

Flourishing at work is all about relationships

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Pressing deadlines, endless meetings, micro-managing bosses. . . workplace stressors often leave employees feeling mentally drained and physically exhausted. But can we go from languishing to flourishing at work? Our recently published [paper](#) says: Yes! The key is to form positive work relationships. Based on over 200 stories we collected from employees in a wide range of industries—including education, government, retail, banking, information technology, health care, human services, and manufacturing—we learned that positive work relationships can help employees flourish at work.

To flourish means to experience a high sense of well-being and to thrive and grow. We do not often associate human flourishing with work, but our research suggests that thinking of work as “strictly business” is outdated. Our work and personal lives are more intertwined than ever before, and the relationships we form with others at work serve an increasing number of functions in our lives.

Don’t get us wrong – positive work relationships continue to help employees in traditional, instrumental ways. In our research, participants told many stories about how their work relationships provided them with *task assistance*, *career advancement*, and *emotional support*. Getting help with job tasks, receiving career advice, and having someone extend a helping hand during stressful work episodes were the relationship functions most associated with higher levels of job satisfaction. But surprisingly, employees also talked about developing deep friendships with others at work, experiencing personal growth through their positive work relationships, and having the opportunity to give to others.

Friendship was the relationship function participants discussed most often. They talked about feeling they could share anything with their friends and doing fun things together outside of work, such as going to the movies, playing Bingo, and even visiting each other’s home towns. Our results showed that *friendship* was the relationship function most predictive of one indicator of flourishing: experiencing positive emotions at work. Put simply, when employees develop friendships with others at work, they have more fun! Considering the wealth of research documenting the

value of positive emotions for motivation and productivity, can you imagine the benefits both employees and organisations might reap if friendship at work became an even more widespread phenomenon?

Another unexpected benefit of positive work relationships revealed in employees' stories was *personal growth*. We heard many stories about gaining valuable insights from others and then using those insights as vehicles for personal growth. Participants shared stories of how they had developed as a leader, learned how to problem-solve better, and felt challenged to think more deeply about a wide array of work-related, personal and even religious issues because of relationships they formed at work. This was a powerful discovery as it demonstrated how the benefits of workplace relationships can transcend traditional work-life boundaries.

Having workplace relationships that support personal growth was the strongest predictor of another key indicator of flourishing: life satisfaction. Wouldn't we all be better off if instead of being a source of work-life stress, our workplace relationships provided opportunities for learning, growth, and development that crossed the work-life boundary?

The final relationship function our research uncovered — *giving to others* — was novel and intriguing because past research has focused on what people *get* from positive relationships at work, not what they *give*. We often think of mentors as the giving type, but fail to appreciate the many ways in which all employees give to each other. In their stories, participants talked about the sense of fulfilment they experienced when they taught a colleague new work skills, helped a colleague see themselves in a more positive light, or created opportunities for a colleague. They also talked about how proud they felt to be a part of a colleague's success, as well as how honoured they were to be able to provide emotional support to a colleague at a time of personal need. If you are thinking that this all sounds like employees finding a sense of purpose and meaning through their positive work relationships, you'd be right! We found that *giving to others* was the strongest predictor of a third key indicator of flourishing — meaningful work — by a factor of 3!

These stories about *friendship*, *personal growth*, and *giving to others* reminded us of a simple truth – we don't stop being human at work. Employees bring their whole selves to the job, not just their work-related skills and capabilities. Organisations that realise this are in the best position to help curb employee languishing and spur employee flourishing. Not convinced? Take a look at the work practices of America's *Best Companies to Work For*. Yes, they all provide amazing perks and benefits – free food, anyone? But beyond that, these successful organisations go out of their way to promote the development of positive relationships among their employees.

Acuity lists “Have Fun!” as a core value, and reportedly throws the best company picnic of them all! The Boston Consulting Group wants to increase employees' work meaningfulness through their new, custom-designed workplace collaboration and teaming program. Deloitte, Novo Nordisk, NuStar Energy, and many others build community through encouraging employees to volunteer for a cause they care about, together. Lest you think that only organisations that employ professionals go to such lengths to promote positive work relationships, cashiers at Wegman's and warehouse runners at Zappos also have much to say about how their company has allowed them to flourish.

We are encouraged to see that so many successful organisations are already doing what our research uncovers as a tool to promote employee flourishing – creating a generative culture where employees build positive work relationships with each other. But, there are thousands of other firms that have not built an environment where employees can connect and flourish. We hope that our research encourages more organisations to create connected and generative work environments, in which employees get and give more through positive workplace relationships.



Notes:

- This post is based on the authors' paper [Flourishing via Workplace Relationships: Moving Beyond Instrumental Support](#), in *Academy of Management Journal*, August 1, 2016 vol. 59 no. 4 1199-1223
 - The post gives the views of the author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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