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Communication Strategies to Restore Working Relations: Comparing Relationships that Improved with Ones that Remained Problematic

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Communication Strategies to Restore Working Relations: Comparing Relationships that Improved with Ones that Remained Problematic

Abstract

When considering problematic workplace relationships, the question naturally arises of how people can deal most effectively with these challenges. What people most want with difficult relationships is a way to make the problems go away. That desire calls for research on strategies to transform problematic relationships into non-problematic relations. For this issue, there is both good news and bad news.

First, the bad news: There are few easy answers when dealing with problematic relations. Problematic relationships are difficult by definition. Relationships that involve challenges a person can easily resolve are not difficult relationships. The co-construction of these relationships often intertwines the weaknesses of both individuals. Given the infinite array of the resulting constructions, there are few actions that will improve every difficult relationship. Communication that makes one relationship less problematic might have no effect on another, or it could even inflame the problems. Thus, effective communicative responses to problematic relationships must be tailored to each individual case. Persons seeking a simple and universal fix are bound to be disappointed.

Now the good news: The variety of causes and difficult nature of these relationships do not preclude research generating insights into their resolution. An examination of problematic workplace relationships can offer essential background to help guide the improvement of almost any difficult relationship. Even though optimal responses vary across relationships, we can still craft useful strategies for identifying problematic issues and responding to them. And, despite the need to adapt communicative strategies to the specific people and situation involved, some behaviors may be documented to have fairly widespread utility. Research can identify those communicative approaches that seem applicable to a wide range of problematic relationships.

This chapter explores the experiences of working professionals who have wrestled with difficult relationships, sometimes seeing those relationships improve, sometimes finding no relief to the challenges of those relationships. Their stories offer useful insights into how people can communicate most effectively in the workplace when relationships become problematic.

Disciplines

Communication | Interpersonal and Small Group Communication | Organizational Communication | Other Communication

Comments

Permission documentation is on file.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES TO RESTORE WORKING RELATIONS

Comparing Relationships That Improved
with Ones That Remained Problematic

JON A. HESS & KATELYN A. SNEED

When considering problematic workplace relationships, the question naturally arises of how people can deal most effectively with these challenges. What people most want with difficult relationships is a way to make the problems go away. That desire calls for research on strategies to transform problematic relationships into non-problematic relations. For this issue, there is both good news and bad news.

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examination of problematic workplace relationships can offer essential background to help guide the improvement of almost any difficult relationship. Even though optimal responses vary across relationships, we can still craft useful strategies for identifying problematic issues and responding to them. And, despite the need to adapt communicative strategies to the specific people and situation involved, some behaviors may be documented to have fairly widespread utility. Research can identify those communicative approaches that seem applicable to a wide range of problematic relationships.

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Dealing with Difficult Workplace Relationships

There is no doubt about the prevalence of difficult workplace relationships. Across research conducted by the team of Hess, Fritz, and Omdahl (see Fritz & Omdahl, 2006), over a thousand people have reported on workplace relationships, and all but one participant readily identified a relationship viewed as problematic. While it is impossible to quantify precisely the proportion of relationships that can be considered problematic, some estimate that 10% or more of all employees can be deemed problematic, a figure that may cost American businesses several hundred billion dollars annually in reduced productivity, lost employee time, and other effects (Bruce, 1990). Levitt, Silver, and Franco (1996) simply referred to problematic relationships as “an integral part of the human experience” (p. 524). Problematic workplace relationships will always exist; the challenge is how best to handle them.

Despite agreement that problematic relationships are prevalent, researchers have not paid sufficient attention to the bigger question of how to deal with these relationships. The literature contains abundant scholarship on topics that could be useful for managing difficult relationships, but scholars have not always been intentional about seeking to integrate these studies into comprehensive answers to the question of how people can best respond to difficult relationships. However, scholars have at least begun to pay more attention in recent years to this question. This attention has resulted in a variety of books offering theory for scholars (e.g., Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik & Davenport Sypher, 2009) and advice for working professionals

(e.g., Bruce, 1990; Hall, 2003). Taken together, these books offer useful information but do not provide a thorough survey of the landscape of problematic relationships at work. Many of these books focus only on certain contexts, based on industry, type of difficulty, or both. For instance, Higgerson and Joyce (2007) devoted an entire section of their book on leadership communication to managing difficult people, but because the book is directed toward academic department chairs and deans, it restricts attention to challenges of higher education. Einarsen et al.'s (2011) edited volume on workplace bullying and harassment is not restricted to one industry, but it is restricted to a single relational difficulty. Twale and De Luca's (2008) examination of incivility among faculty is bounded by both type of difficult relationship and industry.

Taken as a whole, the literature on difficult workplace relationships tends to exhibit a managerial bias, focusing on questions of how managers can best address problematic employees (e.g., Bruce, 1990; Hall, 2003; Higgerson & Joyce, 2007) and driven by organizational goals rather than by a desire to restore positive relationships. These sources are primarily concerned with using people to achieve organizational objectives, and while restoring working relationships is regarded as positive outcome, relationships themselves are often treated more as means than ends. Furthermore, while writers often offer advice for how to improve difficult relationships, researchers have rarely compared relationships that improved with those that did not. Doing so would offer a richer understanding of the forces shaping or preventing positive change in difficult relationships.

This project was undertaken to consider the bigger question of how communication can help restore relationships in the workplace—not just to improve the organization's bottom line but also because positive relationships have intrinsic merit. Furthermore, this study was designed to offer more general insights into how people can best address problematic relationships by comparing relationships that improved with those that did not. We addressed the following research questions:

- RQ1: What communication helped improve problematic workplace relationships?
- RQ2: What similarities and differences mark communication in problematic relationships that improved compared to those that did not?

This project used qualitative methods to glean a rich understanding of people's experiences in problematic relationships. We asked people to share their experiences in problematic workplace relationships that took a positive turn and in problematic relationships that did not. This comparison allowed us to under-

stand the changes that took place and to see what communicative behaviors had a positive effect and what ones did not. By not restricting the scope to a specific industry or type of relational challenge, this study offers a broader viewpoint on challenging relationships.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were 14 individuals who had experienced problematic workplace relationships. Although the requirement of having had a difficult workplace relationship could have been a screening variable, we did not encounter anyone who could not easily recall many such relationships. We used a convenience sample for this study, contacting people who were known to the researchers. This procedure risked producing a set of participants who had similarities due to their contact with the researchers. However, given the diverse experiences and range of strategies across an array of occupations, we believe the sample was not compromised due to the way we identified participants. Our sample was racially homogenous (all participants were Caucasian), but intentionally seeking variety in participants' age, sex, career paths, and type of relationship yielded a sample with notable diversity across those areas. As the results show, people's experiences in these relationships were identifiably different.

Respondents were seven men and seven women, ranging in age from 18 to 75, with a mean age of 38. Participants' occupations included sales, construction, banking, administrative support, farm labor, high school education, day care, bar and restaurant ownership, information technology, warehouse labor, and product delivery. To protect anonymity, all participants are identified in this chapter using pseudonyms.

Procedure

Prior to doing interviews, the researchers contacted potential participants to explain the study and seek their willingness to be interviewed. All people contacted agreed to participate. We met the participants at private, quiet locations agreeable to both parties, typically the home or workplace of the participant or researcher. Before the interview started, the participant read and signed a consent form and filled out a short demographic form that asked about age, sex, race, education, occupation, and duration of the difficult relationship. Two participants who were married co-owners of a business interviewed together, and while both

shared their stories of their relationships (which improved) with the same pair of difficult employees, the husband also talked about a problematic relationship (which did not improve) with a former business partner.

We followed a semi-structured interview guide, which offered a set of general questions for each participant and allowed flexibility for follow-up probes specific to the topics raised in each interview. We began the interviews by asking participants to talk about themselves, their family of origin, and their jobs. These questions helped the participants settle into the interview and provided useful information to contextualize their descriptions of the problematic relationships. We then asked them to talk about two problematic relationships, one that took a positive turn and one that did not. Participants were asked to tell stories about the difficult interactions they had, what factors made the relationship challenging, and about the communication that took place. They were also asked to reflect on what communication behaviors worked well, which ones did not work well, and what might have caused these behaviors to produce the results that followed. All but one participant readily thought of relationships for both categories. One participant could not think of a problematic relationship that had taken a positive turn, so he discussed a pair of workplace relationships that had both remained problematic until he left the respective companies.

The interviews were digitally recorded, then transcribed with all identifying information removed. Interviews ranged from 8 to 61 minutes, with an average of 23 minutes. In the interviews, participants talked about a wide range of professional relationships that proved to be problematic. Most common were difficult bosses (15), followed by peers (8), and, least often talked about, subordinates (4). The category of peer relationships at work included any relationship that did not involve a direct hierarchical relationship between the two people. In some cases, the relationship involved people in the same department who reported to the same supervisor, but in other cases the two people were in different divisions of the company or even in different organizations who had contact but no authority over each other.

Results

The interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Categories were identified when similar ideas recurred across multiple participants. Although our focus was on communication that could help restore working relationships, we also examined the cause of these relationship difficulties. A theoretical analysis of unwanted relationships suggested two main rea-

sons why relationships can be unwanted: goal interference and negative affect (Hess, 2003). The former, rooted in logic and reason, suggests that relationships may be problematic when the other person does not share or support an individual's goals. The latter, rooted in emotion, suggests that problems arise when people dislike each other.

This distinction generally fit these problematic workplace relationships. People reported relationships to be problematic due either to lack of fit between their workplace goals or to behavior that showed disrespect, bred hostility, or was otherwise offensive. For example, people who experienced goal friction included Gina (50, a restaurant co-owner), who reported difficulties with a bar manager who was treating customers poorly (goal of retaining customers); Garrett (26, sales), whose boss was too busy to train him adequately but expected him to perform capably (goal of proper support so he could do his job well); and Jared (51, construction), whose business partner was hiding the fact that he was overcharging customers (goal of running business ethically).

In other cases, participants shared narratives in which the issues that made relationships problematic were not about the work that needed to be done but the way that people felt treated. Alex (32, medical supply delivery) had a boss who seemed to single him out unfairly to pick on him for his work. Abigail (52, administrative assistant) struggled with anger from a coworker who was upset when Abigail received a promotion the coworker had wanted. Lois (75, social worker) had difficulty with a younger male colleague who she believed was patronizing her due to her age. These problematic relationships resulted from feelings of disrespect and undue hostility from peers or supervisors.

Coping

Although the research focused on communication that influenced problematic relationships, the interviews also revealed two actions that seemed to be helpful in improving relationships. Even though these actions did not occur within the problematic relationship, respondents indicated that in many cases they influenced subsequent communication in the relationship. Therefore, they are worth attention in our investigation of communication that can improve problematic relationships. These two actions were doing the job well and talking with others.

Doing the job well. At least six of the respondents indicated that doing their job well was a major element in their approach to dealing with this difficult coworker. While excellence on the job is not necessarily a form of com-

munication, in most cases it had a significant influence on the communication that took place in the relationship. Several reported that they were able to ease tensions by simply displaying competence in their organizational role; in some cases, doing the job well was a means of coping that reduced stress and made it easier for a person to deal with a difficult boss.

Examples of how doing the job well affected subsequent communication were varied. Garrett (sales) found that doing his job well earned the respect of his boss, who then began to treat him better:

With this one [meeting with prospective customer], though, today, I was—I knew how this last one had gone, where he was just pissed off because he didn't think I was prepared, you know. So today, I kind of walked into his office, we kind of went over the whole thing. You know, I said, here is this whole big write up I've done on the whole company, you know, this is everything I know about them, this is where all their plant locations are in comparison to where we are located. You know, all this different stuff. And he goes, "Wow, this is actually really good. Nice job." And then, when he sees that, and then I hear that he already has a good impression of how this might go because of the work that I've done, and then I'm actually, tomorrow, for this meeting tomorrow. I'm actually finally, I'm actually pretty calmed down about it now, because I see that he doesn't already have it in his head that tomorrow is going to be a disaster.

Wade, 34, a banker whose boss was negative toward him, had an experience similar to Garrett's, noting, "I think really once she saw the value that I brought to the bank and my ability to do well and exceed in sales, that changed everything."

On the other hand, some people found that doing their job well reduced their reliance on a difficult coworker, and thereby took away some of the problems they faced with that person. Lois, a social worker, had a technical advisor who was difficult to work with. She worked hard to learn policies that she ordinarily had to discuss with this advisor so she would not have to go to him as often. This reduced her reliance on him and thereby eased some of the difficulty. Interestingly, when the advisor saw how well she learned this information, he began to show her more respect, and the relationship improved. So, even in cases where doing the job well was not undertaken to earn respect, it typically had that effect.

Talking to others. A second action appearing in the reports of at least three of the respondents was talking to others (third parties) about the problematic relationship. This helped them cope, often due simply to the social support of others. For example, Alex, whose boss seemed to pick on him unfairly, reported the following incident:

I would often ask Roger, who was my coworker doing the same job, but he had more years of experience than I did so he was sort of deemed in the office as my supervisor. And so oftentimes, I would say to Roger, "What's going on? Is there anything I'm doing wrong? What in the world—Why does he hate me so much?" And he'd say "I don't know. It doesn't make any sense. We're doing the same thing, and you're doing it as efficiently as I am, you know, I don't really see a difference. And yet—" So it was affirming to me, again, to find out I wasn't crazy, it wasn't me.

For Alex, and others, the support of peers altered their frames of mind, allowing them to better navigate the challenges of the difficult relationships.

Communication to Restore Relationships

Participants in this study reported a variety of communication behaviors that they believed led to improvements in problematic workplace relationships. These communication behaviors could be grouped into six categories, although some could fit into multiple categories: (1) showing civility or a positive demeanor, (2) confronting the other person directly about problems, (3) affirming the relationship, (4) avoiding conflict, (5) listening, and (6) adapting to the other person.

Civility and positive demeanor. One of the most common responses that people felt helped restore problematic relationships was to maintain civility, treat the other person well, and/or show a positive demeanor. Mindy, 23, a public relations intern, said of her approach to her difficult boss, "I just kind of sucked it up and I just tried to be friendly to her, and she, like, when I left, she gave me a gift card and was sad to see me go and said if ever I wanted to come back and work that I could [laughs], not that I ever did, but I thought that it was a nice gesture that it, it ended well." Lois, a social worker, relayed this experience about a difficult coworker who was a younger man: "It was an arrogance on his part and I had to become more humble, but by doing so, by remaining humble on my part and not becoming combative with him, I won him over."

While many people reported avoiding conflict, often due to anxiety or other avoidant tendencies, the people who talked about showing civility or positivity explained it as an active and intentional process. These people felt that they needed to model positive behavior and hoped that doing so would eventually yield more positive reactions from the other person. In many cases this approach worked, although, as we discuss later, some of this effect was mediated by the personalities of the people involved and the context of their difficult relationship. Some people also reported that being "nice" in some situations

did not result in positive outcomes—although this situation was much less common than those who reported that civility and positive demeanor eventually had positive effects.

Directly confronting the problem. Another common response, noted by five participants, was to confront the problem directly. In this case, participants spoke openly with their problematic partner about the nature of the problem and sought ways to resolve the issues. Although this approach was not successful in all cases, more often than not, people reported that this strategy had a positive effect.

One example of how directly confronting the problem had a positive effect was when Mitch, 53, a computer salesman, had to deal with a new—and much younger—manager who seemed to think that older employees were not as capable as younger ones. After just a few months, this manager had to do a performance review on Mitch, and he did not submit a positive report. Mitch responded by addressing the issue with this supervisor. He reported the following events:

I worked with him to educate him on my strengths and accomplishments. I spent time with him and tried to better understand his position so I could react to change his mindset. Basically, I spent several hours preparing a briefing for him on my performance for the previous 12 months. He appears to have somewhat of an attention deficit, so written communication seems to work best with him. Once he reviewed this and actually took the time to understand me, we ended up having a fairly positive relationship.

Abigail, an administrative assistant who received a promotion over a coworker who wanted the promotion, also talked about the situation directly with the coworker. She reported, "I think it was persistence in being straightforward and confronting her about it a few times that eventually made her realize that it wasn't my fault and that she was upset at me instead of being upset with HR or herself for not getting the position." These conversations resulted in an improved relationship between the two.

It is essential to note that in cases where direct confrontation was successful, the participants described conversations characterized by respect and civility. As is discussed later, many people reported angry and hostile confrontations that inflamed the problem and thus did not have positive effects.

Affirmation of the relationship. Four respondents reported that in their conversations with the partner, they expressed their commitment to that person and to improving the relationship. For example, Abigail expressed sympathy to her coworker who was passed over for the promotion, telling her she was sorry that she did not get the position. Rachel, 30, who co-owns a bar with her parents, recalled a difficult period with her mother where the two eventually took time

away from each other while dealing with a significant conflict. Rachel noted, "I think for us it was trying to take a break from each other and take a few days apart and trying to sit down and say, you know, it's not that important, we'll work it out, work towards some sort of compromise where we're both happy because at the end of the day, our relationship is more important than anything else." Harrison, 42, a high school teacher, talked about a problem with another teacher in his department. Later they found out that the principal had been manipulating them, and he approached the other teacher to talk about his commitment to restoring their relationship: "When that happened, I thought, I need to talk to Jessie. So I did. And I said, 'Jessie, you know, this whole thing has been the worst thing between us, and I want to tell you things I know from my experience.' And so I did. And she told me things. And we realized that it was totally orchestrated." Their affirmation helped them restore a more positive relationship.

It is worth noting that all the respondents who reported affirming the relationship also talked directly to their coworker about the relational problems. This finding could suggest that affirmation is simply a part of the direct confrontation process. However, two of the respondents talked about directly confronting the issue without indicating any statement of their commitment to a good working relationship. Therefore, while confronting the problem was a prerequisite for affirmation, the latter can be seen as a distinct communicative response to a problematic relationship.

Avoiding conflict. Just as prevalent as directly confronting the problem was its opposite—avoiding conflict. Five respondents indicated that they avoided confrontation, and counter to conventional wisdom they believed this avoidance was useful in improving the problematic relations. For instance, Dawn, 27, a day care provider, talked about a boss who was not supportive of the workers:

You know, it was frustrating, but I also look at it like that was my superior, and you know, I don't want to start an argument or have a bad relationship with her because she is my superior. You know, so I don't think I really did deal with it, I don't think I ever told her I was bothered by it, I never, she never knew I had any issues with it, I should put it that way. . . . I pretty much just did what she told me to do and I didn't argue [laughs], that usually works best, doesn't it?

Mindy relayed a similar experience, saying, "I wouldn't really battle her in anything, I would just sort of accept whatever she said, because I didn't feel, like even if I disagreed, I'd just be like ok, that sounds good! You know, just because I didn't want to deal with it. If I disagreed, she would not be happy with that, so more of just acquiescing to whatever she wanted."

While both of these respondents suggested that their behavior was motivated by a tendency to avoid conflict, Wade took a more philosophical approach. He noted that he sometimes avoided conflict not out of discomfort but out of a judgment about when conflict was beneficial in the workplace and when it was not. In his words, "You don't want to be in conflict at work all the time, so let it roll off your shoulders." He felt that by minimizing conflict and doing his job well he would contribute to an environment conducive to improved relations.

Listening. Although not as commonly mentioned as the previous strategies, four of the respondents spoke about listening to the other person as a means of restoring better working relations. Two cases of listening include Harrison's conversation with Jessie ("And she told me things.") and Mitch's conversation with his supervisor ("I spent time with him and tried to better understand his position. . ."). In another case, a restaurant co-owner, Gina, talked about listening to a chef and a bar manager who were causing problems. She noted, "And we were really ready to fire him and we went in and listened to his side, but realizing that they're ADD, both of them, we were really shocked." What was striking was the result of that conversation. After Gina and her co-owner listened to the employees and also shared their concerns, the employees made dramatic changes in behavior. Gina continued, "And they were both very apologetic. Apologized to the workers, coworkers, apologized to some of the customers that, that they were rude to. . . . And [the cook] is very good now, we've had him with us almost four years, and he very rarely blows up, and we just have to look at him, and you know 'Alright, alright, I know.'"

Listening seemed to offer respondents a variety of advantages in restoring the relationships. It helped them better understand and adapt to others, it established an environment that facilitated changes in behavior, and it allowed people to show commitment to their relationships.

Adapting to the other. The final behavior that was commonly mentioned as helpful was adapting to the other person. This strategy seemed to necessitate listening or at least careful attention to how the other person responded. Mitch found that using the best channel of communication led to better outcomes (written, instead of oral, for certain information). Garrett found that he needed to adapt to his boss's moods:

I'm a person that tries to interject humor into most situations, you know, but he's not. If you can't tell right off the bat that he is in a good mood, being somebody that likes to interject humor into situations, it's just, it's never a good idea. So just trying to, you

know, if he seems like he is in more of a serious mood, trying to maintain a serious approach to the conversation on your end is probably the best thing to do. So, just kinda, really trying to work towards his mood, I guess.

In contrast, Patrick (18, worker at a farm) found that the right jokes were usually helpful with his boss. But in both cases, the person found success by understanding and adapting to the other person.

Ineffective Communication

In addition to talking about behaviors that were helpful, respondents also noted some behaviors that seemed to reduce the chances of improved relationships. Two were prominent: inflaming the problem and masking the problem. The former made matters worse, and the latter made the problem invisible.

Inflaming the problem. A number of the participants talked about behaviors they did that ended up inflaming the problem. These ranged from reciprocating antagonism or losing their temper to making accusations that could not easily be overlooked when the relationship took a turn for the better. For example, Rachel noted that when she and her mother (co-owners of the bar) would lose their tempers and yell at each other, they ended up making matters more difficult. Garrett noted that saying whatever was on his mind, regardless of what mood his boss was in, made the situation even worse. Harrison talked about restoring his relationship with Jessie, another teacher in his department. Although they were able to restore their relationship, he noted, some of the conversations they had during the difficult years had a lingering effect even when they reconciled:

It nearly ruined the relationship I had with Jessie. And, I think it has definitely pock-marked it so that it can never be the same. But I think now we don't—I don't think she can ever look at me the same. Because I really did attack her motives in a way that revealed her in an unkind way. And I don't think she's ever really thought of herself in those terms. But she's not the most aware person, nor the most self-aware person.

While Harrison was not trying to hurt Jessie during the time their relationship was difficult, his reflections on the events that took place and their impact at the present forms an important example of how actions in a problematic relationship shape options for the future relations between the relationship partners.

Shelly (25, secretary) had to work with a company owner who wanted more deference than she was willing to offer. However, while this owner's expectations created difficulties because they entailed an attitude she was not willing

to offer, she was still careful to avoid inflaming the situation more than necessary in order to maintain her integrity. She noted the following:

He thinks he is so important, that it is hard for me to have conversations with him without wanting to laugh [laughs]. I just don't think anyone is more important than anyone else, especially when they act that way. He gets irritated with me because I don't kiss his ass. I just won't do it....I never push the limit. I am respectful. I treat him as I would treat any boss. I respect him and all that he has accomplished, and he does know I feel that way. But really, I just don't kiss his ass and act all crazy impressed around him like everyone else does. So, I guess I respond by remaining true to myself and my values, and figure that I am good enough at my job that I am not going to get fired for being myself.

Thus, Shelly was able to keep a workable relationship despite the difficulties by being careful not to inflame the situation in ways she could avoid.

Masking the problem. The counterpoint to avoiding inflaming the problem is to mask difficulties completely. While hiding the fact that there are difficulties certainly avoids inflaming problems, it also takes away any opportunity the relational partner might have to contribute to better relations. Often, respondents noted that it was a change in situation or in actions done by the partner that made the relationship improve, not something that the respondent did. For instance, Abigail noted that her relationship got better when her coworker realized that Abigail was not the person at fault for the decision of who to promote. In Harrison's case, his relationship with Jessie improved when the principal who had caused the problems left the school. Lois noted that her problematic coworker became less antagonistic when he realized that he was wrong.

Completely hiding the problem would make it impossible to take initiative to solve the problem. Alex, whose relationship with his boss was difficult, wondered whether talking to his boss about the problem would have helped. While he agreed that it is possible that directly confronting the issue might not have improved the situation, he also noted that there is no way to know. But since Alex had never talked about it, his boss was unaware of the problem and could not have improved the relationship even if he had wanted to. Dawn, who felt that avoidance had helped her problematic relationship, also noted, "I think had I gone to her, maybe she would have been able to work on it, or say 'I don't think it's an issue.' But the fact that I never expressed my feelings to her, I think that was a challenge in itself, because she didn't even know." These examples show that when a person hides the problems skillfully enough that the partner is unaware of the issues, there is no possibility for the partner to improve her or his behaviors.

Taken together, these two observations suggest that people need to find an appropriate balance—they should neither make the problem so invisible the partner is oblivious to it, nor should they unnecessarily escalate problems. The experience of the participants in this study suggests that some constructive attempt to address problems could be useful but that it needs to be done with civility, exercising prudence with regard to how assertive to be.

Relationships That Did Not Improve

Clear distinctions from relationships that improved. When people contrasted relationships that did not improve with those that did, some differences were readily apparent. First, some relational qualities and situations made change more difficult. Relationships that started poorly were more difficult to change than relationships that started positively and took a bad turn due to circumstances. Second, more people talked about difficulties with their bosses than with subordinates. The organizational authority given to bosses can make it easier to effect change than for those who lack power over the problematic relational partner. Third, when people felt the relationship had a forthcoming end point, they were less motivated to improve it. Garrett talked about a problematic relationship at a job he had in college that did not improve: “And another thing with that job is that I didn’t try because I knew that I was close to being done at school; I knew I never was going to work for this guy again. You know, there wasn’t a future for me at this company, because I knew I went to college and I was going to go somewhere else and get a better job.”

Finally, the less malleable a partner’s offending qualities seem, the more difficulty people had in resolving the issues. Partners who exhibited a high degree of inflexibility, a mean-spirited nature, or evidence of psychological problems were harder for our respondents to deal with than those who were flexible, concerned with the respondent’s well-being, or rational. Shelly, the secretary whose company owner wanted her to “kiss ass” more than she was willing to do, was able eventually to develop a better working relationship with him as they got to know each other better. She was unable ever to come to terms, however, with a coworker who seemed to have psychological issues. Shelly finally concluded that “arrogant” is easier to deal with than “crazy.” Likewise, Harrison contrasted a coworker whom he was never able to win over, despite ongoing attempts to improve the relationship:

The one that didn’t make a positive turn was because the person involved—and it kind of became apparent—had issues, personal problems, and I think that it really had noth-

ing to do with me in the end. I think that I was just an outlet for the frustrations that this person was going through. So I think that it didn't make a positive change because this person couldn't change, wasn't able to deal with whatever it was she was dealing with. And she eventually left, which is, hopefully she went on to a happier life. The reason that Jesse and I reconciled was because we both realized that we were manipulated.

Dawn contrasted her non-supportive boss at a day care center with an unpleasant manager she had as a waitress. She eventually earned positive feelings from the former but not the latter. "Where she [day care boss] was never mean to me, I just felt like she wasn't listening, this one [restaurant manager] she was directly mean about it. And I think that was the biggest difference, her attitude about it."

Inconsistent effects. The greatest challenge to understanding how communication can improve or worsen a difficult relationship is the fact that some of the same behaviors that helped people restore troubled relationships were ineffective—or worse, counterproductive—in other situations. While many more people reported that civility and being nice to the partner was helpful, two people indicated that those behaviors did not help their problematic relationships, and one person indicated that being nice seemed to make matters worse. Jared recounted his attempts to talk to his business partner, who was falsely billing customers. Despite Jared's accounts of an approach that seemed rational and civil, the two could not come to an agreement, and Jared was unwilling to be party to this criminal behavior: "The way I extracted myself from that situation was I said, look, I'm not doing this anymore. We're disbanding the company, and that's what we did." Lois had a subordinate who would not follow proper procedures, and while she attempted to be nice to this person, she wondered whether being more businesslike and less friendly might have been more effective in that case.

Shelly, an attractive woman, found that it was being too nice that caused the problems she had with a coworker: "When I was in college, I worked at a little food shop in my small town. So, this kid started working there, and he was super weird, but I wanted to be nice to him because everyone else was rude to him. So I started being really nice, and he interpreted that as we were dating." Reflecting on their difficulties, she concluded, "Honestly, probably, I shouldn't have been so nice. This sounds mean, but this kid was kind of a dork...so he probably wasn't used to someone being so nice. I guess if I had just been cordial it could have ended up a little better. But, I was trying to make him feel welcome and gave off the wrong impression. . . ." For Shelly, civility blended with appropriate distance might have made the relationship less difficult than having shown too much friendliness.

In addition to showing civility or positive demeanor, participants also reported cases where directly confronting the problem, avoiding conflict, and attempting to adapt to the other person did not have restorative effects on the relationship. It is worth noting, however, that those behaviors had a positive impact in our sample much more than they had a negative impact or had no effect.

Discussion

The data presented in this study offer a unique insight into the way people managed problematic workplace relationships and to connections between communication and outcomes. The findings from this study offer both ideas worth further exploration and a useful lens for considering extant literature that can be related to difficult relationships. In the pages that follow, we discuss some potential implications of this study.

Although many of the relationships were presented as being nearly impossible to restore, it was clear from the stories of the participants that communication can do much to improve even the most difficult relationships encountered in professional life. While some communicative behaviors seem to offer high likelihood of positive outcomes, no matter the situation, it was also evident that there is not a set of behaviors guaranteed to offer positive effects in all situations. Therefore, the most important implication of these data is that researchers need to focus their attention in two areas to offer useful guidance to those in difficult relationships: (1) consistent strategies, which are behaviors identified by research as having a high likelihood of success regardless of situation or individuals involved; and (2) adaptive strategies, which include identification of factors that can help guide decision making among communicative choices.

Consistent Strategies

Not inflaming the problem. One consistent finding was that inflaming problems had a detrimental effect on problematic relationships and on the ability to repair them later. If people were able to avoid behaviors that were likely to make the problems worse, then the chances of eventually resolving the problems were increased.

The challenge for people in difficult relationships is that avoiding inflaming the problem is easier said than done. People's emotional responses often overwhelm their rational responses (Haidt, 2006). This makes it difficult to avoid actions that might inflame a problem even for the highly composed. Furthermore,

people have a finite degree of self-control (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). Acting in ways that are difficult in order to avoid inflaming a relationship is hard work that eventually wears people out. It is difficult to make rational choices over emotional ones over a long period of difficult interactions. Furthermore, even when people make rational choices in the face of emotionally charged situations, they cannot foresee the consequences of their actions. Therefore, the ability to determine what actions will inflame a situation can often be judged only in retrospect. Finally, because problematic relationships are already somewhat inflamed, by definition, the issue is not a matter of avoiding any behaviors that could cause conflict or irritation but rather one of figuring out which behaviors are "unnecessary." Taken together, these issues raise a formidable challenge.

The suggestion raised by this study is that when people can identify behaviors likely to inflame a problem without apparent benefit, they should refrain from enacting them. Instead, they should choose behaviors that the best evidence suggests will be non-inflammatory, no matter how difficult those behaviors may be to carry out.

High likelihood practices. The data in this study pointed toward at least three communicative practices that seem to have had more positive than negative effects on problematic relationships: treating the other person with civility, affirming a commitment to the relationship, and listening to the other person. Although these behaviors are not guaranteed to have a positive effect in all cases, they offer high enough likelihood of success to be a good first approach in most situations.

Taken together, these three qualities reflect core principles of *dialogue*. Dialogue is a term whose horizon encompasses a range of activities, but it generally refers to a communicative process in which people of difference seek better understanding of each other's perspectives (e.g., DeTurk, 2006). It is characterized by sensitivity to the relationship between people as well as exploration of ideas, and it tends to establish a non-oppositional approach to exploring difference (Hyde & Bineham, 2000). Characteristics of dialogue include the behaviors mentioned here—civility, commitment to relationship, listening to understand—and related qualities, such as respect for the partner, open-mindedness, authenticity, attention to the partner, concern for each other's well-being, and an emergence of ideas "between" people (Arnett & Arneson, 1999; Arnett, Grayson, & McDowell, 2008).

Dialogue is a communicative construct that rose to prominence in the 1960s but fell from favor among theorists because of its theoretical foundations

in therapeutic humanism that seemed unsuited to the times that followed (Anderson, 1982; Arnett, 1981). However, dialogue has seen a resurgence of scholarly attention since the mid-1990s, with scholars grounding dialogue in narrative and other philosophical foundations rather than in therapeutic perspectives (e.g., Arnett & Arneson, 1999; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The results of this study provide yet another form of support for the idea that dialogue is a powerful form of communication in the pursuit of positive relationships.

Adaptive Strategies

While certain communicative practices seem like a good bet in most situations, it was clear from our respondents' stories that people need to adapt their behaviors to each situation's specific qualities. We discuss two issues that were prominent in this data set: adapting to the situation and making the decision to confront the partner about relationship challenges.

Adapting to the person and situation. Participants in this study noted a variety of reasons for strained relations. These reasons included job-related topics, ranging from people's job performance to specific business decisions, and also personal topics, ranging from messages of disrespect to perceptions of differential treatment from coworkers. It was clear from respondents' experiences that restoration of good working relationships began with responses that were appropriate to the particular situation. For example, Abigail found that talking to her colleague who had been passed over for promotion about the issues led to a positive outcome, whereas Wade found that not bringing his concerns about preferential treatment of other employees to his boss eventually worked out for the better. Lois reported that her efforts to be friendly to a coworker who seemed to treat her disrespectfully helped set the stage for improved relations, whereas Shelly found that being too friendly with a coworker was what caused her relationship to become problematic. She had to distance herself in order to make the relationship more functional.

The clear implication of these outcomes is that people need to determine, as best they can, the cause of the relational difficulties and adjust their behavior accordingly. It is important to note that people cannot always be certain of the cause of difficulty, a point made clear by Harrison's experience with his colleague Jessie. Their problems appeared to have one cause at the time they emerged, and it was only after the departure of the school's manipulative principal that both Harrison and Jessie were able to piece together the actual source of the problems. Obviously, had more information been available to

them, they could have dealt with the problem differently. Within the limits of available information, the better a person can assess the forces causing relational difficulty, the more effectively that person can tailor an effective response.

It is also worth noting that people needed to adapt to the perceptions of the difficult relational partner, regardless of the cause of difficulties. Mitch's problematic relationship with his new supervisor was caused by the boss's lack of understanding of Mitch's abilities. While his strategy of providing information to show the boss his contributions was a good adjustment to the cause of the problem, his observation that the boss absorbed written information more readily than oral reports allowed him to provide that information in a manner that would have the greatest impact. Put simply, a general awareness of the other person's perception is an important element of adaptation.

Confronting versus avoiding. One of the most fundamental decisions people have to make is whether to confront the person directly about the problem or to avoid bringing the issues to the fore. While more of our respondents found positive results from dialogue with the partner than found positive outcomes from avoidance of the issue, it was clear that in some cases, raising the issues could be counterproductive. Therefore, this decision will require thoughtful consideration.

Our data did not provide enough cases to begin to offer consistent reasons for a choice of whether to confront or to avoid. Future research will need to explore this topic. However, it is clear at this time that the choice of confronting or avoiding is one of the most fundamental decisions people need to make in dealing with problematic workplace relationships, a point that is consistent with the conflict management literature (e.g., Cabn, 1992; Kilmann & Thomas, 1975; Zietlow & Sillars, 1988) as well as other literature which suggests that the approach-avoid decision is fundamental to human social interaction (e.g., Mehrabian, 1981).

Skill

One issue that is not frequently explored in the relational maintenance literature is the skill with which people enact communicative behaviors. Yet there were indications throughout our interviews of the importance of the quality with which communication was enacted. Gina's conversation with the cook she was about to fire showed a genuine attempt to understand in her listening. Garrett's adaptation of his messages based on his boss's mood demonstrated sensitivity to another's emotions and appropriate adjustment. Mitch's efforts to

understand his new boss's views and include that information in his messages showed an attempt to frame information in a manner most useful to the listener. All of these examples reveal the impact of not just what tactics were attempted but how *well* they were performed. In contrast, Shelly's coworker, who misinterpreted her friendliness, showed a lack of deftness in understanding social behavior, which led to problems between them.

Researchers often examine the presence or absence of behaviors without consideration for how well people accomplish those activities. The literature on communicative competence indicates that the skill with which certain communicative strategies are executed is likely to have more impact than any simple measure of how frequently a behavior is carried out (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). For example, relational maintenance is normally studied by assessing frequency of maintenance behaviors, but one study (Ramirez & Merolla, 2006) showed that the skill with which these strategies are enacted has a significant impact on their success. A concern for skillful communicative enactment is particularly salient when considering difficult situations. It is easy to imagine that a person who adroitly confronts the coworker will be more effective than a person who confronts that person in a clumsy or offensive manner. In some cases, a person's social skills may even mediate whether a strategy will work. Someone who does not handle conflict well might make a problem worse with an antagonizing attempt to address the issue, whereas someone who is remarkably skilled at dialogue might find success in direct confrontation where others would have failed. The results of this study show a need for more focus on how well certain strategies are executed, not just on what strategies were tried.

Taken together, the results of this study offer useful insights for communication scholars and practitioners on how to improve problematic workplace relationships. The results support re-emerging attention to dialogue in communication and allied disciplines. They also indicate that sensitivity and adaptation to others are critical to communicative success. Given the study's modest sample size, these results have limited generalizability. However, they offer a valuable springboard for future research on the actions and communication behaviors likely to contribute to the restoration or further deterioration of problematic relationships in the workplace.

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