



151 insights to help you build better relationships at work

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Introduction

The insights presented in this book offer information on building strong interpersonal relationships and communication skills in the workplace. Spanning topics like cultivating trusted friendships, resolving conflicts, promoting diversity, overcoming remote work challenges, and succeeding through mentoring and sponsorship, these insights contain research-backed recommendations for strengthening workplace culture and effectiveness through social connection.

Several overarching themes emerge across the insights. First, they emphasize the importance of cultivating self-awareness to build healthy relationships. Understanding our own patterns, biases, and communication styles enables us to interact more effectively with colleagues who have different backgrounds and perspectives. Second, building a culture of trust, belonging, and psychological safety is portrayed as foundational to teamwork and innovation. Things like sharing personal experiences, resolving conflicts proactively, and encouraging open communication are highlighted as ways leaders can foster inclusive workplaces.

Additionally, the insights provide suggestions for adapting leadership and enhancing collaboration amidst disruptions like remote work arrangements prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Adopting empathetic, transparent leadership and using technologies to bridge physical divides are presented as ways to manage distributed teams successfully. Finally, the insights recommend seeking out mentors and sponsors with care to benefit from their guidance in reaching career goals and overcoming challenges.

Together, these insights offer research-based, actionable recommendations for strengthening interpersonal ties and communication to build more cohesive and productive workplaces. While focusing on different specific aspects of relationships and interaction, they collectively provide valuable guidance for improving organizational culture, teamwork, and leadership in an evolving workplace.

Your identity at work

07 Vet organizational culture

To pursue long-term fulfilling careers, we must all first rigorously vet a potential employer's culture. This is particularly crucial before we assume that our authentic self-expression will be welcomed. Assess whether leaders actively invite diverse perspectives. Are work-life boundaries clearly respected? Or do inclusion policies pay lip service to buzzwords without systematically nurturing minority voices? While no workplace perfectly aligns individual-organizational purpose, one must first discern baseline norms before revealing vulnerable selves¹¹.

Where rhetoric eclipses practice, proceed with care in what you share, and keep exploring options aligned with your truth. However, also recognize that through patience and compassion, you may help progress culture toward more psychological safety over time. Listen to understand the fears driving the discomfort that your organization may have with vulnerability. Then elevate those that may need your support.

Remember that you can pioneer positive evolution, even within flawed systems. Lead by modeling authenticity and push boundaries in the right direction, one step at a time. Imperfect progress is still progress when done with love. You may plant seeds of inclusive belonging that future generations harvest.

08 Leverage your identity to advance job tasks

Rather than assuming that all non-work aspects of your identity stay walled off on the job, you should deliberately yet diplomatically explore how your background and experience could lend relevant strategic perspectives to assigned goals¹¹. For example, perhaps your volunteer experience in disaster relief logistics could inform streamlining complex distribution pipelines. Perhaps product developers would gain insight from your avid user persona in a niche market.

Tactfully call out connections where you see them but leave room for disinterest from the other party. Frame this not as self-focused branding but as

offering assets for a collective mission. People who fail to leverage such complementarity lose out on the compounding benefits of collective wisdom. So carefully test norms around value-added self-disclosure unless you think that this is clearly forbidden.

09 Learn to recognize transferable talent in diverse teams

Optimal teams feature a tapestry of backgrounds, each contributing its own unique texture to advance toward shared goals¹¹. This diversity blossoms when individuals can apply transferable talents that were developed through varied life experiences.

Consider a programmer who played competitive chess growing up. Concepts like anticipating multiple moves ahead and rigorously weighing risks versus rewards may enrich how she approaches technical problems at work. Or take a marketer who photographed beautiful landscapes on weekends. His refined eye for light and composition could inform how he directs compelling ad campaigns.

The key is uncovering and empowering these superpowers, not constraining colleagues to narrow niches. When hiring, probe a candidate's diverse passions. How have non-work pursuits exercised skills that may be adaptable to team objectives? Then hire for transferable potential, not just credentials. And post-hiring, foster continuous multidirectional mentorship. Urge teammates to teach each other new applications of their expertise. Make space for passion projects that allow for creativity beyond formal requirements.

10 Emphasize interdependence over independence

Ensure that workplace inclusion does not just highlight the freedom of individual expression but also addresses interdependence and mutual reliance. This collective reliance on diverse strengths empowers organizational resilience and purpose¹¹. People shouldn't have to fight conformity alone, but rather all lean on each other's varied identities to accomplish shared goals. Many organizational goals are impossible to achieve for homogenous teams that are too focused on upholding restrictive norms.

Shift the narrative to needed mutualism from grudging tolerance. Leverage your team's experiences and insights to solve problems – and make this visible.

This visibility underscores the fact that no one is strictly self-made at work or thrives alone. When people see that many parts come together to make the whole stronger, they are more motivated to share their views and insights.

11 Think about identity filtering before promotions

Before transitioning into new higher-visibility leadership roles, assess whether any aspects of your personality warrant a strategic emphasis or deemphasis in the new context to maintain organizational cohesion¹¹. If you have been serving in a role for a long time as purely an individual contributor, you may require guidance on how you can remain authentic while still adhering to a different set of behavioral standards in your new position.

Think of these changes not as betrayal of the self but as a requirement to fulfill expanded obligations. Good leadership requires better judgment as stakes heighten. But framed openly, your growth and change in perspective need not undermine your foundational attributes that fueled your ascent in the first place. By acknowledging that changes to your identity affect more than just your career, you can become more aware of the impact you create.

12 Give unconventional thinkers a chance

We often unconsciously limit our perspectives by making assumptions about which identities and experiences are most valid and valuable. Though organizations may claim to embrace diversity and empower self-expression, certain ways of thinking and being are still marginalized if they fall outside of accepted cultural norms¹¹. If we open our eyes to wider possibilities, we may find fresh insights and untapped potential in embracing identities beyond the mainstream. There may be unconventional thinkers among us whose alternative worldviews could greatly benefit our collective growth and innovation.

The benefits of embracing atypical identities and thinking styles remain theoretical until put into practice. If we wish to maximize meritocracy, we must move beyond rhetoric and take purposeful steps.

Every mind is wired differently; there are likely gems of wisdom and resilience hidden in those once dismissed as too far outside the mold. Incremental change starts with seeking data and proof points. If we wish to progress, we must question our patterns and widen the circle of identities given

platform and voice. With open eyes, we just may find the seeds of innovation in the minds we least expect.

Dealing with envy

134 Identify the role of proximity in social comparisons

Proximity is a strong influence on social comparison and envy in the workplace²⁰. Social comparison and envy shape our daily interactions and perceptions in subtle yet profound ways. As we examine this idea more closely, we gain deeper insight into how different forms of proximity—geographical, structural, and social—act as catalysts for comparison or envy.

Consider how two coworkers who share the same physical office space exist in a state of constant visibility and interaction with one another. This geographical proximity makes it almost inevitable that they will end up comparing their own work and achievements against those of their office mates. The metaphorical expression "keeping up with the Joneses" encapsulates this phenomenon. It is human nature to benchmark our progress in relation to those around us.

Similarly, those who operate within the same departmental or team structures experience a form of structural proximity. Sharing common goals and responsibilities with our colleagues fosters an unspoken atmosphere of comparison and evaluation. We unconsciously judge whether we are pulling our weight in comparison to our teammates. Even if left unspoken, we feel the pressure to match their output and accomplishments.

Beyond geography and structure, social proximity adds yet another intricate layer to this dynamic. Relationships with close friends or trusted colleagues carry an emotional weight that can make comparisons more piercing. We may feel a sense of solidarity when perceiving a friend's success, or pangs of envy and self-doubt when faced with a colleague's accomplishments.

Gaining awareness of these social comparison mechanisms can empower us to cultivate healthier workplace environments. Workplace designs, both physically and organizationally, need to consider these aspects. We should consider how office layouts, team assignments, and even social events can impact the way we view ourselves in relation to others.

135 Recognize the dual nature of transparency

Transparency in the workplace, while championed for its ability to create fair and equitable environments, also carries with it unintended consequences, particularly in fostering an environment ripe for social comparison and potentially, envy²⁰.

While transparency is crucial for ensuring everyone is on the same playing field, it also makes everyone's achievements and failures more visible. This visibility can lead us to constantly measuring ourselves against our peers, which, while healthy in moderation, can also lead to unhealthy competition and dissatisfaction. The challenge for us is to find the sweet spot where transparency serves its purpose of fairness and openness without becoming a breeding ground for negative comparisons. This might involve advocating for policies that ensure transparency is coupled with positive reinforcement and recognition of individual efforts and achievements, ensuring that workers feel valued and seen.

136 Dissect the complexity of workplace envy

Envy, a complex and often subtle emotion in the workplace, can arise from various factors, not just direct comparisons of performance or rewards²⁰. It's not just about who got a bigger bonus or who received more praise from the boss; sometimes, it's about perceived ease of achievement or even luck, such as being on a favoured team.

Understanding this complexity is key to addressing workplace envy effectively. It's not enough to simply encourage employees to 'work harder' or 'achieve more.' Instead, managers and leaders need to create an environment where effort and achievement are recognized fairly, and where random advantages or disadvantages are acknowledged and compensated for. This might involve more personalized approaches to employee development and recognition, ensuring that each employee's unique context and contributions are considered.

137 Be aware of upward social comparisons

It's a common pitfall in many work cultures—the tendency to fixate on those shining stars who seem to be the embodiment of success and advantage. Without realizing it, we end up making endless upward social comparisons, measuring ourselves against these paragons²⁰. And when the objects of comparison sit in close proximity, whether in the next cubicle or the same hierarchical role, their brilliance seems even more glaring.

This very human tendency to compare upwards can spur us to higher performance, which is typically the intended outcome. But it can also carry emotional sting, leaving us feeling envious, demoralized, and inadequate. We come to see thriving colleagues less as inspirations and more as threats or measuring sticks that highlight our own perceived deficits.

How can we counterbalance this? First, we can create more opportunities for horizontal and downward social comparisons. Enabling workers to compare their progress realistically in relation to peers provides perspective. We can also take care to celebrate different flavours of success, so that no single prototype of “excellence” intimidates the rest.

Most importantly, we must model appreciation for the uniqueness of each person's abilities and contributions. Comparison is inevitable. But by shifting its focus from ranking to honouring diversity, we can transform it from a force that divides, to one that reveals our complementary strengths. Workplaces where comparison uplifts rather than deflates human potential is a goal worth striving for.

138 Mitigate harmful comparisons

The human tendency toward social comparison can feel like an immutable force, simply part of our psychological wiring. But with understanding comes the power to create environments that bring out our best rather than feed our basest instincts²⁰.

We can intentionally craft teams, spaces and systems to minimize harmful comparisons. This might mean diversifying work groups or implementing success metrics broad enough to celebrate excellences of all stripes. We can also

nourish organizational cultures centred on honouring people's unique strengths and challenges, not ranking them on standardized scales. An environment where frequent, constructive feedback is the norm helps keep comparison's focus on growth rather than judging self or others.

None of these interventions promise a workplace devoid of comparison. But they do help ensure that when comparisons happen, they inspire more than discourage. With care, we can guide social comparison from an unconscious source of envy and inadequacy toward a conscious force that reveals our complementary gifts.

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