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The missing link in the leader-follower relationship

Firms spend a fortune on leadership and development, yet more than half of people are still leaving their jobs because of their boss. We need to look at the science behind relationships and how to build strong relationships between leaders and followers, says author Sherri Malouf



I think that we can all agree that the leadership and development industry is huge. In a 2019 Forbes article analyzing the global leadership and development market it was estimated at \$366 billion, with \$166 billion in the US alone. With all that money being spent on leadership training and development, we should have the smoothest-running businesses in the world! But alas, we do not. People still leave their job and the most common reason is their boss. A [2019 DDI study](#) found that 57% of people leave because of their boss.

It seems contradictory that we spend all this money on training leaders, yet people are still leaving their jobs because their boss makes their lives miserable. If you really think about it, organizations are indeed weird places. You get hired to do a job and work with people you may never choose to hang out with. It is a forced social environment, where you need to be politically correct, abide by a bunch of spoken and unspoken rules and somehow get along with everybody. I find it strange that we don't understand that building relationships in this context requires attention and intention – that's the missing link.

In fact, many direct reports (or followers) feel ignored, hurt, disappointed and taken for granted. Many leaders feel that they have tried every leadership program out there, but they still feel frustrated when managing people. What I realized through my research and 30 years as a trainer and consultant for global businesses is that they really lacked connection, that social relationship so critical to the success of organizations.

No matter the type of relationship, when it comes to the quality of that relationship it is a 50-50 deal. Followers are just as responsible for the relationship quality as are leaders

There are a lot of amazing leadership models out there, and some have been around for 75 years. All of these models mention, in one way or another, that leaders need to achieve objectives and deal with people. This makes sense, but we really have not figured out the people part. Hence, we have the servant leader, the emotionally intelligent leader, the transformational leader, the authentic leader – the list goes on and on. What these models don't look at is the science behind relationships and how to build strong relationships between leaders and followers in organizations.

One big mistake is that everyone puts it all on the shoulders of the leader. However, my position is that no matter the type of relationship, when it comes to the quality of that relationship it is a 50-50 deal. Followers are just as responsible for the relationship quality as are leaders. Don't confuse role with quality, though. Yes, leaders can make the discussion about the relationship easier if they are open, but followers need to be aware of their responsibilities in this regard as well.

Using a cross-disciplinary research approach, I developed the Implicit Social Elements®. They form an unconscious system that uses our implicit knowledge to automatically assess situations and drive how we respond to those situations. I call them 'elements,' because they are the foundation of all relationships. Some are more important than others to different people, so no two people will have the same exact needs.

The seven elements are as follows:

TRUST	confidence in the honesty or integrity of a person
FAIRNESS	impartial and just treatment of others
SELF-CONTROL	control thoughts, regulate emotions and inhibit impulses
EMPATHY	awareness, understanding and the sharing of another's feelings
RECIPROCITY	mutual benefit in which both parties gain value
STATUS	acknowledgement of position and prestige
MUTUAL RECOGNITION RESPECT	respect of individual rights and humanity through recognition of everyone's worth and dignity

The following are recommendations for both leaders and followers for improving each of the elements, which I outline in my book *Science and the Leader-Follower Relationship*. For example, to build:

Trust: Be predictable. People should not have to figure out which personality they are dealing with at any given moment.

Fairness: Every leader has some people he or she is more comfortable with. That is natural. It is easy to find yourself spending more time with those people and joking around with them. Stop doing that!

Self-control: Manage your thoughts and emotions; do not get angry and yell at people. Control your thoughts, so you don't get lost in the past or future.

Empathy: Notice when a direct report/leader is having difficulties and stop pushing your agenda. Take the time to listen and understand the situation before making any suggestions.

Reciprocity: Say positive things about your boss to other people in the organization.

Status: Being valued is more than an intellectual exercise. Contribute to the emotional wellbeing of others as well.

Mutual Recognition Respect: Accept everyone unconditionally.

The bottom line is that only conscious intention and positive influence will pave the way for truly building this critical relationship and making the workplace more productive, less stressful, and more fun.

Sherri Malouf, pictured below, is the president of Situation Management Systems, a leadership training consultancy, and the author of [Science and the Leader-Follower Relationship](#)

