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## THE SHRM EXECUTIVE NETWORK BLOG <sup>+</sup>

March 18, 2021

# 6 STEPS TO FIX A BROKEN LEADER-FOLLOWER RELATIONSHIP

By [Sherri Malouf](#)[Tweet](#)[Share](#)[1](#)[Comments](#)

Looking at a wide range of leadership models (some going back 100 years), you will find that they usually refer to getting tasks done and dealing with people. The people side is a challenging aspect for most as relationships can be a maze. Even between leaders and followers, as with ALL relationships, both people are equally responsible for the quality of the relationship. Please do not make the mistake of confusing roles with relationship quality.

Relationship is not a new concept, but very few researchers have focused solely on the leader-follower relationship or defined it as a close relationship. I am proposing that it should be defined and developed as a close relationship, because it will reduce stress, boost productivity and increase employee engagement.

When looking at the research on close relationships, you will find that:

- Close relationships endure and involve strong, frequent and diverse causal interconnections.
- The interdependence between partners affects the interaction process.
- The partners frequently influence each other (e.g., emotions, cognitions and actions).
- The influence is diverse (i.e., across different kinds of behaviors and not specific to one).
- The pattern of interactions continues for some period, so over time.

The above may be applied to the relationship between leaders and followers. Considering the amount of time spent working together, describing the leader-follower relationship as close is accurate.

Another way of thinking about close relationships is attachment theory. This theory looks at how we were treated as infants and children, as this could form the basis of our ability to create close relationships. Overall, researchers believe that attachment needs evolve as we mature and learn to manage ourselves. Some people want to be close, while others prefer to have a bit of distance.

Another way we approach close relationships is through a growth or destiny mindset. A destiny mindset believes in fate and that one needs to wait and see how things turn out. A growth mindset believes that we can always work things out for the better. So, some people want to talk to you about the relationship, while others are waiting to see what you will do. Can you imagine if both the leader and follower have a destiny mindset? They will never discuss or work on the relationship!

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If you are a leader or a follower (it can be riskier for the follower so think it through carefully) and feel that you have a challenge creating close relationships with the other, you have choices. It starts with planning. Remember the words of Paul "Bear" Bryant: "It's not the will to win that matters—everyone has that. It's the will to prepare to win that matters."

Here is how you can strengthen leader-follower relationships.

### Step 1: Identify a relationship that you think is in trouble.

A relationship is in trouble if:

- You are not able to tell the other person what you want in such a way that they understand what you are talking about.
- You feel uncomfortable talking to the other person, or you think that they're weird.
- The other person doesn't seem interested or seems bored with what you need to talk about.
- You just straight out disagree on many things and really struggle to come to agreements that both can buy into.

Any or all of these examples may be indicators of a less than ideal relationship, and you need to rescue the relationship.

### Step 2: Brush up on your listening and disclosing skills.

Yes, I mean active listening. You need to be able to paraphrase, listen to feelings and even parrot if the other person's emotions are strong using the appropriate words, tone of voice and body language. When you really listen to someone else without arguing or defending, you are being present and giving them your attention. I realize this sounds simplistic, but turn away from all devices (trust decreases when a phone is in view according to multiple studies) and give that other human being 100 percent of your attention. Just doing this builds the relationship and you may actually learn something interesting. Disclosing is your ability to apologize (if necessary) or be vulnerable. It enables the other person to see more of who you are and provides more information about your motivations. Vulnerability increases your perceived humanity and trust.

### Step 3: Invite the other person to a virtual meeting, lunch or a virtual lunch.

Put it on the calendar and state that you want to talk about how you are working together and about your work relationship. No surprises! If asked for clarification, just say that from your side you want to find ways to strengthen the relationship. The other person needs to have the opportunity to plan as well.

### Step 4: Plan the interaction.

First and foremost, think through the things that you appreciate about the other person and write them down. Think about how to open the conversation. Thinking clearly about the other person, what would be the most positive way to begin? Some people like small talk, others don't want to talk about anything personal. Then, when it feels right, disclose and get vulnerable. You can start with: *I feel as though we don't always resolve our differences; I feel like I tend to upset you; I feel that I could be doing a better job of supporting you.* Use one short sentence, but have a few ways of disclosing planned and written down.

At some point, you may need to state clearly what you want, so have that statement planned out too. In addition, think of a solution and write a succinct proposal with a couple of reasons that would get the other person's buy-in. Also, think through how to disengage if your meeting were to go badly, e.g. *perhaps we need to try this again at a later time; let's go for a quick walk and clear our minds; let me collect some information and we can pick this up again next week.* Not running away or avoiding, but disengaging.

Finally, get very clear on what you want this relationship to look like. How will it benefit both of you? What is your most optimistic vision for how things will be in 3-6-9 months' time?

### Step 5: Get yourself centered and grounded 15 minutes before the meeting.

What this means is that you meditate, go for a run, sit quietly and breathe, imagine roots going into the ground and reinforce your boundaries. All of this is considered self-control and emotional intelligence. It doesn't matter if you're a leader or a follower, you both need it. Often, leaders think it is okay to not have self-control, while followers understand the need for high levels of self-control.

### Step 6: It's go time.

Breathe deeply, put your feet flat on the floor and get that video conference going. In person is better, but virtually works well, too. Have your notes handy to remind you, but do not read them. Put up a sign that says LISTEN. Every time the other person speaks, paraphrase before asking another question. Focus on the other person and learn as much as you can. Feel appreciation for the person while you are talking. So much of relationship management is invisible, but we send out lots of messages, so make sure you send the messages you want to send. When it feels right, when you feel connected to the other person, make "we" statements such as: *it sounds like we both would like to have a stronger relationship, or, we both feel the need to get more aligned,* then you can state your vision for the relationship in the future, what you want or present a proposal to solve some of the issues. Do not start with wants and proposals right from the get-go, instead start with vulnerability and listening. Stay firmly focused on your optimistic vision in your mind and stay appreciative.

If you can follow this process, whether you are a leader or a follower, things are bound to improve in your day-to-day interactions and you will positively strengthen your relationships. It is critical to remember to remove the word "you" from your vocabulary for this conversation, take responsibility for your half of the relationship and be authentic.

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The Authors:

**Sherri Malouf, Ph.D.,** is the President of Situation Management Systems, Inc., and author of Science and the Leader-Follower Relationship.