

# When Relationships Break Down

By Mark Samuel

As change continues to be on the rise, it becomes harder to maintain healthy relationships between people--regardless of level or function in the organization. People are more stressed, in fear and often times confused, and take out their frustrations on others creating a breakdown in teamwork. These problems include an increase in conflict, a lack of trust between co-workers and management and breakdowns in communication and information sharing.

Unfortunately, many organizations are still resorting to classes in communication skills, dealing with conflict, or forms of team building to remedy this growing problem. Otherwise, they are trying to "empower" the employees to solve relationship breakdowns on their own. It is common for managers to feel unprepared to deal with relationship breakdowns because it appears to require "counseling" skills that fall outside of most manager's expertise. How else can one deal with trust issues or conflicts within a team? Ignoring the problem, sending people to classes, or using a counseling approach to solving relationship breakdowns is generally not effective in achieving long-term results that impact performance.

There are five (5) different types of relationship breakdowns that require 4 different responses and strategies. The four different strategies for improving relationships include Information Sharing; Interaction Agreements; Communication Skill-Building; and Coaching.

## **Breakdown #1: Role Confusion**

While it may not appear like a true relationship breakdown, Role Confusion is one of the major causes for trust problems and an increase in conflicts within the workplace. When we are confused about our role, we either make assumptions (about our job role) and step on someone else's job or responsibilities, or we wait until someone clarifies our role and miss completing important tasks in which others depend on our services. This quickly results in a lack of trust between people, miscommunication, and the natural conflict that arises when people's ego enters the picture as they argue over responsibilities and authority.

## **Solution #1: Information Sharing**

Gather interdependent people on a team, project or task force to discuss their role and interdependencies, while the leader provides clarity and guidance according to the big picture. Identify the linkages and expectations surrounding the hand-offs that take place between people along with the contingency methods for recovery when a hand-off goes awry.

## **Breakdown #2: Conflicting Priorities**

Once roles are clarified, the next issue creating a breakdown in relationships takes place when the various priorities of different team members aren't coordinated between people. Today's priorities usually require the support of others in our workplace. When we need

someone's assistance we ask for it without considering the impact on the other person's priority projects. Often times, this request can't be met due to conflicting priorities. Then blame of not being a team member enters the picture. Sometimes, the person makes a commitment to assist, but does not come through because they get interrupted by someone else's priorities. As one can see, resentment can build, mistrust takes hold, and team-work breaks down.

### **Solution #2: Information Sharing**

Similar to clarifying roles, it is important to gather the people who have interdependent relationships and varying priorities. Have each person share their priorities with the people they expect to involve and impact with each of their projects. Developing a Priority Matrix can be helpful in this process. Identify interdependent relationships, timing of interdependence and expectations that people have of one another. Doing this up-front saves many unnecessary conflicts when the stress is greater and the patience thin. It is clear that the first two sources of relationship breakdowns stem from the need to share critical information, not from resolving personality differences, providing skills in communication or building trust on a ropes course.

### **Breakdown #3: Hidden Expectations**

Most of us who depend on another person for information, assistance, guidance, or performance have expectations regarding the communication involved with those deliverables. We have expectations about how we will be treated, when we will be informed of a problem or change, and how we will be respected and acknowledged. However, we don't typically discuss these expectations because we confuse them with "values" that we think others should already know. When others don't comply with our unspoken expectations, we generally move into judgment against the person and question our trust and respect for the person. Conflict is created and is intensified by the bad feelings that can occur with this kind of relationship problem.

### **Solution #3: Interaction Agreements**

This particular relationship problem is the most closely associated with traditional methods for improving relationships. This involves people clarifying their expectations with one another around topics of trust, communication, resolving conflict and sharing information. It is important to start by creating clear intentions for the kind of relationship that is desired by the people involved, and then to establish the conditions by which all parties can comply with the intention. These conditions include answering the following questions: What will make it safe for you to participate in this agreement? What do you need from the other people to comply?

What can happen that would cause you to break the agreement, and what needs to happen that will ensure that an obstacle isn't created?

Finally, if the agreement doesn't work, what will be the process for getting back on-track (with a modification of the agreement or a process)?

Once this kind of agreement is created, it is important to review it regularly to assure compliance and modify if necessary.

#### **Breakdown #4: Communication Breakdowns**

While roles and expectations regarding our relationship with others may be clear, the way in which each of us share information, needs, goals and concerns vary from person to person. Unfortunately, we don't always understand the way in which other people express themselves. In addition, we may not always have the words, the appropriate gestures or the expressed emotions to convey our message in a way that is understood by others. The result is that there is a lot of communication without a lot of understanding or empathy. This dilemma regarding our individual differences grows when we are in a stressful environment caused by crisis or an overwhelming number of activities.

#### **Solution #4: Skill-Building**

This is the most popular solution for improving relationships, even though it is quite limited to problems stemming from the mechanics of communication. This particular solution provides people with both awareness training and skill building in the techniques of communication and listening.

Unfortunately, if the other issues involving poor relationships are not addressed, the skills learned with this solution will have a minimal impact. This can be due to lack of "safety" to communicate openly, a misunderstanding at the core of the relationship, or confusion about roles or information received. Nonetheless, it is critical that each person gain greater understanding of the various styles in which people communicate, the techniques for listening effectively, and the processes for translating our desires, concerns and feelings in a way that accurately represents our position in a non-threatening manner to others.

#### **Breakdown #5: Resistance to Change**

We don't typically link resistance to change with relationship breakdowns. However, when someone resists change, they are more inclined to create conflict, spread negative rumors, and align with a subset of team members creating isolation and polarization. All of these situations create breakdowns in people's ability to communicate and in their relationships with others. In addition, the person who is resistant to change regarding an organizational situation, is likely to resist change regarding their own style or skill in communication. This reinforces dysfunctional communication and the lack of flexibility necessary to improve relationships. Because it is the most transparent problem involving relationships (we only deal with the aspects of change and getting buy-in, not the impact on team relationships), it is the most challenging to address and resolve.

#### **Solution #5: Individual Coaching**

This is a case where the manager must exert his/her authority and position as a leader with the individual(s) in question. Communicating a clear direction for their team, followed by clearly articulated standards regarding team relationships to achieve that direction (including Interaction Agreements) is the first part of the coaching session. Then it is critical for the manager to establish regular reviews with that individual based

on assessing their communications with other team members and provide the proper feedback and guidance for the individual to make the necessary changes. Finally, if no progress is observed, it is important for the individual to be placed on corrective action in order to make the last effort to maintain the person's job.