

# Stages of a business relationship: 3

Relationships go through a number of stages—honeymoon, power struggle, dead zone, partnership, leadership. The third, dead zone, is 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.

## 3 Dead zone stage

The power struggle stage can be exhausting to maintain and one of the functions of the dead zone is to provide a space where the parties can retire and lick their wounds. It's important to recognise that both parties want the business relationship to continue, but they don't know how—or are unwilling to dare—to take the next step, the step out of the dead zone. So, it's a place of inauthenticity, characterised by withdrawal and deadness.

The relationship might appear to be successful, but we don't feel successful in it and even this can often only be achieved with hard work. This is where we need to deal with the deeper blocks we use to inhibit success.

As with all the stages of a business relationship (except honeymoon), the relationship can be experienced in a number of ways. Here are three of the more common.

### Roles, rules and duties

This is the epitome of inauthenticity, where we are “going through the motions”, doing the right thing for the wrong reasons, “acting it” rather than “being it”.

Case study: I used to work with Desmond in a London pub where we were barmen. He was amongst the better staff: quick, efficient, he'd always give you the right change, and he was always affable and friendly. The trouble was that he had a little habit of saying, when he asked for the money, “that'll be forty four coins of the realm, please”. (Yes, it was that long ago.) The very first time one heard this, it might raise a slight smile; after ten or more times in one evening, it was getting wearing and, after three months, homicide-inducing.

It was the clear inauthenticity of the way Desmond related to the customers that grated. It encouraged one to find further 'faults' and soon anything in his manner, however normal, became suspect. One rapidly came to the conclusion that, rather than being a barman, he was someone *playing the role* of a barman.

Of course, in all organisations, there are legal obligations on managers that they require all staff to abide by regulations regarding health and safety, as well as many other spheres of activity, such as finance.

The directors of most organisations have a duty to act in the best interests of the organisation, ultimately to ensure its preservation, and this shows up in requirements that staff comply with rules and procedures which determine how the business operates and people work within it. It makes sense, for efficiency, that staff are given roles (job descriptions) which should ensure they know what they are supposed to be doing.

In some organisations, such as those in the health sector, compliance with roles, rules and duties can literally be a matter of life and death.

None of any of this implies that the organisations are in the dead zone. The roles, rules and duties have clear purposes and are often essential. Where there is a likelihood that a business relationship is sliding into the dead zone, it will be when rules are being followed for their own sake, where people are complying with them rather than doing what's most useful. Desmond, in the example, decided that he had to act and talk in certain ways in his relationships with customers.

**Case study:** Roger ran a small business offering consultancy services. It was important that written material, particularly proposals, was as good as possible, so there was a rule that he had to review such documents before they were sent. By and large, his review always made some improvements and was therefore welcome. However, he couldn't leave it at that, and insisted on seeing not only the revised document, but in reviewing in four, five even six times. Assuredly, it was no better after six reviews than it had been after two.

Roger seemed to be stuck in his own rule that he couldn't get out of. That it was a real rule would be only too clear if a document had gone out without his final say so: there would be trouble to pay. However minor, this was a perfect illustration of the way Roger's relationships with his staff were dead.

**The way forward** is to see that making the rules more important than the purpose of the working relationship will make it harder to achieve that purpose. To commit to the success of the relationship, you only have to have an intention to make the working relationship more important than petty rules. In other words, by being authentic, saying what you really think and trusting others enough to share your needs, you can make progress (see also *Fear of the next step* below).

## Competition

This is rather like power struggle disguised as attempts to be successful. Competition between businesses, and between people within businesses, is so accepted as a cultural norm that any suggestion that it is not the most useful way can often be met with genuine incomprehension.

But, consider a sales director who pits his sales executives against each other, offering a prize each month for the one who has sold most. Immediately, all the executives will start plotting to take sales from each other. Someone who knows they won't win one month will fail to close deals until the following month so they might contribute to that month's performance. Meanwhile the prospect has gone elsewhere. In short, people will expend time, energy and resources on competing which could, instead, have been spent on the business.

Competition in a relationship inevitably sets up one person to be the loser, and this has a detrimental effect on that person's attitude, affecting their motivation and performance. This is particularly damaging where some or all directors of a business are in competition; not least because, by showing this particular way, they are inculcating this aptitude in the staff.

A telling question here is, “do you want to win or do you want to succeed?” For many people, it is about winning. This often arises from a belief in a ‘scarcity model’: a belief that there is not enough to go around. Wherever this belief came from (and it is unlikely to be the business), it is a common one and accounts for why competition (a codified form of taking) shows up in so many people independently that it is considered to be part of the world of work (and, of course, the rest of life).

**The way forward** is to recognise that, in a business relationship, the other person’s interests and our own are the same. If we believe in, and invest in, the other person’s success then it becomes our own. But, if they lose, we, or the business generally, will have to make up for it.

### Fear of the next step

Arguably this is the crux of the dead zone. We all fear change—or, rather we are *anxious* about how the results of the change will affect us.

This is not a trivial distinction. If a fierce lion is running straight at me, all my fear responses will be triggered: they are instinctive, triggered without my conscious volition. I will go into flight or fight mode.

But, if I am sitting in my office, ‘fearful’ lest a fierce lion leap into the room and make straight for me, given that I am sitting in semi-rural Gloucestershire and the likelihood of this happening is rather small, this is about my imagining of what I think might happen. It isn’t fear at all, it’s anxiety, created more or less consciously. And if it is created, it can be ‘uncreated’. As Viktor Frankl observed, “everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way”.

So, typically, we anticipate being rejected, or failing, or succeeding, or being found out (feeling a fraud); we might believe we will lose something or lose control. Actually all we need to lose are our self-imposed limitations.

It can often be useful if we encapsulate this with the word, ‘doubt’. We doubt that we can do it, we doubt that we will be accepted if we do it, we doubt the people we need to help us do it will help us, and so on and so on. We are limited only by our imaginations in what we decide to doubt.

**Case study:** The first stage of the development of any new business is ‘start up’. The trouble was, Jane’s business was still in start up after ten years or trading, just about surviving. When we discussed the idea that she might be fearful of something and, if so, what that might be, she said pretty much these words, “I am scared that we will be discovered and exposed by the Daily Mirror as frauds”.

In this case, pretty much all the relationships in the business, not just those between Jane and her colleagues, were in dead zone.

**Case study:** John’s first business was successful—at least until it reached a particular point, at which it spectacularly collapsed. Undaunted, he started a second business which reached pretty much the same point—and then collapsed. Still undaunted, he started a third business, which was just approaching the same point. Interestingly, he was a philanthropic employer: his business paid to have its staff given individual coaching. But he would not pay for coaching for himself and the inevitable happened.

Here, it is mostly John’s relationship with the business which is in dead zone.

**The way forward** is commit to change and taking risks. Be willing to go outside your comfort zone. Don't decide you need the confidence before you'll take the next step—take the step and you will become confident.

In the well known scene in *Indiana Jones and the raiders of the lost ark*, Mr Jones has to cross an abyss, trusting that the bridge he has told is there, but which he can't see, will support him.

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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