

Building collegiate relationships in schools

Tips for leaders

The success of a school is based largely on the quality of its relationships.

When it comes to staff relationships, building a collegiate environment is a fundamental pillar for building protective resilience and improving wellbeing across the school workforce.

Staff in education have to deal with a number of different types of relationships with all types of people. The difficulty is in knowing how to manage the different needs, expectations and requirements of each of these. Below are some tips for leaders to help build collegiate relationships across the school workforce.



Keep it (largely) positive

Relationship expert John Gottman found that the most successful relationships are built on positive communication. His research showed that for every negative comment there were five positive ones exchanged in a happy relationship. So, leaders should facilitate opportunities for staff to hear about what they are doing well. Leaders should encourage communication focussed on successes and build this into team meetings, 1:1 conversations and daily interactions. Even when difficult conversations need to be had with staff, make sure the tone is positive and that the aim is to resolve the tricky situation. This will help to move any issues forward rather than stagnating in a bog of pessimism and negativity.

Appreciation

Feeling appreciated is a key driver of positive mental health and wellbeing amongst staff in schools. But appreciation is more than just a thank you. When it comes to building relationships, creating opportunities to show appreciation is a great way to connect staff and help them find their common purpose. You can understand more about why appreciation matters when it comes to teacher mental health and wellbeing, by watching our webinar [here](#).



Find common ground

Humans have a tendency to like and gravitate towards people that are similar to them. And when we like people, we're far more likely to be compliant and behave in a co-operative way with them. The difficulty is that schools are full of such diverse groups of people it can be easy for a 'them' and 'us' situation to arise. Therefore, it's important for leaders to consciously try and create opportunities to explore common ground amongst their staff. It really doesn't matter what staff have in common but find that common ground and build from there. This is especially important when building relationships between different roles within schools, for example teachers and support staff. Or Senior Leadership Teams and catering staff. Bridging any gaps between different roles will avoid a culture of 'them' and 'us'.



Show some compassion

There's an old adage that goes, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." It reminds us that life can be really harsh and unfair sometimes and we never really know what is going on for someone at any point in their life. So, if a staff member uncharacteristically snaps, give them the benefit of the doubt. It could be that a student's behaviour is less than ideal, or a parent isn't playing ball, and they are having a really hard day. See if there's any way you uncover what is really bothering that person and then offer to lend an ear to listen or a hand if they need help. Only when we try and put ourselves in another's shoes and then offer some support can we truly understand one another and move the relationship forward.



As a leader, also encourage this within your teams so that staff are collectively creating a compassionate workplace where everybody gives each other the benefit of the doubt.



Be assertive and encourage others to be

Most people are not mind readers. This means if we want or need something from someone else, we have to be clear and let them know what it is we are asking for. Assertiveness is not about being aggressive, it's about communicating clearly and explaining what you are happy with doing or not doing. So, if a staff member's behaviour is not to your liking, let them know how you are feeling and explain how you would like things to be instead. The key is to nip the behaviour in the bud as soon as possible, especially if the behaviour is impacting on other staff and affecting wider team relations.

When communication in schools is clear and direct, relationships really start to flourish. Encouraging all staff to be assertive, particularly when being asked to do something at school they don't feel comfortable with, is important.



See the funny side

According to some psychologists, one of the evolutionary purposes of laughter was to reduce stress and tension amongst a group. Laughter can be a great bonding tool as it helps build rapport. There's even research that shows that humorous head teachers have staff who report higher job satisfaction and that humorous teachers increase their students' motivation to learn. So, find opportunities to laugh with your team and create the space for them to laugh together. There's no doubt that using humour appropriately in schools can make life seem that little bit easier.



Manage difficult relationships swiftly

Conflict or discomfort among staff can result from a number of behaviours. The common factor in conflict is usually a direct disagreement between people. The key thing for any leader is to manage the conflict as soon as possible so that it doesn't escalate, and as a result impacts on wider team relations.

Disagreements consist of both the objective point at issue and the subjective emotional involvement invested by the staff involved. Both elements must be addressed for an effective resolution. It's also important to understand how conflict can arise in dealing with a difficult person. Different personality types react in characteristic ways in conflict situations. Recognising these dynamics is the first step to coping with the situation, and you can begin by recognising the role that you yourself play as a leader.



Improving your own response to conflict as a leader

Learn to recognise and control your defence mechanism as way to role model effectively to your staff. Identify your triggers. Consider what always makes you angry. Do certain words instantly provoke a reaction? Are you irritable before your coffee? Are there certain times of day you are better than other? Next identify how you usually react. Do you tend to shout back? Do you withdraw? Can you be passive aggressive? Are you too nice? Consider taking the following positive steps and promote these amongst staff who may be dealing with conflict with a colleague:

- Learn to listen
- Try to be open and receptive
- Ensure that you understand what is being said to you – calmly ask someone to clarify if you do not
- Be aware of your own strengths and weakness
- Actively take steps to work on your weaknesses, particularly those that affect your work life and relationships
- If you feel that your own behaviour is not the only factor in the conflict, perhaps the source of your difficulty is ineffective communication.



Communication

The key to any successful relationship is communication. Poor communication is often the cause of many relationship problems, particularly in the workplace. Many teachers are adept at communicating effectively with pupils and students, but can be less successful when talking with other adults.

Creating clear communication structures, opportunities for staff to talk to each other and ways for staff to raise concerns and issues should be a priority for all school leaders. The cost of not doing this is too high.

You'll find a range of resources on 'getting staff talking' on the Taking Care of Teachers: Mental Health and Wellbeing hub [here](#).



Breaking down barriers to communication

As a leader it's important to consider how you can break down the barriers to communication across your staff team. This is both important in relationships between line managers and direct line reports, but also between colleagues. Things to consider, and to encourage your staff to consider, are to:

- Avoid assumptions
- Agree 'rules' of communication before speaking, e.g. no interruptions, length of responses, etc.
- Focus on facts, rather than emotions (where possible)
- Give space and time to others speaking
- Use 'I' statements, rather than 'you' statements, i.e. "I felt that", not "you made me feel"
- Respect yourself and others' right to speak
- Listen.



Listening

Listening is one of the most powerful ways to build relationships. For leaders, it's one of the most powerful ways to build a collegiate environment within schools. There are many ways to create space for listening, but how often do we really hear what we are being told?

Hearing is, for most people, a largely automatic, unconscious process by which our neurological mechanisms translate sound waves into recognisable patterns. Listening is the self-conscious process of sifting out that which we wish to pay attention to and understanding what is being said. Listening skills allow one to learn, make informed decisions, and establish meaningful relationships with others.

Listening operates at different levels depending on the circumstances:

- **Cosmetic listening** – I'm hearing the words. It looks like I'm listening, but I'm not
- **Conversational listening** – I'm engaged in the conversation, more focused on me than on you, listening, talking, thinking, talking
- **Active listening** – I'm more focused on you than on me (some internal dialogue may still be happening). Listener is mentally registering and recording facts, confirms they are listening using appropriate sounds, gestures or expressions, using clarifying questions, repeating information back and offering observations

- **Deep listening** – I'm focused on what you're saying, recording facts, paying attention (minimum internal dialogue is taking place)
- **Non-verbal listening** – how the person says something may be as important what they say. Non-verbal listening is paying attention to body language, facial expressions, gestures, or emphasis on words.

Active listening is often encouraged in workplaces and usually involves listening at three levels:

- 1 Paying attention to the speaker and to the message.** Rather than listening half-heartedly or forming a reply in one's head while the person is still speaking, concentrate on what the person is saying.
- 2 Building trust and rapport.** Being sensitive to the communication style of the other person will help bridge the communication gap, demonstrate respect and build trust and rapport.
- 3 Sharing meaning.** Reiterate what you think the other person has said. Pick up on non-verbal cues and reflect them back to the person to reassure them that you have understood the message correctly. Paraphrase the message and ask questions to clarify.

Active listening doesn't come naturally to everybody. Providing opportunities for your staff to learn, and practice the techniques, will go a long way in creating an environment where people are confident and skilled listeners.



Poor listeners

Poor listeners have a number of characteristics in common. They are likely to:

- Interrupt or finish the other person's sentences
- Think about what they are going to say next or hurry the other person or daydream
- Argue with the other person and give unsolicited advice
- Tend not to respond or to jump conclusions

As leaders, it's important to identify staff members that may have these characteristics and work with them to improve where needed. If a colleague constantly feels like they are not being heard by another colleague, a breakdown in the relationship could occur, so it's important that when these characteristics are identified they are challenged as soon as possible.



Good listeners

In contrast, good listeners will respond by:

- Encouraging the other person
- Asking questions when they don't understand something
- Looking at things from the other person perspective
- Restating the important points to show that they understand
- Maintaining emotional control and staying mentally present – being patient
- Helping people to draw their own conclusions
- Offering all the same level of courtesy and respect
- Active listening

Encourage these behaviours amongst your staff and remember to role model them yourself!



Appropriate challenging/ difficult conversations

Appropriate challenging/difficult conversations involves placing demands on people because, generally speaking, they are receiving information they don't necessarily want. It's not surprising that we often withhold 'bad news' even when it is in the other person's interest to hear it.

Challenging people respectfully is both difficult and demanding, but often as leaders it is essential if we want to build positive relationships and encourage them between staff. A large part of staff feeling comfortable in having challenging or difficult conversations is feeling *psychologically safe* to do so, so as leaders it's important to think about how you create the right conditions to facilitate this.

People often avoid challenging conversations because they are afraid of conflict. Effective challenging involves being assertive and raising awareness of what is happening, supported by facts. To do this, encourage staff to:

- Feed back to their colleague about how their attitude or behaviour impacts on them
- Ask direct, open questions to their colleague e.g. "When, How, Why, What, Where"?
- Change focus from "what?" to "how?", from "then and there" to "here and now", and from "I can't" to "I choose not to"
- Ask for their feedback and thoughts after they have stated their case
- Affirm all the positive qualities the other person possesses



Giving and receiving feedback

A collegiate environment is one that allows space for staff to give and receive feedback to each other, while feeling safe to do so. Like with having challenging conversations, staff often need to feel *psychologically safe* when giving and receiving feedback.

There are many models for giving and receiving feedback and providing staff with the tools to do this effectively is important. One model is called *Radical Candour*.

Leaders should lead by example and role model giving and receiving feedback, so that it sets a culture where this a normal practice within schools.



You can access more resources for line managers, leaders and wellbeing leads [here](#).