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Treat you co-worker like your spouse

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What's the most common complaint or source of job dissatisfaction reported by employees across industries? According to Gallup and other research organizations, it's employees' relationship with their boss, and secondarily, with their co-workers. Where should we go for better or newer strategies? The latest management guru? A surprising source may give us some new insights.

Look no further than the institution of marriage, according to Dr. John Gottman, Director of the Relationship Institute. Gottman is the renowned authority on marriage and significant other relationships, having studied the behaviour patterns of thousands of couples over the last 30 years. He has even claimed to be able to predict with 90% accuracy whether or not a relationship will last, after interviewing and observing the couple together for a short period of time—a claim that no-one to date has been able to successfully challenge.

What wisdom comes from Gottman's research that can help organizations improve relationships among employees, but particularly between management and employees? In a December, 2007 article in the *Harvard Business Review*, Gottman says that people manage their work relationships in a similar way to how they manage their personal ones. For example, someone who is abusive or aggressive at work is likely to exhibit the same behaviour at home. Similarly, people who have positive relationships at home

are likely to have positive relationships at work.

Gottman says that people in successful personal relationships look for ways to focus on the positive, and say "yes," to each other as often as possible. He adds that good relationships are not just about clear communication, but about small "moments of attachment and intimacy,"—which require effort on each person's part. Gottman points to a number of other characteristics of strong and positive personal relationships which have implications for relationships in organizations:

- Power is shared in the relationship
- Good relationships are not just about knowing when to deal constructively with conflict, they're also about humour, affection, playfulness, adventure, and many other positive emotional things.
- People have to see each other as human beings first and co-workers second.
- Workplace friendships build strong working relationships.
- Look for the positive things in people first, rather than the negative things.

- Guard against the "*Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*,"—criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling and contempt. These are the best predictors of deteriorating relationships that eventually end up in a break-up.

Finally, Gottman makes the observation that negative relationships---and this is supported by substantial medical research---can have a disastrous impact on our physical health. Employers would do well to note Gottman's work. For bottom line business performance is driven by employees, and their performance is clearly affected by their working relationships.



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