

Building Relationships at Work

A conversation with Amy Gallo, author, HBR contributing editor and co-host of the HBR podcast Women At Work.

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How has hybrid changed our relationships at work? Work Better Editor In Chief and podcast host Chris Congdon talked with Amy about conflict, communication and the benefit of feeling uncomfortable.

CC: How is hybrid work changing the way we navigate our relationships?

AG: Overall, there is a deterioration of a connection. Remote modes of communication (i.e. email, text, IM) are flatter, communicate less emotion, less nuance and that presents challenges. One of my biggest concerns is hybrid work gives us an excuse to not address conflict. That said, I have relationships with close team members that are strong despite working remotely during the pandemic. It depends on the nature of the relationship.

CC: You are an advocate for healthy conflict at work. How can you make conflict constructive in a hybrid work model?

AG: One of the things about having disagreements in a hybrid environment is you have to be much more intentional about clarifying your perspective and goal for the conversation. It can be tempting to say, “We’ll address that later.” But when we delay, interactions, relationships and, ultimately, projects we work on together suffer. We think video conferencing is a good replacement for in-person, and sometimes it is. But in a virtual environment, you lack context and can’t read body language or facial expressions well. You also stare at each other constantly — something that in person would seem aggressive. That doesn’t mean we should avoid these conversations. There’s discomfort that comes with interacting with other humans, but that’s how you learn and grow, how you create interesting work together and how you innovate.

CC: You have identified eight archetypes of difficult people and the worst is the Passive Aggressive. Why is that one so tricky?

AG: The reason Passive Aggressive is the worst is because it can feel like shadowboxing — constant evasion. Someone may have a reason for behaving passive aggressively. They may hate conflict, don’t have power or fear rejection. To address this kind of person, document your conversations. Send an email saying, “Here’s what we discussed.” Clearly explain what will happen if they fail to follow up so they are aware of the consequences. And if all that fails, ask if there’s something else going on that’s causing them to dodge you.

CC: How do we identify if we’re behaving like one of the difficult types of people?

AG: Despite your intentions, you need to be able to sense the impact you have on people. Getting valuable feedback helps. Do you have people who you can go to and say, “I know there are ways I’m holding myself back. What do you think those are?” Test your hunches. Maybe ask: “I struggle to be direct. Do you think I’m coming off as passive aggressive?” The more you get reflection from others, the more you can recognize these patterns.

CC: Do our interpersonal dynamics play a role when it comes to wanting to go to or avoid the office?

AG: I have certainly had remote workers tell me, “I’m so glad I don’t have to deal with this colleague.” There is (pre-pandemic) research that shows we focus more on the tasks rather than the relational side of work when we’re remote. On the flip side, research tells us positive relationships with coworkers are good for us. Good for teams, for work, for the organization. So, if we’re not forming relationships because these mediums are not as conducive to it, it’s likely going to hinder work.

CC: What risks are we taking if we don’t find ways to keep building relationships in a hybrid or remote environment?

AG: Remote work allows us to self-select into smaller and smaller communities, or echo chambers. I get to only interact with my two best work colleagues as opposed to all of these other people. By working from home, we choose who we have the Zoom coffee with and that is probably going to be the person who looks, thinks and acts like us.

Last Words

The insistence so many people have on feeling comfortable, avoiding conflict or avoiding interacting with people who aren’t like them, does ourselves, our organizations and certainly society a disservice.

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