

Dealing with poor work relationships

- Does your team ever have problems in their relationships?

- Do you feel confident in dealing with them?

- You must always deal with poor work relationships promptly.

This session is about how you identify and deal with poor working relationships. You will look at what makes a good relationship at work to help you see what might cause a poor relationship. You will also think about your own personal characteristics and how they might affect your working relationships.

What is a poor working relationship?

All relationships at work have their ups and downs. The role of the team leader is to work with team members to smooth these out. Every organisation is made up of people with a variety of personalities. At times when people are finding life difficult they can be harder to work with. Whilst this is understandable, it is not acceptable for a team member to be difficult to work with all the time.

Looking at what makes a good relationship can be helpful in identifying why a relationship becomes difficult.

Exercise

The table below lists six characteristics of *good* working relationships and the first two characteristics of a *poor* working relationship. You will see that they are the opposite of the good characteristics.

- ❖ Complete the other four characteristics.
- ❖ Rate yourself between each of these pairs of characteristics from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good). If you have problems rating yourself for any of the characteristics, ask yourself whether this is something you think you ought to be better at. If you do, then this suggests that you need to score yourself at 3 or less.

A good working relationship	Circle your score					A poor working relationship
Co-operating on achieving a work task	5	4	3	2	1	<i>Not working effectively with others on work tasks - 'doing your own thing'</i>
Understanding my own and other team members' jobs	5	4	3	2	1	<i>Showing no interest in the work of other team members</i>
Good at listening to other team member's views	5	4	3	2	1	
Able to see the work situation from another team member's point of view	5	4	3	2	1	
Can receive support as well as give support to other team members	5	4	3	2	1	
Friendly, and respect other team members	5	4	3	2	1	

- ❖ Have you met any team members with these characteristics that have caused poor working relationships?

Improving poor working relationships

You have already looked at a number of ways of dealing with poor working relationships in other sessions:

- ❖ *Handling discrimination and harassment*
- ❖ *Discipline and competence*
- ❖ *Working well with your manager*

From these three sessions, the key points in handling poor working relationships can be identified as:

1. Deal with the situation **promptly**.
2. Deal **directly** with the team members who are involved in the situation.
3. **Don't blame** anyone, think firstly about **why** team members are behaving in this way.
4. Help them to understand that they need to **change their behaviour** to improve the situation.
5. Be clear whether you are dealing with the situation **formally or informally**.

Read this case study for an example.

Case Study

Once a week a team have a meeting. As usual Alex, the team leader, has circulated the agenda with topics that need to be discussed. Team members can add to the agenda anything else they would like to have discussed at the meeting. Usually team members add topics to the agenda. Alex makes sure that she gives enough time to each topic in the meeting.

For the last two weeks David has not contributed to the meeting at all unless he has an item on the agenda. In the meeting he stares out of the window, writes lists and looks at his diary. When he has been asked his views on an item he has responded that he has nothing to add. Alex is aware that this is making other team members uncomfortable.

Just before the team meeting Naomi came to see her to say that Darren had asked David why he did not contribute to the last meeting and seemed to be bored. David told Darren to "mind his own business, I do my job don't I?"

Exercise

List the characteristics of the poor working relationship that David is showing.

For each of the characteristics of a poor relationship that you have listed for David, write what you would do if you were the team leader, to try and improve David's behaviour.

Clearly there are problems in David's relationship with the team. He is showing no interest in their work, not working effectively with them, and not listening to other people's point of view. Nor is he showing respect for them or offering any support. You may have come up with some of the following ways to help David improve his behaviour.

You could delay the team meeting by fifteen minutes and speak to David. Ask him whether he thinks his behaviour at the team meetings has been different recently. Talk to David about how you see his behaviour at the team meetings. He may not be aware how his behaviour is seen by you and by others.

You could try and support David more in the meeting by encouraging him to contribute through referring to good pieces of work he has done. You could also suggest to team members that it is time to have a review of how well team meetings are going.

Are these suggestions similar to the ones that you came up with on how to improve David's behaviour? There are many ways that you could deal with this situation. The important thing is to deal with it promptly, and not to blame David but to invite his views.

When a poor relationship develops into conflict

Sometimes, even though you have tried to improve a poor relationship with a team member, the relationship gets worse. It can then become a source of **conflict** in the team. A conflict is where opinions differ so much or a disagreement is so strong that it has become a struggle or a fight. It may not be a physical fight (although it can be), but it may be very negative competition between two people or groups. They will compete to make the other look bad or suffer in some way.

When conflict happens it usually has a major effect on the team. This effect will usually be to cause upset and reduce people's performance. It can also involve other people outside the team. Often team members and those outside the team can take sides. This can make the conflict worse.

We all find conflict difficult to handle for different reasons. As a team leader it is important for you to understand what you find difficult about conflict. This will help you deal with it more effectively. Remember though, that you must check with your personnel department (if you have one) whether there is a formal procedure for dealing with conflict and, if there is, whether it should be used.

Exercise

Think of a conflict (at work or at home) that you have either observed or been part of. Using the table below make a list of what you find difficult about conflict and what you feel you deal with well.

Things I find difficult about conflict	Things I do well when dealing with conflict

Coping with conflict

It would help you if you could find ways of dealing with the things you find difficult. Talk to someone you know who is good at dealing with conflict. Ask them about the ways in which they deal with these difficulties. Think about those you feel most comfortable about using and try them next time you are faced with conflict.

People often say the most difficult thing when dealing with conflict is the fear, the sense of feeling out of their depth. They can also feel angry, sad and upset at having to be involved in the situation. Some would rather not be involved and wish the conflict would go away.

Most of these are **emotional** reactions. You are being forced to deal with somebody else's behaviour and reacting to this. Remember that conflict is also about emotions. You need to help people overcome these and think about the problems more **rationally**. That means thinking about the real causes of the problems and discussing these. You and they need to find out why they are behaving the way that they are.

This can only be done gradually. Don't expect people to admit they are at fault, but encourage them to examine **why** the problem has become as bad as it is, and **how** they can help to resolve it. Encourage people to consider others' points of view, without having to accept them as right. Conflict can only be resolved by **compromise**. Compromise means that all the parties involved may have to give way on something.

There is more about the causes of conflict and how to deal with it in the two **BS2** sessions *Causes of conflict in teams* and *Resolving team conflicts*

Your role as a team leader

Poor relationships and conflict can happen within your team, within the organisation and outside it. You can use these ideas on how to deal with difficult relationships at work and in your personal life. When poor relationships turn into conflict it becomes one of the most difficult things to deal with. Never be afraid to ask for advice and support when you have to resolve it.

This session has shown you how difficult relationships at work can be. The exercises and the case study have given you ideas on how you can try to improve working relationships and deal with conflict.

Comprehension Check

Complete the following exercises. Refer back to the session if necessary.

A. Give three examples of the characteristics of a good working relationship.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

B. What are the five key points in handling poor working relationships?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

C. Complete each sentence. Circle the letter in front of the answer.

1. Conflict in a team is likely to lead to:
 - a. team members taking sides.
 - b. creativity being released in the team.
 - c. you being disciplined.

2. Compromise between two conflicting sides means that:
 - a. one side has to give in.
 - b. both sides have to give way.
 - c. one side is successful.

D. Mark the following statements (T)True or (F)False:

1. Conflicts usually involve people's emotions.
2. Poor relationships at work can be avoided if people are encouraged to 'do their own thing'.
3. A key part of the team leader's role is to find out who is to blame for poor relationships at work.

Making Connections

Answer the questions following the case.

Alex has decided that she needs to tackle David about the problem before the next team meeting.

Alex: "David, I just wanted to have a word because we've all noticed how pre-occupied you seem. Is something wrong?"

David: "You're talking about me behind my back, are you?"

Alex: "No, it's not like that. You seem so withdrawn. You're not like your old self, that's all. People worry about you."

David: "I don't think it's got anything to do with anybody else. I do my job don't I?"

Alex: "Yes, but you don't say anything in team meetings. From my point of view, you don't seem interested in them. They are part of your work too. If you don't contribute or pay attention then we all lose."

David: "Perhaps I haven't got anything to say."

Alex: "But you used to. You were always had good ideas. Are you unhappy with the job? Has it changed in any way?"

David: "No, the job's fine. The truth is, I'm getting divorced at the moment and it's hard to be concerned about team meetings. To be honest, they don't seem particularly important."

Alex: "Why didn't you say something?"

David: "It's not something I like to talk about."

Alex: "I appreciate that. I shan't say anything about it. But perhaps you could try to play a more active role in the team? You don't have to be the life and soul, but remember that we need you in the team. If you put a little bit of effort in, you'll find that the team is very supportive, even without them knowing about your personal circumstances."

❖ What does Alex do (and not do) to resolve the problem?

Think and Apply

How well do you use the skills in this session? Think about the relationships within your team and between the team and others in the organisation.

- ❖ Does everybody show the characteristics needed for good working relationships? If not, what can you do to improve their behaviour?
- ❖ Are there any conflicts? Have you taken prompt action to try and resolve them? Do you need to change your own approach to dealing with conflicts?

1. Read the list of skills. Tick the boxes to show your strengths and weaknesses.

Skills	<i>strengths <- - - > weaknesses</i>			
	I'm good at this	I'm quite good at this	I'm not so good at this	I'm quite poor at this
■ recognising the characteristics of <i>good</i> working relationships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
■ recognising the characteristics of <i>poor</i> working relationships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
■ taking prompt action to deal with poor relationships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
■ dealing with conflict in your team	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. Do you want to improve any of these skills?

3. How do you plan to improve the skills you listed in question 2? (You might want to discuss this with your line manager or your tutor/mentor/coach.)