

Stages of a business relationship: 1 and 2

Relationships go through a number of stages—honeymoon, power struggle, dead zone, partnership, leadership. The first two are covered here.

Progress isn't all one way: we can and do slip and slide back and forth between these stages.

Although relationships in business tend to be more muted than personal ones, that doesn't mean they don't go through the same stages in the same way and for the same reasons. And, if the following descriptions seem rather flamboyant for the world of work, it is as well to be able to recognise the stages clearly when they do show up in work.

1 Honeymoon stage

The honeymoon stage is a familiar enough concept. There is a sense of possibility—we can see all the positive things in the other person and they in us.

Case study: I'd been working with Ben and his small business for a number of months when he told me he had had a remarkably positive meeting with Bill, someone I also know from the networking events I attended. Ben was full of admiration for Bill and described admiringly many qualities he saw in him. I'm not saying that I couldn't see these attributes myself, or at least imagine they were there, but, shall we say, I wasn't wearing Ben's rose tinted glasses.

Over the weeks, Ben told me about a joint venture he and Bill were working on. It clearly had promise and Ben was full of enthusiasm for it and for his new business partner, at one point recommending that I consider developing some sort of venture with Bill.

So, as the case study shows, the honeymoon stage facilitates commitment to the relationship in both parties, who are willing to overlook, or not even notice, things that don't fit the positive experience they are having.

It's an essential start to a long standing and successful business relationship, whether the relationship is, like the case study, one between business partners, or one between employer and employee, service provider and client, or any other.

But it is (partly) an illusion as we shall see.

2 Power struggle stage

Pretty soon there is trouble in paradise. A dispute blows up, apparently out of nowhere: one party is aghast at what the other has said or done, and the other is completely nonplussed by the reaction. What is happening is that each person in the relationship is now fighting to ensure their needs are met from the relationship—fighting to be in control of it. What was interesting before now becomes the source of disputes; disputers which seem sometimes to be positively welcomed by both parties.

Case study: One day, I received an angry, exasperated phone call from Ben. “Do you realise what that b***** Bill has done? HE has handed me a document describing in detail a proposed business relationship between us which is far from what we agreed in our discussions. It’s completely unacceptable as a document and it’s completely unacceptable that he is demanding unilaterally that I accept—and sign—it.”

Now Ben had learnt all about the stages of a business relationship but it possibly didn’t help his mood when I lightly pointed out, “Oh, I see you’re in the power struggle stage now”.

The case study shows a perfect example of Bill attempting to ensure his needs are met: to the point that he writes them down and makes Ben sign them! I daresay Bill’s fears that his needs wouldn’t be met led him to exaggerate the strength of his demands that Ben comply with them, thereby precipitating (or, even, ensuring) the inevitable argument that followed. Of course, Ben wants his needs met in the relationship, so he is furious that Bill has stolen a march on him.

The power struggle stage is usually experienced in very polarised ways. Here are some of the more common.

Good guy/bad guy

Ben and Bill each saw themselves as the good guy (the aggrieved guy, in Ben’s case) and the other person as the bad guy. The relationship can break here, because we focus on things in the other person that we can’t accept and, depending on how committed we are to not accepting them, they can become insuperable obstacles to progress.

The way forward: In a power struggle, don’t insist that you’re right and the other person is wrong.

I am certain that the power struggle is an essential stage in the development of all relationships and that people will argue (ostensibly) about the price of fish if they don’t have anything better to row over.

It’s important that neither party withdraws at this point. If you can see the perception of good guy/bad guy is just an artefact of the process, it’s possible to see past it to a more productive relationship.

Case study: Ben decided to walk away from the potential business partnership.

Even though Ben knew that he was in a predictable stage of his business relationship with Bill, he preferred not to deal with the issues that were coming up for him, and the implication that it might be for him (as the person who was supposed to understand about these things) to step up and lead both of them through the difficulty.

Case study: ‘[Email blizzard](#)’ is a good illustration of supplier and client locked in a good guy/bad guy relationship.

Independence/dependence

By independent, I don’t mean self-sufficient or autonomous (though independent people can be these things). I mean something more controlling, more unwilling to engage with others: the typical British boss, in fact, who says “it’s tough at the top” or “if I want a job done properly, I have to do it myself”.

The independent person needs to be right—to have the answers and be seen to have them—while the dependent person is more emotionally reactive—they will feel a victim, and will often appear ‘needy’.

Time and again, in all walks of life, not least business, you see two people, or two groups of people, who have set up a dependent/independent relationship. Indeed, one person wanting to be dependent more or less forces the other to be independent, and one person wanting to be independent makes the other dependent.

So, by being independent, bosses make their staff dependent, and then complain that the staff aren't motivated, self-starters, proactive or whatever euphemism. They may well ensure that they recruit staff who comply with this (however unknowingly).

Case study: Jack and Jill, the two directors of a small business, had noticeably set up a dependent/independent relationship. What was interesting—remarkable, even—was how long they had kept it going, and how successful the business was, despite the time, energy and resources they had committed to perpetuating their fight. However, the relationship was taking its toll on the business: Jack, who had been successfully manoeuvred against his will, into dependency, was becoming increasingly stressed and his physical health was affected; Jill's attitude at work was demotivating and demoralising staff.

What probably annoyed Tony Blair about being called “Bush's poodle” by the media was that here was a relationship in which both parties desperately wanted to be seen to be the independent person. As this is almost impossible to maintain for any length of time, and would have required a public persona that would have been as ridiculous as it was unacceptable, Blair was forced into the dependent position, much against his will, I imagine.

The way forward: The independent person should consciously value the dependent person and what they have to bring to the relationship. The dependent person should stop using others to take care of them. Both of these are far easier once one has the insight about what is going on.

Positive/negative (or optimistic/pessimistic)

Here, one person is the problem solver but is blind to pitfalls; the other can see problems which they can't resolve.

Imagine two sales executives arguing about why sales haven't reached the company's quarterly target (again). One can see what needs to be done, but can't see why it won't work. To the other, the situation is just a disaster and there's no hope.

Yet, chances are that the situation is one where the sales executives aren't arguing because sales are down; sales are down because the executives are arguing. In other words, if they spent the same amount of time, energy and resources addressing the problem instead of each other, they could resolve the situation by bearing in mind that...

The way forward: The two positions need to be united. Both are equally necessary and both have value.

Jeremy Marchant

About this model

This model was originally developed by [Susan Campbell](#) from original research (see *The couple's journey*, 1980).

It was substantially developed by **Chuck Spezzano** and integrated into his Psychology of vision model of personal development. Chuck's main contribution was to beef up stage 3 from Campbell's *stability* (“the illusion of peace”) to dead zone, and to distinguish the various steps within the power struggle and dead zone stages. The best writeup is in *Wholeheartedness* (Chuck Spezzano, 2000, pp 25-47), from which this presentation has been derived.

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