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Diana McLain Smith

## Three Keys to Unlock Better Relationships at Work

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Anytime you talk about relationships at work, people think you're talking about love or sex. But almost everything you do at work, you do in the context of relationships. If those relationships fail, odds are, you will too. Today, relationships are the lifeblood of business. To succeed, you need to build relationships strong enough to weather the demands and pressures that go hand-in-hand with life in the fast lane.

Of course, building strong relationships is easier said than done, especially when it comes to that boorish officemate, or that controlling boss, or that smarmy subordinate. Just how are you supposed to build good relationships with *them*? Truth is, it's not easy, but it is possible, and once you do, you'll discover your officemate is less boorish, your boss less controlling, and your subordinate not quite as smarmy as you thought. Not only will this make you more effective, it will make you a whole lot happier. By taking the following three steps, you can build better relationships with almost anyone at work.

**1. Shift perspective.** We all have better or worse selves. Some people bring out the best in us, others the worst. The same holds for our co-workers. Yet we tend to view them through that same lens every day. *Oh, that's just Frank. You know him, he's a control freak.* But if you look a little closer, you'll see what I saw in my research—that Frank acts more or less controlling depending on the circumstances and the people. While he may be more controlling than most, some people seem to have a knack for eliciting the best in Frank (his least controlling behavior), while others repeatedly do things that reinforce the worst (his most controlling behavior).

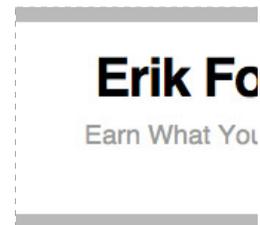
Why the difference? As I show in *Divide or Conquer*, those who focus on people's personalities consistently do things that bring out the worst in others. In an effort to manage a "controlling" guy like Frank, they become quiet; they don't interrupt; they allow him to interrupt them; and they bide their time until he shuts up and they can leave. But these responses only create a vacuum for Frank to fill, implying that it's okay for him to control or dominate the interaction.

In contrast, people who focus on interactions understand that Frank will be less controlling if they become a little more controlling. When these folks interact with Frank, they talk more not less; they politely insist on finishing their sentences; they don't hesitate to interrupt Frank to get a word in edgewise; and they refuse to leave until they learn something new or interesting about what makes Frank tick. In other words, they let Frank know they're not controllable, that he must share control. Before they know it, Frank becomes less controlling.

**2. Get people's stories.** When you get people's stories, you can turn even the most taxing relationship into a more interesting one. Just ask someone what they did on the weekend or the previous evening, or what they're planning to do on their vacation. Then listen for *anything* you find

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even remotely interesting. Latch onto that and ask more. Then listen again for anything that catches your interest and ask about that. Soon, the other person will sense your interest and let down her guard, turning into a more interesting person right before your eyes.

But what if, despite your best efforts, you simply can't connect with *anything* someone says. Well, in that case, either you're not asking the right questions (see *Divide or Conquer* for help), or you're so caught up in your own existence, you don't care much about someone else's, especially if theirs is different from yours. If the latter is the case, you're going to have trouble succeeding at work, especially the higher you go. You'll always encounter people you find difficult or different. If you can't find your way into their shoes or cultivate their talents, then you best get to work on yourself, or you'll never be ready for prime time.

**3. Pull them into your story.** Sometimes people do bothersome things because we don't give them what they need to understand us or to address our needs. We get treated like a caricature because we act like a caricature—someone with no apparent reason for doing what he does. To become a more complex and interesting character in the minds of others, you have to act like a more complex and interesting character. Characters that interest us the most not only do things, they reveal what they think and feel. At the same time, they don't tell us every single thought or feeling that goes through their head; they reveal only what they need to reveal to compel us to read on, to want to know more.

Next time someone does something you don't like, or you do something they don't like, explore the thoughts or feelings that led to the actions. Ask them about the pressures or constraints they're up against, the kind of help they need from you, what they were feeling or thinking. Also, let them know what's going on with you: the pressures or constraints you're up against, what you were feeling or thinking, and the kind of help you need from them.

Whatever you do, don't just focus on what the other did to provoke you. Instead ask yourself, "When they did that, what led me to respond the way I did?" The answer to that question will tell you things about yourself that you can use to succeed at work and to make it worth it.

Diana McLain Smith is the author of *Divide or Conquer: How Great Teams Turn Conflict into Strength*. She is also a partner at the Monitor Group, a global management consulting firm.

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**Kiersten Mitchell**

I love this post! You make some GREAT points here that I plan on sharing with my team and utilizing in my own development. I can't wait to read the book. The higher up you go, the more your success and core role is based off influencing others. This advice is invaluable in achieving that success.

*posted June 30, 2008 8:59 pm*

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