

What is a relationship?

If you work in the social service delivery space, in complex reforms or in collaborative work in general, you will recognise the refrain “relationships matter.” It sits neatly alongside the need for “trust” in partnership-based work. But what does this mean? And if it is so important, what are we doing to elevate the role of relationships in our work? This note explores the difference between a connection and a relationship and looks at how we can make relationship-building a more intentional part of our work.

Work in social service delivery relies on things like a sound funding model, strong regulatory protections, and a capable workforce. We understand that to get these things right requires attention, focus, and investment. We are also told that strong relationships are essential for working in complex spaces. Yet efforts to build relationships are often viewed as being supplementary, or at best, complementary to these other requirements. ‘Building relationships’ just isn’t viewed as being ‘real work.’

What if we were able to change this viewpoint and make relationship building a core and intentional part of how we work?

Isn’t every connection a relationship?

Here is a quick summary of some relationship types:

I know you. You know me. We work together, from time to time. We have a working relationship.

I like you. You like me. We get along well. It’s a good working relationship.

I value your skills and insights. You value mine. It’s a valued relationship.

I trust your judgement and candour. You trust my judgement and candour. We have a trusting relationship.

There is a bit of continuum here (note - it also extends in the other direction towards a toxic relationship).

It all seems pretty simple. If we meet as part of work and we don’t annoy each other, we’ve already started to build a relationship. So, what more is there to know?

Relationships are more than functional

I’m going to propose that without the characteristics of seeing value and having trust, you have a connection and not a relationship.

Here, I’ll use the term ‘relationship’ to imply a positive and meaningful connection that is mutually supportive. This is, after all, what we really mean when we say *relationships matter* in solving complex problems.

We readily build connections with people based on our work. Your role may be to represent your organisation, offer expert advice or deliver a certain service. These are functional activities. They relate to your position and the job you need to do.

Relationships can emerge organically through repeated interaction and on-topic and off-topic conversation. And trust can emerge from repeated experiences of someone being reliable and forthright. However, there is more that can be done to uncover a person’s value by *understanding their motivations, expertise, and experience – and what they identify as their purpose*. And especially the story of how that purpose developed.

Where that purpose is shared, or aligns with yours, you now have something extra to work with. Something that could be very valuable in helping to navigate difficult times, solving unexpected problems, making compromises or offering resources beyond what they are obliged to do because of their job.

Three steps to building deeper relationships

1. Tried and true – have a chat

There is nothing wrong with things that have worked in the past. A bit of small talk, an interest in life outside of work, some social interaction. We know this works. Yet is probably the bare minimum you could do. And it rests heavily on the personal connection – or it risks falling back into being something which is more functional.

2. Add relationship-based activities to work

We are also familiar with icebreakers in workshops and team-building activities. These are good activities. They create a moment to disconnect from ‘other work,’ are fun, and can help build bonds. Remember, however, that people engage in different ways, have diverse cultural contexts and varying levels of comfort with sharing or performing.

Think about inclusive ways of bringing people together. Make it safe. Do this through your planning. Ask for input and guidance as you design your activity. And be thoughtful in how you introduce, run, and close the session.

3. Allocate specific time and resources to building a deeper connection and understanding

All good so far. What goes further than steps one and two?

To build deeper relationships will take time and explicit intent. It isn't as simple as throwing a few questions about “what motivates you?” into a coffee catch-up. A ‘space’ needs to be created and ‘held,’ where a back-story of skills, experiences and motivations creates a fuller picture of the person you are partnering with.

The aligning element will be your purpose. For collaborative work, a shared purpose is critical. And in long-term work, this works better if the purpose is more than “to do my job.”

This is so important that it deserves to be a dedicated part of a work-program. Set time aside specifically for relationship building.

Think imaginatively about how you can do this. Invite people into your planning and ideation spaces, share learnings, or problem solve in creative ways with the people you collaborate with. Test, learn and iterate *with the intention of building relationships*.

It doesn't need to be exclusive. But it isn't just a tack-on to something else. Relationship building should be an objective in its own right, and a deeper relationship, the outcome.

Try not to go with: “...and our last item on today's agenda is building deeper relationships. Looks like we have ten minutes left. Who wants to start?”

So, what does this mean for me?

I'm not trying to stop people using the term “working relationship” as they always have. Instead, the construct I have presented here tries to distinguish the different ways we can connect.

It highlights the special characteristics of having a **valued** and **trust-based** relationship in long-term reform and local service delivery roles. And most importantly, encourages you to add specific time and activities to your work in our pursuit of this outcome.

Questions to ask in doing your work?

- » When do I pro-actively create space to learn more about my colleagues and partners? Is it built into regular meetings, or just once a year when we do some planning?
- » How can we plan and host opportunities, activities, or times where people can learn about each other's drivers and experiences?
- » Who do I need to build and deepen my relationships with?
- » Am I doing this right? What is working and what isn't?
- » Who can I share my learnings with and who can I learn from?