



The Power of Healthy Relationships at Work

By Emma Seppälä and Nicole K. McNichols

Kushal Choksi was a successful Wall Street quant who had just entered the doors of the second twin tower on 9/11 when it got hit. As Choksi describes in his best-selling book, *On a Wing and a Prayer*, his brush with death was a wakeup call. Having mainly focused on wealth acquisition before 9/11, he began to question his approach to work.

Choksi's new perspective translated into an entirely different relationship with his employees. Whereas historically his leadership style had been primarily transactional, he began seeing employees as individuals, each with their own unique set of strengths and needs. He began to lead with compassion, kindness, and authenticity instead of only focusing on efficiency. And in doing all this, he felt more present and whole as a person than ever before. He eventually left his corporate career to start his own ventures, and his businesses skyrocketed. A serial entrepreneur with multiple successful endeavors, Choksi sold his first venture, Hubbl, a content discovery platform, for \$15 million. His latest venture, Elements Truffles, an artisanal chocolate company, is a successful pro-social enterprise that donates 25% of its profits to childhood education in India.

Choksi's story is inspiring, but not at all surprising when considered in the context of what the research says about how effective leaders motivate people.

Data from the field of social psychology demonstrates that leaders who prioritize relationships with their employees and lead from a place of positivity and kindness simply do better. The most effective leaders of all (as measured by their success rates and the success of their organizations) are values-driven, transparent, compassionate, humane, and recognize employees as unique individuals. As a result, their employees

perform better, too: They are more engaged, less likely to turn over, more loyal, and more productive. Companies that are run by these types of leaders enjoy higher client satisfaction, a better bottom line, and boosted shareholder returns.

The fact that employees perform better when they feel respected and cared for makes sense when you consider that company culture has a much bigger influence on employee well-being than salary and benefits, as a Glassdoor study reveals. A research study by Julia K. Boehm and Sonja Lyubomirsky considering evidence from three types of studies — longitudinal, cross-sectional, and experimental — showed that happiness is in turn predictive of workplace success. And when you dig deeper to explore what “happiness” at work means for employees, it comes down to positive relationships.

Research confirms that our desire to feel seen, heard, and recognized is fundamentally human. As a species, we’ve evolved to place enormous value on our relative roles and relationships to other group members. Not feeling valued for your contributions or sensing that your value isn’t acknowledged by others in your group activates the stress response and feels like a threat. Being rejected by your clan would put you at risk of being ostracized, which, in the wild, was akin to death. And that’s probably why rejection activates similar regions in the brain as physical pain. It hurts.

Our sense of connection to others doesn’t just impact our mental health though. In a much more concrete sense, it directly influences motivation. Research on self-determination theory, for example, demonstrates that in addition to having a sense of autonomy and freedom, motivation at work is largely impacted by our feelings of connection to others. We feel inspired when we’re reminded that we’re not alone in our endeavors and that our experiences are not ours alone to struggle through. One of the things that makes burnout particularly detrimental is its inherent link to loneliness.

All of this means that helping employees feel motivated and engaged requires more than just restructuring the nature and design of their jobs. Time off, meditation, and on-site daycare and fitness gyms can absolutely alleviate stress. But those things frame unhappiness as an individual condition when, in reality, it’s a relational problem in need of relational solutions.

Below are five principles for improving work relationships, borrowed from the literature on leadership as well as social psychology research on interpersonal relationships. Whether the context is work or personal, all relationships flourish when you take into account the following five core principles:

1. Transparency and authenticity

Healthy work relationships require clear, consistent, honest, and open communication, which itself is the key element in trust, without which all relationships fail. There is robust research showing that authenticity and transparency are critical to effective leadership. Without those qualities, employees feel disregarded and dehumanized. Moreover, research by James Gross and Robert Levenson also shows that we register inauthenticity as threat. Our heart rate goes up when we encounter someone who is pretending to be something they are not. Authenticity, even when it means being vulnerable, puts people at ease. In fact, vulnerability has many benefits. Learn to communicate honestly yet compassionately. Make sure to listen and respond so others feel heard, seen, and valued.

2. Inspiration

In healthy relationships, people lift each other up by inspiring each other to be the best versions of themselves. One of the biggest predictors of relationship satisfaction is the ability for people to maintain positive images of each other. When someone sees the best in us, it motivates and inspires us to become better. The same holds true for employee-supervisor relationships, where research also shows that when we feel inspired by someone's perspective of us — that is, they see us for our best selves — it inspires us to improve. Whether it's an employee or a friend, we feel valued when others acknowledge and celebrate our strengths. This kind of interaction is deeply energizing, which further enhances productivity. Everyone wants to feel respected and appreciated for their individuality. Exercises like the Reflected Best Self can help them (and you) do so successfully.

3. Emotional intelligence

How you handle emotions (especially the big, bad, negative ones) is critical to your ability to navigate inevitable conflicts. Are you self-aware? Do you know how to handle negative emotions successfully? One of the fastest and most efficient ways to regulate your emotions, our research shows, is through breathing.

When you relate to others, can you read non-verbal cues? Do you know how to act with skill and compassion toward others? These skills and abilities also feed into another important attribute: the ability to exercise self-control. Research shows that our relationships, whether at home or at work, do better when we don't sweat the small stuff. Research also shows that our relationships thrive when we are able to occasionally put the needs of a relationship ahead of our own.

4. Self-care

Maintaining a connection with others requires maintaining your own balance and sanity as well. Learn which mental states burn you out faster. Exercise self-care by taking your vacations and making the most of minibreaks. Learn recovery techniques and build your stress resilience with meditation and nature. Encourage your employees to do the same (and make sure it's not just lip service). Set aside time just to focus on nurturing your own energy. It's impossible to nurture and honor the mental balance and health of others if you aren't first attending to your own.

5. Values

Humble leaders who are compassionate, generous, forgiving, and ethical do better. They lead with kindness and keep their employees' well-being in mind. They create positive workplaces that yield superior financial performance, customer satisfaction, productivity, and employee engagement. There is also robust research showing that when teams share the same mental models, meaning that they approach projects with the same sets of expectations and priorities, they perform better. Communicate goals clearly with employees and respect differences in how to approach work.

Feeling connected to others requires being on the same page emotionally as well as intellectually.

In healthy work relationships, everyone benefits, and everyone experiences moments of authentic happiness and enjoy. Businesses thrive under such leadership. “Nobody brings out as much engagement and performance as leaders who can balance between the head and the heart,” Kushal Choksi shared in an interview. “It brings positive energy and empathy in the management style. And when your team feels inspired and taken care of, they bring their best selves to work.”

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