

Building relationships across cultures

Building good relationships with unfamiliar others can be difficult, especially across cultures. This bite examines the challenges and introduces findings on the successful management of relations.

The term relationship is used in many different ways and contexts, often without any definition. One way to conceptualise relationships is as *mutual connections* characterised by the social variables *power and distance* (Spencer-Oatey, 1996).

Power and distance vary greatly across relationship types. Between romantic partners, for example, both would be typically low, whereas between manager-subordinate both would be typically high. Further, the rights and obligations of individuals are distributed in line with the power and distance attributed in a relationship. These influence what an individual legitimately can and can't do: Using informal names, swearing or making crude jokes are all interactional behaviours that in some circumstances can enhance relationships, but equally can threaten them in others.

Relationships are not static, but dynamic: Individuals continuously negotiate and change the distribution of power and distance between them as well as what counts as an appropriate interaction. This change can be clearly observed in the relational shift from strangers to friends. While both parties start out at a distance – reflected in the use of, say, formal address terms, 'safe' conversation topics such as shared work experiences, benign jokes and a careful respect for personal space, both partners gradually reduce this distance over time, thus gaining relational rights they didn't have before. These could include shoulder pats, drawing on and sharing personal information.

Relating across cultures

Recognising the degrees of power and distance assumed by the other to exist in a given relationship is crucial in order to manage relationships. This can be tricky, however, as the way power and distance are assumed to operate in different relationship types can vary across cultures. In one organisation or country, being friends with one's boss might well be the expected norm, while in another a too friendly tone might be seen as inappropriate. When mismatches occur, individuals are easily perceived as incompetent or rude. When we perceive others to have infringed our position in regards to power and distance, we tend to react with negative personality judgements. Working in an internationalised university entails regularly receiving emails with unconventional address forms such as 'hi dear' or 'dear honourable esteemed Dr'. Taken together, such cases reveal vast

differences in the underlying understanding of power and distance in the student-teacher relationship. However, even where there is a match between expectations, language differences can interfere with the use of appropriate forms in another language.

How then do people build close relationships?

Individuals use a wide range of strategies to increase intimacy and decrease power difference in relationships. One crucial aspect, especially interculturally, is the search for common ground, which is essential for good relationships. The existence of commonalities is often assumed where interlocutors are perceived as culturally similar, and doubted where they are perceived as culturally other. Believing that we share common ground and actively seeking it is however crucial to building close relationships. Equally, enacting the behavioural features of a closer relationship moves the relationship in that direction.

Self-disclosure of (appropriate) information, shifting talk to new topics or indicating the importance of the relationship are key ways in which distance can be minimised, if these behaviours are in accordance with existing perceptions of the relationship. One activity that helps promote closer relationships is sharing small troubles and jointly complaining in a benign manner about shared hardships such as weather, difficult work situations or exhausting travels. Doing 'troubles talk' increases common ground quickly and indicates a shared perspective and a supportive attitude towards the other. In workplaces it thereby encourages positive relationships, but also aids task achievement by allowing team members to develop shared perspectives and common ground, which can facilitate decision-making and encourage collaboration (Debray, 2018). Managers should for this reason give space to such non task-focused talk, sometimes dismissed as 'bitching' or 'gripping', as long as it doesn't negatively affect team morale.

Debray, C. (2018). Troubles Talk as a Relational Strategy in Intercultural Teamwork (Doctoral dissertation).

Spencer-Oatey, H. (1996). Reconsidering power and distance. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 26(1), 1-24.



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