

GRACE at Work

A new social contract changes workplace relationships.

By Eric de Nijs

Less than 30 years ago, an implied mutual contract existed between organizations and their employees. The company would provide long-term secure employment in return for employee loyalty. It wasn't uncommon for someone to begin a career in his early 20s and retire from the same company, taking home the coveted gold watch and good wishes. As business and economic conditions changed, however, so did that unspoken agreement of a lasting relationship.

The "career lifetime" of employees during the late 1970s and early 1980s averaged about 25 years. In the 1990s, that number dropped to five years. Today, some have estimated that time to be as little as 18 months. Job security, fulfillment, safety, and lasting relationships have been swept out onto the street with the rest of the workplace turnover statistics. Today's workplace has morphed into something less friendly and more intimidating. It is characterized by outsourcing, reorganization, streamlining, exploding technology, and the need for speed. The old implied social work contract is gone forever. The notion of the old social contract whereby employers and employees would grow old together is now just a fond memory.

We can't go back to those days, even if we want to. The swift corporate current will drown you if you stop paddling. But we have traveled, too quickly, from a place of win-win working relationships to a sorry state of survival of the fittest. Is there a way to return to a safe place that fosters productivity and powerful results for both the organization and the professional? Yes, there is. This article will introduce a simple but proven model for turning the business

battlefield into a winning playing field—a model that involves a fundamental change in attitude and approach to leadership. It isn't about a checklist of competencies and behaviors. It's about building a new kind of powerful relationship between an employer and employee that creates mutually satisfying results and sets up the players for future success.

Revive relationships

Webster's Dictionary defines relationship as "a state of affairs existing between those having relations or dealings." What we need to know, however, is not the definition, but the condition of the relationship. A vital leadership model for today's business environment is one based on trust and transparency between leaders and employees that can weather the storms of outsourcing, downsizing, and the good and bad of business as usual.

This approach is what is missing in today's corporate culture. These relationships died during the transition from a social contract for lifetime work to a frantic, distrustful, and self-advocating survival culture. Webster's definition assumes a relationship between those "having relations or dealings." But what we've done is remove the relationship from the relations. The organization, employer, and employee may have dealings together, but the relationship has been abandoned.

Relationship development is the single-most critical success element for any leadership model. Leaders who develop powerful, purposeful, and productive relationships are more likely to inspire greater productivity, career growth, innovation, and overall employee performance. Leaders who excel at employee development—building relationships—realize dramatic improve-

ment in performance and productivity. An employer-employee relationship based on mutual benefit and commitment will have a positive impact on the company's bottom line.

Powerful, purposeful, productive relationships

Powerful relationships are based on goodwill and a mutual commitment to shared purpose that provides affirmation, inspiration, and personal transformation. These relationships emerge only through the presence and practice of five key components: goodwill, results, authenticity, connectivity, and empowerment (GRACE).

Goodwill involves assuming positive intent, suspending judgment, looking out for the other person's best interests, giving without condition, offering forgiveness, being at peace with what is, and providing support and safety in times of risk and failure. Powerful relationships begin with goodwill. The leader creates a "safe space" for working relationships to flourish, where people work together to achieve similar and collaborative goals. Goodwill doesn't mean ignoring the effects of poor decisions. It means creating conditions that allow both parties to know the other is looking out for his best interests. Sometimes that might involve giving without condition or extending forgiveness. Sometimes it might mean simply being at peace with what is.

Results are split into two components: reason and results. Anticipated results represent the tangible reason for the relationship. This "R factor" focuses on creating a shared sense of purpose and value that is commensurate with the mutual investments of both parties.

Effective leaders help their employees identify their purpose and passion.

DESIGNING LEARNING

GRACE helps them answer the questions, “What is my reason for being?” and “Why are we in this relationship?” Long after leaving an organization or exiting a relationship, people realize that success isn’t just about the numbers. It’s about making a contribution by doing the things they love to do—things that are meaningful. Changing the way people think about themselves, their jobs, and their organizations can yield impressive improvements in employee performance. Effective leaders recognize this desire as a powerful motivator for people, and they leverage it to create commitment to the vision and purpose of the organization.

Authenticity is being honest with yourself and others, choosing how you relate to others, declaring what your stand is, holding yourself accountable for your actions, rewarding yourself appropriately, being open and vulnerable, and openly communicating needs, desires, moods, attitudes, values, and feelings—even about the other person.

Being real and being all that you can be is essential to any relationship—especially to one with expectations for authentic results. Open and uncompromising standards, positive attitudes, and the desire to be exactly who you are, are at the heart of a fruitful relationship.

Authenticity keeps the relationship balanced and healthy. Each person must first identify and then own up to his own place of reality. Successful relationships thrive when both parties reveal exactly who they are, say exactly what they mean, and use the same standards for self and others, all in the spirit of goodwill. Great leadership begins by knowing and leveraging strengths and weaknesses.

Connectivity means finding ways to identify with, affirm, and encourage the other person, understanding how the other people feel, identifying what is important to them, sharing assumptions and beliefs, identifying and realizing differences in intention and impact on others, and communicating a genuine desire to associate with and relate to others.

When the components of goodwill and authenticity combine, they advance the relationship to the place of real connectivity. Connectivity is about em-

pathizing with others, finding ways to engage them in the pursuit of mutual goals, and co-creating value. Employees perform best when they feel personally connected to their work and their organization. Sometimes these connections are more important to improving employee performance than almost any other incentive. Leaders connect with others and essentially “team up” for shared results.

Leaders have their own goals and objectives but also must be sensitive to the goals and objectives of others. Task-driven leaders know what they want and they won’t hesitate to advocate it. They often perceive the work relationship as an opportunity to negotiate their best deal. If an employee is not up to the task of representing his position, he loses. Hence both parties lose the opportunity to create a mutually motivating and satisfying experience. When the leader and employee connect, however, through shared motives, values, goals, and understanding, the bond can yield powerful results.

Empowerment is helping others overcome obstacles and develop new skills, establishing a safe environment to succeed (for self and others), creating catalysts for change, helping others see potential and possibilities, being open to possibilities, allowing time for testing and learning, and seeing the larger whole but being aware of smaller components.

Empowerment is about enabling success. The leader becomes a coach through the balanced use of challenge and support, and motivates others to take risks and to see and do new things. Athletic coaches know how to get their stars to excel. They create a dynamic tension, which motivates the athlete to advance his skills, but still provide encouragement and support. It is critical for the leader to create this same balance between challenge and support, advocacy and inquiry, and task and relationship.

Leaders and employees need to co-create the boundaries for empowerment, learning, and responsibility. Trust plays a vital role in empowerment, and begins with a common understanding of expectations and mutual commitments

of goals, roles, and consequences. Employee development is a fundamental empowerment tool as workers create greater awareness of their abilities and options. Development keeps employees viable and empowered for current and future employers. Failure to develop employees is like benching a star athlete for the season.

GRACE-ful leadership occurs when all five GRACE components work together to create that purposeful, powerful, and productive relationship that reflects a capacity to create value and to recover quickly from mistakes. If any one of those components is missing or exists in insufficient quantity, there is no GRACE.

It's not about me

This is not a popular sentiment among many leaders today, but it is essential for the GRACE-ful leader. Team or organizational success sometimes demands individual sacrifice. And that requires doing what’s best for the team, as opposed to pursuing individual honor and recognition. In the game of baseball, a sacrifice fly or bunt may result in a player sacrificing his personal performance statistics to advance the team. Similarly, in the workplace that may mean giving up the need to be right for the good of the project. This is an attribute that, when successfully modeled, can be learned by others.

Graceful change

Those who work within the model of GRACE are also more apt to recognize when the opportunity to create mutual value no longer exists and it is time to move on. Organizational decisions involving downsizing, outsourcing, or reorganizing will not come as a surprise or be perceived with a sense of betrayal when GRACE is at work. Employees and leaders realize that these actions represent the right business decision for the organization and for the individual.

If GRACE has been operational in the workplace, employees are better prepared for new challenges and opportunities. It is vital to remember that GRACE operates on the win-win assumption. Even if an employee moves on, it is a win for him because he was given every op-

portunity to thrive and prepare in a safe place.

Lead with grace

Powerful relationships can form the basis for achieving breakthrough performance and building the capacity for future growth. Whether you are an executive, manager, coach, or colleague, GRACE at work can provide greater opportunities to build relationships and facilitate performance. Employees and leaders are authentic—they achieve a special kind of chemistry for growth, empower each other, and extend goodwill. It is the creation of a safe place for people to perform—within stated boundaries—without fear of failure.

Leading with GRACE encourages people to learn new things and to express themselves. GRACE encourages commitment, not compliance, because it assumes that development and high performance occur most effectively in the context of a purposeful relationship. This relationship is based on goodwill and a mutual commitment to a shared purpose that provides affirmation, inspiration, and personal transformation. Without GRACE, what remains is a series of transactional interactions that neither satisfy nor inspire. **TD**

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