

Stages of a business relationship: introduction

'Businesses are just people' is a principle shared by many. Of course, this is not to belittle people: the principle states that people form the most important component of a business. (Incidentally, this is a values-neutral statement: people may be a business's greatest asset, but they can also be its greatest liability.)

It's important to maintain this principle at the forefront of our attention because a disproportionate amount of resources and time are given to process and procedure, to the nuts and bolts, rather than to the people who are making it all happen.

But businesses are nothing if not transactional. Not just the commercial transaction between supplier and customer, but also the interpersonal communications between the people in the business and the client needed to ensure the right goods or services are supplied; the management and leadership needed in the business—and the teamwork which results; the interpersonal communication between people in the business and people in their supplier businesses, in other businesses (for example at networking events) and other stakeholders.

So, a more useful principle might be that 'businesses are just the relationships between people'—and between groups of people: directors and staff, marketing team and production, "the business" and "clients".

To address the relationships between businesspeople, a suitable model is needed. There is no research and no evidence that human beings form relationships differently in different spheres of life: private, work, sport, religion and so on. As the only models about interpersonal relationships have been created from work done with private relationships, emotional intelligence at work uses such a model.

It's true that private relationships are felt more intensely than work ones (on the whole!) but that doesn't mean the process isn't the same. Indeed, describing business relationships in a flamboyant, almost exaggerated, manner has the benefit of ensuring that people will more easily see what's going on in a business relationship. If the relationship between two businesspeople is drifting into a dead zone, then seeing that for what it is will help them move forward, whereas considering the relationship as 'business as usual, but less productive' will make it hard to see where there might be a problem and will result in this state lasting potentially a long time.

It's also true that some people at work introduce an element of privacy, of intimacy, into their relationship which is not necessary for the success of the business, but just emphasises that relationships are just relationships, whatever the contexts and, in fact, can't be pigeonholed into particular contexts (private, work, sport, religion and so on).

Why use a model?

That relationships change through time is obvious to everyone who has ever been in a relationship (if only as child and care giver). That you might be able to define certain states of a relationship and say that any given relationship goes through these states through time would probably be accepted by many people.

The benefit of the model we use is that it is able:

- to define these states in terms of a small number of stages (five),
- which are clearly distinguishable from each other
- and which can be described in detail.

At this point it is worth recalling what George Box, a British statistician, said. "All models are wrong, but some models are useful." In other words, relationships do not switch between five precisely define stages, but it is useful to think that they do because, by thinking this way, one can learn about what is going on for each of the people in the relationship.

Because the model runs on a time line—this stage, then this stage, then this stage, and so on—if one encounters two people who demonstrate they are at a given stage of their relationship, it is possible to test the applicability of the model by asking, "did your relationship in the past conform to the predictions of the model about earlier stages of the relationship?" IF they can see that it did, they are likely to see that it could be possible to attain the future stages the model predicts.

The model is empirical: it was developed, formulated and enhanced using the experience of many people in relationships. It confirms that the people being researched (and the many more people who have used the model as a tool to help them move forward) tend to form relationships in broadly similar ways. This makes it reasonable to assume that other people will also find the model useful in helping them move through their relationship. And so it proves. This is the most important aspect of the model, in our opinion.

In addition to being validated by extensive testing in the field (it is well over thirty years old and has been used by hundreds, if not thousands, of practitioners with their clients), the model is fully explicable by main stream psychological theory.

Stages of a relationship

The model suggests that business (and all other) personal relationships go through five stages.

The first of these is the **honeymoon stage**. This is a widely accepted concept. For example in politics, a newly elected prime minister or president, is considered to have a honeymoon period whose end is gleefully marked by all concerned.

It's a period in which each partner in the relationship tends to see the best in other, to be able to see the most potential in the relationship, and to overlook (or not even be aware of any ways in which the other might fall short).

This stage is abruptly ended by the **power struggle stage**. Now each party can see all the 'faults' in the other, is often genuinely shocked when the faults materialise, as if they hadn't existed until that moment. As the name implies, it is a time of fights and dissent, of needing to be right. Most of all, it can be considered the period in which each party is fighting to have their needs met in the relationship.

As this stage can be exhausting, it's followed by the **dead zone stage**. This is where both parties retire to lick their wounds: they don't want the relationship to end but:

- either they don't see they are in this position, so it becomes 'business as usual, but less productive'
- or they realise they have a problem, but they don't know how to move forward in the relationship
- or (and this is remarkably common) they realise they have a problem but, whether they are aware of the solution or not, they refuse to move forward.

And the last of these is common because, at its heart, the dead zone is place where we refuse to take the next step.

The next step is **partnership**. It's what the name suggests. Looking back, it's clear that the first three stages were all about "me, me, me". It's only in partnership that the relationship becomes about "us". This is, obviously, a far more productive and useful place to be for any business.

The reason people can't or won't go there is their unwillingness to take the next step—the step out of dead zone into partnership. And, at base, that unwillingness (that refusal, I'm tempted to say) stems from doubt. Doubt they can do it, doubt they will be accepted if they do, doubt that other people will have recognised they've done it, doubt they will be rejected having stepped out of their comfort zone, doubt... . Any doubt the ego can create in order to keep them 'safe'.

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 been told is there, but which he can't see, will support him. He has to take the next step with no proof it will be supported. It is.

Once two people can make their relationship about "us", they can make it about the other person. In the fifth stage, **leadership**, people typically are able to make the other person more important than them, as Chuck Spezzano has put it. This is not behaving or feeling or thinking as if the other person were more important: that route leads to making oneself inferior, ultimately to becoming a victim. It is about acting as if. If each party in the relationship is making the other more important than them, that is going to be the most useful way of deepening and enhancing the relationship and, in business terms, growing the business.

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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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