

3.3: Relationships at Work

Learning Objectives

1. List the different types of workplace relationships.
2. Describe the communication patterns in the supervisor-subordinate relationship.
3. Describe the different types of peer coworker relationships.
4. Evaluate the positives and negatives of workplace romances.

Although some careers require less interaction than others, all jobs require interpersonal communication skills. Shows like *The Office* and *The Apprentice* offer glimpses into the world of workplace relationships. These humorous examples often highlight the dysfunction that can occur within a workplace. Since many people spend as much time at work as they do with their family and friends, the workplace becomes a key site for relational development. The workplace relationships we'll discuss in this section include supervisor-subordinate relationships, workplace friendships, and workplace romances (Sias, 2009).

Supervisor-Subordinate Relationships

Given that most workplaces are based on hierarchy, it is not surprising that relationships between supervisors and their subordinates develop (Sias, 2009). The supervisor-subordinate relationship can be primarily based in mentoring, friendship, or romance and includes two people, one of whom has formal authority over the other. In any case, these relationships involve some communication challenges and rewards that are distinct from other workplace relationships.

Information exchange is an important part of any relationship, whether it is self-disclosure about personal issues or disclosing information about a workplace to a new employee. Supervisors are key providers of information, especially for newly hired employees who have to negotiate through much uncertainty as they are getting oriented. The role a supervisor plays in orienting a new employee is important, but it is not based on the same norm of reciprocity that many other relationships experience at their onset. On a first date, for example, people usually take turns communicating as they learn about each other. Supervisors, on the other hand, have information power because they possess information that the employees need to do their jobs. The imbalanced flow of communication in this instance is also evident in the supervisor's role as evaluator. Most supervisors are tasked with giving their employees formal and informal feedback on their job performance. In this role, positive feedback can motivate employees, but what happens when a supervisor has negative feedback? Research shows that supervisors are more likely to avoid giving negative feedback if possible, even though negative feedback has been shown to be more important than positive feedback for employee development. This can lead to strains in a relationship if behavior that is in need of correcting persists, potentially threatening the employer's business and the employee's job.

We're all aware that some supervisors are better than others and may have even experienced working under good and bad bosses. So what do workers want in a supervisor? Research has shown that employees more positively evaluate supervisors when they are of the same gender and race (Sias, 2009). This isn't surprising, given that we've already learned that attraction is often based on similarity. In terms of age, however, employees prefer their supervisors be older than them, which is likely explained by the notion that knowledge and wisdom come from experience built over time. Additionally, employees are more satisfied with supervisors who exhibit a more controlling personality than their own, likely because of the trust that develops when an employee can trust that their supervisor can handle his or her responsibilities. Obviously, if a supervisor becomes coercive or is an annoying micromanager, the controlling has gone too far. High-quality supervisor-subordinate relationships in a workplace reduce employee turnover and have an overall positive impact on the organizational climate (Sias, 2005). Another positive effect of high-quality supervisor-subordinate relationships is the possibility of mentoring.

The mentoring relationship can be influential in establishing or advancing a person's career, and supervisors are often in a position to mentor select employees. In a mentoring relationship, one person functions as a guide, helping another navigate toward career goals (Sias, 2009). Through workplace programs or initiatives sponsored by professional organizations, some mentoring relationships are formalized. Informal mentoring relationships develop as shared interests or goals bring two people together. Unlike regular relationships between a supervisor and subordinate that focus on a specific job or tasks related to a job, the mentoring relationship is more extensive. In fact, if a mentoring relationship succeeds, it is likely that the two people will be separated as the mentee is promoted within the organization or accepts a more advanced job elsewhere—especially if the mentoring relationship was formalized. Mentoring relationships can continue in spite of geographic distance, as many mentoring tasks can be

completed via electronic communication or through planned encounters at conferences or other professional gatherings. Supervisors aren't the only source of mentors, however, as peer coworkers can also serve in this role.

Workplace Friendships

Relationships in a workplace can range from someone you say hello to almost daily without knowing her or his name, to an acquaintance in another department, to your best friend that you go on vacations with. We've already learned that proximity plays an important role in determining our relationships, and most of us will spend much of our time at work in proximity to and sharing tasks with particular people. However, we do not become friends with all our coworkers.

As with other relationships, perceived similarity and self-disclosure play important roles in workplace relationship formation. Most coworkers are already in close proximity, but they may break down into smaller subgroups based on department, age, or even whether or not they are partnered or have children (Sias, 2005). As individuals form relationships that extend beyond being acquaintances at work, they become peer coworkers. A peer coworker relationship refers to a workplace relationship between two people who have no formal authority over the other and are interdependent in some way. This is the most common type of interpersonal workplace relationship, given that most of us have many people we would consider peer coworkers and only one supervisor (Sias, 2005).

Peer coworkers can be broken down into three categories: information, collegial, and special peers (Sias, 2005). Information peers communicate about work-related topics only, and there is a low level of self-disclosure and trust. These are the most superficial of the peer coworker relationships, but that doesn't mean they are worthless. Almost all workplace relationships start as information peer relationships. As noted, information exchange is an important part of workplace relationships, and information peers can be very important in helping us through the day-to-day functioning of our jobs. We often form information peers with people based on a particular role they play within an organization. Communicating with a union representative, for example, would be an important information-based relationship for an employee. Collegial peers engage in more self-disclosure about work and personal topics and communicate emotional support. These peers also provide informal feedback through daily conversations that help the employee develop a professional identity (Sias, 2009). In an average-sized workplace, an employee would likely have several people they consider collegial peers. Special peers have high levels of self-disclosure with relatively few limitations and are highly interdependent in terms of providing emotional and professional support for one another (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Special peer relationships are the rarest and mirror the intimate relationships we might have with a partner, close sibling, or parent. As some relationships with information peers grow toward collegial peers, elements of a friendship develop.



Figure 3.3.1: Having coworkers who are also friends

enhances information exchange and can lead to greater job satisfaction. Chris Hunkeler – [Three Coworkers](#) – CC BY-SA 2.0.

Even though we might not have a choice about whom we work with, we do choose who our friends at work will be. Coworker relationships move from strangers to friends much like other friendships. Perceived similarity may lead to more communication about workplace issues, which may lead to self-disclosure about non-work-related topics, moving a dyad from acquaintances to friends. Coworker friendships may then become closer as a result of personal or professional problems. For example, talking about family or romantic troubles with a coworker may lead to increased closeness as self-disclosure becomes deeper and more personal. Increased time together outside of work may also strengthen a workplace friendship (Sias & Cahill, 1998). Interestingly, research

has shown that close friendships are more likely to develop among coworkers when they perceive their supervisor to be unfair or unsupportive. In short, a bad boss apparently leads people to establish closer friendships with coworkers, perhaps as a way to get the functional and relational support they are missing from their supervisor.

Friendships between peer coworkers have many benefits, including making a workplace more intrinsically rewarding, helping manage job-related stress, and reducing employee turnover. Peer friendships may also supplement or take the place of more formal mentoring relationships (Sias & Cahill, 1998). Coworker friendships also serve communicative functions, creating an information chain, as each person can convey information they know about what's going on in different areas of an organization and let each other know about opportunities for promotion or who to avoid. Friendships across departmental boundaries in particular have been shown to help an organization adapt to changing contexts. Workplace friendships may also have negative effects. Obviously information chains can be used for workplace gossip, which can be unproductive. Additionally, if a close friendship at work leads someone to continue to stay in a job that they don't like for the sake of the friendship, then the friendship is not serving the interests of either person or the organization. Although this section has focused on peer coworker friendships, some friendships have the potential to develop into workplace romances.

Romantic Workplace Relationships

Workplace romances involve two people who are emotionally and physically attracted to one another (Sias, 2009). We don't have to look far to find evidence that this relationship type is the most controversial of all the workplace relationships. For example, the president of the American Red Cross was fired in 2007 for having a personal relationship with a subordinate. That same year, the president of the World Bank resigned after controversy over a relationship with an employee (Boyd, 2010). So what makes these relationships so problematic?

Some research supports the claim that workplace romances are bad for business, while other research claims workplace romances enhance employee satisfaction and productivity. Despite this controversy, workplace romances are not rare or isolated, as research shows 75 to 85 percent of people are affected by a romantic relationship at work as a participant or observer (Sias, 2009). People who are opposed to workplace romances cite several common reasons. More so than friendships, workplace romances bring into the office emotions that have the potential to become intense. This doesn't mesh well with a general belief that the workplace should not be an emotional space. Additionally, romance brings sexuality into workplaces that are supposed to be asexual, which also creates a gray area in which the line between sexual attraction and sexual harassment is blurred (Sias, 2009). People who support workplace relationships argue that companies shouldn't have a say in the personal lives of their employees and cite research showing that workplace romances increase productivity. Obviously, this is not a debate that we can settle here. Instead, let's examine some of the communicative elements that affect this relationship type.

Individuals may engage in workplace romances for many reasons, three of which are job motives, ego motives, and love motives (Sias, 2009). Job motives include gaining rewards such as power, money, or job security. Ego motives include the "thrill of the chase" and the self-esteem boost one may get. Love motives include the desire for genuine affection and companionship. Despite the motives, workplace romances impact coworkers, the individuals in the relationship, and workplace policies. Romances at work may fuel gossip, especially if the couple is trying to conceal their relationship. This could lead to hurt feelings, loss of trust, or even jealousy. If coworkers perceive the relationship is due to job motives, they may resent the appearance of favoritism and feel unfairly treated. The individuals in the relationship may experience positive effects such as increased satisfaction if they get to spend time together at work and may even be more productive. Romances between subordinates and supervisors are more likely to slow productivity. If a relationship begins to deteriorate, the individuals may experience more stress than other couples would, since they may be required to continue to work together daily.

Over the past couple decades, there has been a national discussion about whether or not organizations should have policies related to workplace relationships, and there are many different opinions. Company policies range from complete prohibition of romantic relationships, to policies that only specify supervisor-subordinate relationships as off-limits, to policies that don't prohibit but discourage love affairs in the workplace (Sias, 2009). One trend that seeks to find middle ground is the "love contract" or "dating waiver" (Boyd, 2010). This requires individuals who are romantically involved to disclose their relationship to the company and sign a document saying that it is consensual and they will not engage in favoritism. Some businesses are taking another route and encouraging workplace romances. Southwest Airlines, for example, allows employees of any status to date each other and even allows their employees to ask passengers out on a date. Other companies like AT&T and Ben and Jerry's have similar open policies (Boyd, 2010).

Key Takeaways

- The supervisor-subordinate relationship includes much information exchange that usually benefits the subordinate. However, these relationships also have the potential to create important mentoring opportunities.
- Peer coworker relationships range from those that are purely information based to those that are collegial and include many or all of the dimensions of a friendship.
- Workplace romances are controversial because they bring the potential for sexuality and intense emotions into the workplace, which many people find uncomfortable. However, research has shown that these relationships also increase employee satisfaction and productivity in some cases.

Exercises

1. Describe a relationship that you have had where you were either the mentor or the mentee. How did the relationship form? What did you and the other person gain from the relationship?
2. Think of a job you have had and try to identify someone you worked with who fit the characteristics of an information and a collegial peer. Why do you think the relationship with the information peer didn't grow to become a collegial peer? What led you to move from information peer to collegial peer with the other person? Remember that special peers are the rarest, so you may not have an experience with one. If you do, what set this person apart from other coworkers that led to such a close relationship?
3. If you were a business owner, what would your policy on workplace romances be and why?

References

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