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Personal Realities of Working Relationships

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To put a professional gloss on a well known line of one of the wise men of personal relations, “All happy working groups resemble one another. Each unhappy working group is unhappy in its own way.” Working groups are not exactly like families. The level of both love and ability to psychically harm are almost always lower at work. Nonetheless, there are many truths about well functioning, caring families that apply to and can be incorporated into well functioning and caring work organizations. There are few consistent things about a happy work environment, but the few that do exist are crucial. For this article I will focus on two personal components of good working relationships.

Common values are crucial; similar personalities are not.

Within law firms (of various sizes) and corporate legal departments, there exists an extremely wide variety of working styles. Some organizations are formal; some are relaxed. Some have tight internal rules; others are more freewheeling. Some are strict hierarchies; others approach democracy. None of these factors are any indication of whether the organization has good working relationships within it. People may be uncomfortable in places that go against their grain, but true happiness is possible.

Distinctions like those are distinctions akin to personality differences within marriages. They are not especially important to the health of the relationship. We have all known couples who are happy and work well together when both mates are shy or both are gregarious. Likewise, couples can be joyous with one of each; they encourage each other into action or relaxation. Couples can be happy when only one partner likes to read, play golf, dance or go to museums. Some people deal with the world mostly from their head; others relate to the world mostly from their heart. Matings can work well with only one or both of those types of personalities in a couple.

Couples get divorced when there is disagreement over values. When a couple comes into unexpected money, their marriage will thrive only when they agree about whether to put that money in the bank, go on vacation or send their children to better schools. The marriage will be in trouble when their basic values differ. These types of values rarely change in adults, and certainly not without trauma.

Likewise, and to continue the analogy as closely as possible, when a law partnership has extra money, the partnerships that thrive are the ones which can reach a comfortable consensus about whether to give the partners a bonus, give the associates and support staff a bonus, hire more people or put the money aside for the proverbial rainy day. People who disagree about these things can consider their partners foolish or worse.

In either a marriage or a legal partnership, if no true agreement is reached, if one party feels resentment, the relationship may not dissolve immediately, but it will be unhappy and probably fray.

Professional colleagues must communicate honestly, and with appreciation and care.

In 1986 Professor John Gottman of Washington University conducted a study to understand what makes happy couples happy. (see, www.gottman.com) To his surprise, after performing interviews with a scientifically statistical number of couples, Professor Gottman learned that there is only one thing couples who consider their relationship successful have in common. One. The only common factor in happy couple relationships is the proportion of praising statements vs. critical statements. Other than that, couples can be happy in all sorts of ways. Happy relationships could be subservient or equal, meditative or reactive, etc. If there was too much articulated blame, too much complaining, no one could be happy.

The happiness ratio between praise and blame turns out to be quite precise. Happy couples voice at least five times as many praising as blaming statements.

Unfortunately, because in a business context we do not necessarily think of our colleagues as a source of emotional support, we sometimes forget to speak our gratitude. In law firms and corporate law departments, appreciation is often unspoken. It is sometimes even thought of as unnecessary or sappy. People who need it are considered immature. Wrong.

People really do work better together when assistance and even separate accomplishments are verbally appreciated. "Thank you for coming to this event with me. I know you had to give up something to do it." "That was such a good way of handling the conference call." "I appreciate your help in showing me how to communicate a realistic timetable to the client." "That was a well reasoned analysis."

All such comments, whether in a marriage or a work environment boil down to, "I appreciate and care about you." None of us want to feel taken for granted. When that happens, we disengage or worse. People are herd animals. We know that we are welcome into the community when we are praised. Most importantly in a work context, praise allows for criticism to be heard. We keep listening because we know we are accepted in the group and do not need to take the criticism as a threat.

After only an hour or so with a couple, John Gottman says he can predict with 90 per cent accuracy which couples will still be together in five years. "Couples who say five positive things to each other for every one negative should be OK. If the ratio drops to one in two, they're in trouble."

This ratio of praise to blame is also crucial to the integrity of law firms and corporate legal departments. Both colleagues and subordinates can best be taught when they want to listen and

learn. We want to listen and learn most when we are comfortable being vulnerable. We are comfortable being vulnerable, not joyous, only when we know that in the grand scheme of things we are appreciated, that our good work has been seen, that we are safe within the herd. Expressing gratitude to one's colleagues helps hone legal as well as personal skills. It is only in the context of plentiful praise that we can hear criticism and want to change.