

The Four Elements of Strong Relationships: The Manager's Guide to Relationship-Building

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Introduction

Few relationships shape our experiences at work more than the one we have with our manager. If our schools and organizations are organisms, relationships are the connective tissue—they bind, support, and protect us.

This article is for managers looking to build (more) supportive and functional relationships with their staff. We believe that relationship-building is a **core competency** for effective management (equitable, sustainable, and results-driven). This means that even though it's a two-way street, **it's the manager's responsibility to drive and prioritize the work of relationship-building**. Here's why:

1. **Equity.** Structural oppression produces disconnection and competition. Strong, supportive relationships across lines of difference and power help to counteract the effects of oppression by creating connections and opportunities to create change together. These connections form the building blocks of progressive social movements. Strong relationships grounded in mutual respect and dignity help us create the world and visions of justice that we're fighting for—within our organizations and beyond.
2. **Sustainability.** A solid and enduring sense of connection and community makes it easier to show up to work, stick with it through the ups and downs, and avoid [burnout](#).
3. **Results.** Strong relationships reduce friction and increase momentum so that people can work better together (especially across lines of difference), solve problems and resolve conflict more quickly, and ultimately get better results.

Relationship-building is a form of alchemy. As you read this piece, think about the four elements of relationship-building (**authenticity, trust, power and difference**, and **shared purpose**) not as discrete building blocks, but as ingredients to be combined. Think mixing, not layering. Consider a cake—the eggs, sugar, butter, and flour don't just sit on top of each other. They bind and react, yielding new flavors, textures, and shapes. The final product results from the quality of the ingredients, skillful execution, and finally, time.

Space for authenticity

When we ask training participants about their most supportive relationships, one theme is **authenticity** — the *invitation* to be authentic and their manager's ability to *embody* it. People say: “they saw me as a person, not just a coworker,” and “they are honest and vulnerable.”

Showing up as your whole self involves risk-taking (though the risks vary from person to person), so the more that we feel we can be ourselves, the more we experience [psychological safety](#) at work. One indicator of success might be that people believe this message: “I don’t have to be perfect to belong” or “I can be myself.”

Be a person. Managers, it starts with you. This means:

1. Cultivating **self-awareness** about your values, beliefs, behaviors, and impact on others
2. Aligning your **values** with your actions, and
3. Acknowledging and learning from your **mistakes**.

From the Field: Relationship-building with PTR

“When Octavia became my manager, our first check-in was focused on getting aligned on what kind of relationship we wanted to have using the PTR tool. She asked about my preferences in a managerial relationship and we discussed traditions within the organization that we either want to uphold or disrupt. We also drilled down on the requirements of our relationship—the things we needed to commit to and follow through on to be successful together. It helped us get started on the right foot.

In the past, I’ve had managers who assumed that I wanted to be friends with them right off the bat. I’ve also had managers who kept our relationship strictly professional. In most cases, I felt like I had to follow the lead of the manager to match what they wanted or expected. As a transracial adoptee, these experiences reinforced a belief that I held as a child that in order to belong, I had to “follow the lead” of the people around me and not challenge authority.

This conversation was the first time that I felt like I had a choice (and that it mattered!).”

Take it to the next level: the Green Lens

Consider a person who saw your inherent value—who believed you could make a difference, created space for your full humanity, and treated you with dignity and respect (even when you messed up!). How did it feel? How did you show up?

What if you could be that person for someone else simply by approaching them with a presence that makes them feel empowered to see the best version of themselves?

This is called using the “Green Lens,” according to Maria Nemeth, Director of the Academy for Coaching Excellence. Below are the five items that make up the Green Lens. Try saying these lines out loud to yourself before your next check-in, and notice if you feel a difference in how you approach and communicate with your staff person.

- This person is a hero, whole and complete.
- This person has goals and dreams and a desire to make a difference.
- This person has their own answers.
- This person is contributing to me right here and now.
- This person deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.

This is easier said than done. Managers (especially those with marginalized identities) are under pressure to perform—to be confident in the face of uncertainty, know what to do when there are no easy answers, or hold steady in a crisis. Perfectionism, assimilation, and performativity make it harder to be real. You may not be able to be 100% authentic at work, but when it comes to your relationships with staff, how you show up is in your sphere of control. It’s your job to create space for authenticity without judgment—the antidote to perfectionism.

See a person. If inclusion is being invited to a potluck, then belonging is having people swoon over your kimchi tacos. It’s feeling seen, appreciated, and valued for the things that make you uniquely you. Imagine: if you planned a party for each staff, would you do the same activities and have identical guest lists? We sure hope not! What would you include to make it feel like an experience created just for them? It’s not just about knowing their favorite songs or foods—it’s about being attentive to and celebrating each person’s unique qualities. It’s also about seeing the qualities that aren’t so swoon-worthy and accepting them anyway. When we view staff as fully human, we set ourselves up to treat

them as partners in the work—people we exercise **power with, not power over.**

Note: How people show up is a choice. Negotiating boundaries is critical to practicing and inviting authenticity. This often happens through social cues, but it's a good idea to make the implicit explicit—especially if lines of difference, such as neurodivergence or culture, might be at play. In your first check-in, ask about and share your relationship-building [preferences, traditions, and requirements](#): “What do you think success would look like in our working relationship?”

Effective navigation of difference and power

“Without community, there is no liberation.. but community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.” — Audre Lorde

Every manager must grapple with differences in **identity, power, and privilege**. And if your organization has a hierarchical structure, you have **positional power**, which gives you significant influence on the time, energy, and livelihoods of the people you manage. To make matters more complicated, sometimes a manager has positional power but not social power (based on race, gender identity, etc.), and those lines of difference operate simultaneously. It's tempting to minimize power and difference because it can be uncomfortable to acknowledge it. But the more we avoid naming and confronting these factors, the less intentional we can be about how we wield our power and leverage our differences. Avoidance creates (more) inequities, disingenuous relationships, and bad results.

Examine the broader context. No relationship exists in a vacuum. Identify things that form the backdrop of your relationships. These include systems of oppression (and their impacts on organizational structures and culture) and the values, norms, and narratives of your team and organization. Consider how this context might influence how you show up in relationships with your colleagues.

Take a curiosity stance. Having positional power doesn't mean you always have to play the role of expert, evaluator, and judge. Curiosity opens doors for empathy, possibility, and creativity. It requires humility (“I don't have all the answers”), perspective-seeking (“what am I missing from where I sit?”), and perspective-taking (“how is my staff member/team experiencing this?”). When confronted with difference, listen to understand, ask probing questions, and suspend judgment (don't climb the [ladder of inference](#)).

Find the “aha” moment. Conflict often feels terrible. Many organizations don't have cultures, practices, or processes to handle [conflict generatively](#) (ask us how we know!). But conflict can sometimes be the lever that leads to “aha!” moments—breakthroughs that shift how you work together to get to better outcomes. As the manager, your job is to find and pull that lever. Name tensions, [look for the iceberg](#), and take action so that the molehill doesn't become a mountain.

Use your power for good. What can you do to improve lives and advance equity, particularly for your most marginalized staff? Examine your [choice points](#). Think about ways to increase growth opportunities, spotlight their successes and skills, and advocate for greater equity, inclusion, and belonging.

Own your authority. This tip is for managers who find themselves suffering from [imposter syndrome](#) or are often undermined due to bias. Sometimes, your job is to call the shots, be the expert, and bring the solutions. Don't hide the ball when you're exercising authority: “I'm the approver of this project” or “I'll make the final call.” Be honest about your decisions (especially the tough ones) and share your rationale. Be clear about when you're delegating an assignment (vs. making an ask).

From the Field: Breaking the Spell

“I started managing someone who used to be my peer and it was rocky. I couldn't put my finger on it at first. When we were peers, our relationship was great, but the added layer of positional power shifted the dynamic.

It was important to me to have a good relationship with her, not just as her manager, but also because we were two BIPOC in a predominantly white organization. As two of just a handful of women of color on a large team, it often felt like we were on display and like we were implicitly being compared to each other.

During one of our early check-ins, I said, “Hey, I want you to feel like we're on the same team. Sometimes it feels like we're in competition and I know it's not because either of us want that. What do you need from me to feel supported?”

Naming the tension I was sensing was a turning point for our relationship—it felt like breaking a spell. It's not that we didn't experience tension or conflict after that point, but we were able to name it much quicker. We saw ourselves as partners in supporting each other and getting the work done.”

Trust

Trust is the confidence you have in someone. It is the lifeblood of all strong relationships, and, as a manager, it's your job to earn, build, and communicate it. Ultimately, you want your staff to feel like they can count on you to act with care, integrity, and competence and that you feel the same towards them.

Act with care and good intent. It's easier to trust someone when you believe they have your best interests at heart (or at least would never *intentionally* hurt you). This goes in the other direction too—the greater the trust, the more you assume best intent. For managers, demonstrating good intent is usually about little, consistent acts of care and consideration—taking time to check in, supporting their well-being, and giving credit.

Act with integrity. Back up your intentions with actions. Follow through on commitments, be transparent about decision-making, give honest feedback, and acknowledge and fix mistakes. Note that trust is built both in and out of other people's presence. It's not just how you act towards and in front of your staff; what you do behind the scenes and how they observe you treating others matters too.

Demonstrate competence. Along with congruence between intentions and actions, competence and credibility are critical for trust-building. Let's be real—when you're not good at your job, the people who feel it the most are the people you supervise. You don't need to be perfect, but you *do* need people to believe they can count on you to leverage your strengths and work to mitigate the negative impacts of your growth edges.

Communicate trust. As humans, we tend to respond in kind. If someone does something nice for us, we're likely to return the favor. The power of reciprocity also applies to trust-building. Communicate trust in your staff by creating meaningful opportunities for them to demonstrate leadership and investing in their growth.

Case Study: Acknowledging and Repairing Harm

Xavier manages a newly-formed communications team. Recently, Xavier received feedback from two staff people that the lack of direction and clarity about their latest project was creating stress and anxiety for some of their team members. Some staff were having a hard time with planning and prioritizing, and at times ended up having to double back on work, wasting precious time.

Upon realizing this, Xavier did the following:

1. **Reflected on their intent and impact.** Xavier had thought that providing flexibility was a way to communicate trust and offer autonomy, but this backfired because what their team really wanted was direction and support. They also recognized that they tend to default to communicating in broad strokes instead of creating structured, detailed plans as part of their leadership style. For the most part, this has worked for their team (especially for staff who share a similar style), but in this case, it had created disparate impact.
2. **Checked in with each staff person** about how they were experiencing Xavier's leadership of the project and apologized to the ones who had experienced negative impacts. Xavier also thanked the people who shared feedback initially.
3. **Asked each person,** "Is there anything you wish I'd do differently moving forward?"
4. **Scheduled a work block** to create a more detailed work plan to share with staff within a week of their check-ins.
5. **Committed to conducting advance check-ins** for future projects by asking, "What details, context, or direction do you need from me to feel confident about our plan and the pieces you're owning?"

As a result of these actions, Xavier was able to reassess and shift their approach and rebuild trust with their team. Their staff felt heard and ultimately got what they needed—more clarity and direction.

Shared purpose

Strong working relationships require clarity of shared purpose. By purpose, we mean what you set out to do as a team—your mission, vision, and goals. Shared purpose is the piece of relationship-building that distinguishes your relationship with staff from most other relationships. It's what the work is ultimately about. As the manager, your job is to lift up your shared purpose to strengthen connection and collective responsibility and to instill the belief that at the end of the day, you're on the same team.

Instill “teamness.” You don't need a mascot or a secret handshake, but you do need cohesion and alignment around what you're after ([goals](#)) and how you'll get there (values). From there, develop rituals and traditions that give people a sense of familiarity, belonging, and connection. Seize opportunities to overcome obstacles together and celebrate successes. Roll up your sleeves and pitch in when needed—whether it's to problem-solve, coach, or pinch-hit.

Be clear about how each person contributes to the whole. Provide transparency about strategy, [roles](#), and [division of labor](#). Give people full ownership over their realms (with your support and guidance). Set aside time to appreciate each person's contributions.

Build a sense of collective responsibility for wins and losses. Provide and seek accountability by regularly sharing, soliciting, and following up on [feedback](#). Capture (and implement!) lessons learned through [debriefs](#). [Set and track progress to goals](#).

Case Study: Team Reset

Olivia had been working as a Program Manager at a community-based nonprofit for two years when the head of her department transitioned out. During her time on staff, her department functioned mostly as a loose group of individual actors who connected at irregular and infrequent team meetings. For the most part, they all worked successfully towards their individual goals, but without a clear sense of what they were trying to accomplish together or how to relate to each other.

When Olivia was eventually promoted to Program Director (by which point the team had been leaderless for six months), she decided to do a reset. Below are a few things Olivia did:

1. Kicked off her tenure with a **team retreat** to build connection and belonging, create a shared purpose statement, and reorient the team. The purpose statement drove their decision-making around goals, resource allocation, and strategy moving forward.
2. Recognizing that the team had been operating with a pre-existing set of traditions, practices, and norms—some of which were no longer serving them—she asked: “As we re-enter being a team, what do we (individually and collectively) need to **let go of**?”
3. She scheduled **biweekly team meetings and semiannual retreats**. She redesigned them so that each person showed up, owned pieces of the agenda, and had opportunities for collaboration and co-creation.
4. At the start of the pandemic and in the midst of the uprisings after the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, Olivia doubled down on team connection, mutual support, and team purpose by investing more time in **team and individual check-ins**.

In her first year as head of the team, each person met or exceeded their goals, which directly connected to the team purpose. They experimented with more collaborative strategies that enabled them to serve more of their most marginalized members. Their strengthened relationships also contributed to a culture of belonging that helped each team member get through an exceptionally tough year.

Practices for relationship-building

Below is a (non-comprehensive) list of tactics for relationship-building in some key management areas.

Hiring	● Be honest about the challenging parts of the job and organizational culture: “One thing that we’re struggling with right now is ensuring staff feel connected, especially as our team has grown and we’ve switched to remote work.” ● Let candidates know what to expect from the process. Consider sharing some questions or exercises in advance.
Check-ins	● In your first check-in with a new direct report, ask about and share your preferences, traditions, or requirements when it comes to relationship-building: “What do you think success would look like in our working relationship?” ● Calibrate the personal check-in to match the preferences of your staff person. ● Ask for their perspective to work through challenges: “There’s something I’ve been struggling with and I’d love your take on it.” ● Share regular praise and appreciation. Be specific and name their strengths.
Delegation	● Be explicit about the “why” of a task or project—share how the assignment will advance the overall goal, mission, or purpose of your team. ● Avoid micromanaging. Get aligned on the MOCHA and set up checkpoints for slices, shadowing, and feedback. Be clear about which decisions they have the authority to make.
Roles & goals	● Build in regular check-ins and stepbacks around goals, including debriefs to capture lessons learned and celebrations of successes. ● Share competencies, career pathways, and what it’ll take to get promoted.
Developing people	● Ask about their intended career trajectory and invest in them by creating space for growth opportunities, sharing feedback, and spotlighting accomplishments: “What are your hopes for your career trajectory? I can’t make promises, but I will do what I can to support you to get to the next step of your journey.” ● Be honest about growth areas that might get in the way of advancement (and support them to grow).
Performance problems	● Give constructive feedback as soon as you spot potential issues, even if they seem minor: “I’d like to address something that isn’t a huge deal right now but might be an issue if it becomes a pattern.” ● Acknowledge when extenuating circumstances might be contributing to the problem: “I know there are things outside of our control that are impacting your capacity and performance. Is there anything you’d like me to know?”
Decision making	● Engage in fair process, clarify your decision-making mode, and share the rationale (along with pros, cons, and mitigations) for decisions. ● Be real about your struggles with decision-making and share the tensions you were/are wrestling with: “This was a hard decision to make. I was worried that ____ and I was uncertain about _____. Ultimately, I decided to do XYZ because _____.”

What now?

Reflection Questions

- As you were reading this article, were there moments when you felt **proud** because you saw your own management practices reflected? Were there moments you felt **curious, concerned**, or even **ashamed**?
- Which aspects of relationship-building come **most naturally or easily** to you? Which aspects do you need to be **more intentional or put more effort** into?
- Did you have any **“aha” moments**? What might those lead you to do **differently** moving forward?
- As you were reading, did you think of anyone who **exemplifies** these qualities of relationship-building?
- What do you still have **questions** about and want to explore more?

Suggested Next Steps

- **Share this article** with each person you manage. Ask them to reflect on their relationship with you and share feedback in your next 1-1 check-in.
- Review the **“Practices for Relationship-building”** section. Commit to 1-3 practices on the list. Brainstorm additional practices.
- Read the **case studies** in each section and reflect on real-life examples of the elements of relationship-building that you’ve encountered.
- Share **gratitude** with a manager or colleague that you have a supportive relationship with.

Readings and Resources

- [Burnout at Work Isn't Just About Exhaustion. It's Also About Loneliness](#)
- [Why Psychological Safety Is Essential For Your Team's Success](#)
- [Rethinking thinking](#)
- [Moving Toward Conflict for the Sake of Good Strategy](#)
- [How to Receive Feedback \(Part 2\): Power, Difference, and Inequity](#)
- [Using Choice Points to Advance Racial Equity and Inclusion](#)
- [Racial Imposter Syndrome - Interaction Institute for Social Change](#)
- [From SMART to SMARTIE: How to Embed Inclusion and Equity in Your Goals](#)
- [How to Develop and Use Core Values](#)
- [Role Expectations Template & Samples](#)
- [Division of Labor Sample](#)
- [CSAW Worksheet and Sample](#)
- [The Management Center's Debriefing Template](#)
- [Red Light/Green Light Goal Tracking Tool](#)