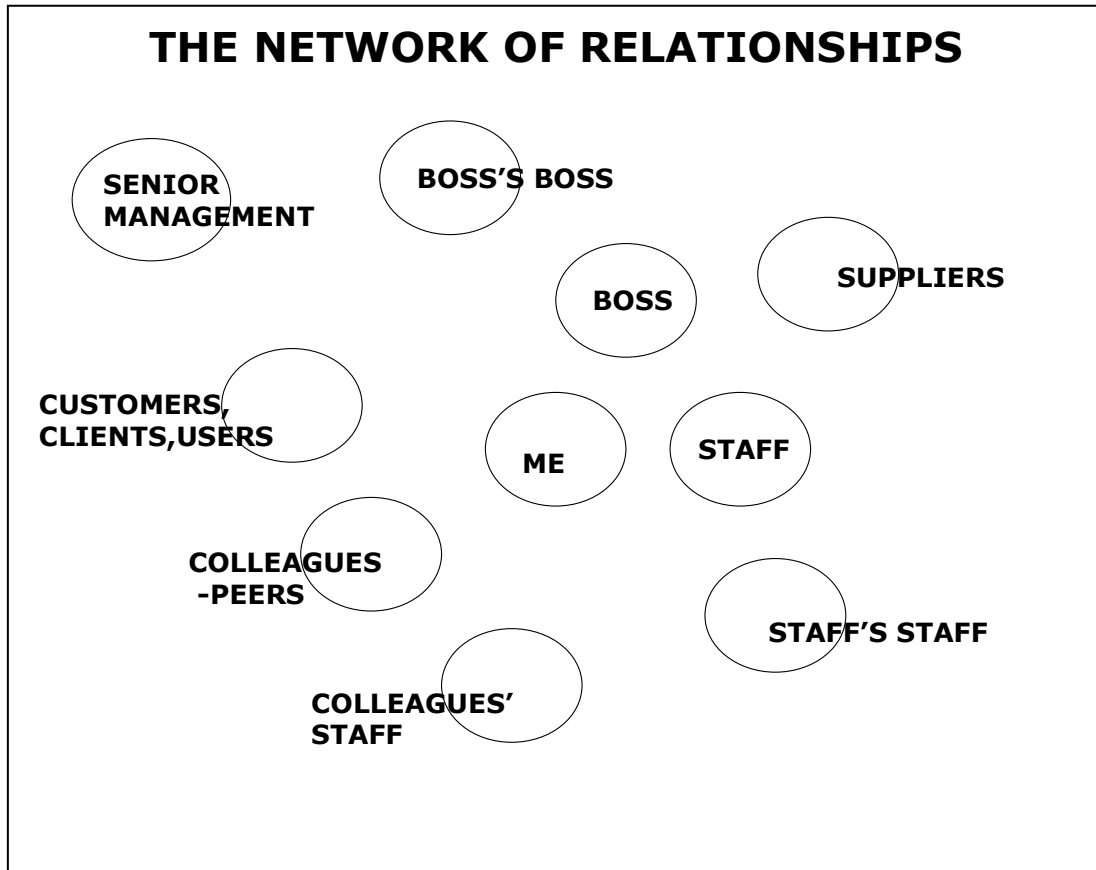
When on my courses I ask participants to draw a picture of themselves in their organisation, something like 90% tend to draw a diagram of the organisational structure, reflecting the formal lines of 'command and control'. Reality is, of course, far less rigid and often 'messy'. Lars Colin, Managing Director of the Danish electronics company Oticon, once famously described his organisation as being more like a plate of spaghetti and commented 'We are trying to get away from a command structure to a problem solving structure. Projects, management and staff are thoroughly entangled with each other. It's integrated not structured, but it's fast and creative and it works'.

An alternative view to the traditional organigram is to put oneself in the middle of the page and to think through who one actually interacts with at work. The result may be something like the diagram below.

Some of these relationships may be stronger than others in so far as you have more frequent or more in-depth dealings with some people than you do with others. What we need however is a pro-active strategy to build and strengthen relationships with all parts of the network – not only (for instance) the boss's boss and peers. Even the seemingly 'lowliest' person in the organisation can be an influential opinion former.

Short Course for Management & Professional Development

www.proseminar.co.uk info@proseminar.co.uk



If you take the time to draw your own version of the network diagram, go one step further. Under each category (e.g. peers, senior management, suppliers etc) list the actual people involved by name. Working relationships are, after all, based on personal relationships with real individuals. Once you've done this, think about each relationship in turn and what you could do to strengthen it.

Here are some practical tips to help you develop your strategy. As you will see, these are mostly an extension of good social skills into the workplace.

Build rapport with individuals

Rapport is about finding the common ground – what you share in terms of identity, background and experience. In fact we have many identities – for instance as a parent of kids of similar age, as someone from a particular part of the country or experience of living in a particular part of the world, as someone with a particular professional background or educational formation, as someone who

shares the same hobbies and interests etc, even as someone who simple shares the same experience of being human – of driving on the same roads and enjoying/suffering the same weather!

It's quite usual when meeting someone new at a social gathering to attempt to build a relationship through 'small talk' which is intended to exchange information so that a mutual identity can be found as a basis for further conversation and used later as mutual reference points. The same process applies to building relationships at work. It takes time, which may appear to be a distraction for the immediate business in hand. But actually the time involved is relatively small and the later benefits can be significant.

Use the 'chat-gap' and respect conversational rituals

The 'chat-gap' is my term for the usual 'small talk' which takes place before any meeting. 'How was the journey?' 'How's your son doing with his football' etc. It should only last a minute or two and becomes distracting if it goes on too long but it's necessary to respect the ritual. I remember being rather dismayed when on meeting the newly appointed personnel officer of a company which had been one of my clients for a long while she bustled into the room (after keeping me waiting) and started straight away with 'Now what we want is . . .' We never did develop an effective working relationship.

Other rituals include the 'apology /forgiveness' ritual. 'I'm sorry about that' is supposed to elicit the response 'That's okay', 'Don't mention it' or some such acknowledgment. Someone who apologises and doesn't receive such an acknowledgement will often feel disadvantaged and disquieted. They may then start to become rather wary in their dealings with you.

Box 1

Conversational rituals – 'one up, one down'

In her fascinating book, 'Talking Nine to Five' 'Talking 9-5: Women & Men at Work - Language, Sex and Power', Deborah Tannen describes the way conversational rituals and language affect relationships and our perceptions of who's 'one-up' and who's 'one-down'.

Conversational rituals allow both parties to maintain the other's 'face'. An apology usually expects a response which mitigates or shares the blame. 'I'm sorry I should have been more careful' may well expect a ritual response 'Oh no it's not your fault. I should have explained myself more clearly.'

But what if the ritual is not understood or respected? Tannen tells a story to illustrate the implications of non-compliance by one party in what the other saw as a 'thanking ritual'.

"A novelist who prided herself on her efficiency and attention to detail received a fax from an assistant in the publicity department at her publishing house; it contained suggested catalogue copy for her latest novel. She immediately faxed him her suggested changes, and when he later faxed her his revision, she called him right back with her response. When they were done going over the changes, she said, 'Thanks for running this by me,' fully expecting him to say, 'Thanks for giving me such a quick response.' Instead he said 'You're welcome.' Suddenly instead of an equal-appearing exchange of mutual pleasantries, she found herself positioned as the one-down recipient of a favour. This made her feel like responding 'Thanks for nothing!'"

When the thanking ritual doesn't receive the expected response, feelings can be hurt. In this case, when the novelist thought about it, she realised that the thanks she offered the publisher was a way of triggering the thanks she expected from him in acknowledgement of her prompt reply.

Give others a sense of importance and individuality

People like to think that they are unique and that your relationship with them is special. Make sure you learn people's names and make sure you use them. Listen to what they have to say. Show you're listening by using appropriate and affirming body language and other signals – nodding, smiling, frowning, grunting etc. Refer to their comments later in the conversation or in subsequent conversations.

Let people talk about themselves and don't be a 'capper'

Most people (me included) are fairly egocentric and their favourite topic of conversation is themselves. In small talk, let them talk about themselves. Encourage them by showing that you're interested in talking about what they're interested in.

If someone tells you a story, show admiration, surprise, horror or whatever is expected. Don't try to out do them – don't be someone who always has to cap the other's story – *'So you were lost in the hills for five hours and they had to get the dogs out to find you? A similar thing happened to me, but I was up a lot higher, it was overnight and winter. They had to get the helicopters out, but that wasn't any good because the visibility was appalling. You were lucky to only have a broken ankle. I had frostbite as well'.*

Don't be a know it all

Share your own frailties/limitations

Admit your own mistakes particularly when someone else has made a similar mistake. Be modest and even self-deprecating, but don't be falsely modest and don't trawl for compliments. Shared weaknesses can be a basis of rapport and empathy.

Help the other party 'keep face'

No one likes to lose face – that is to say no one likes to be humiliated or shown up in any way. To build good relations avoid putting the other person down. Don't show them up in front of others. If you're winning an argument or a negotiation, let them still retain something of their position or interest even if it's only of symbolic value – don't steamroller through just because you can.

Show consideration

It's said to be the golden rule – 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you'. Put yourself in their position; try to understand what's important to them. Set your own priorities to meet the needs of other people. Plan with others in mind.

Deliver on your promises

If you agree to do something for somebody, make sure you do it and do it on time. You can't expect others to do things for you if you don't deliver on your own promises.

Show appreciation and acknowledge contributions

People like to be appreciated, thanked and praised for what they've done. Actively look for opportunities to give praise and make your praise sincere by making it specific..