



Building Direct Report Relationships through Rapport and Trust

Direct reports value a strong relationships with their managers, and our own internal survey data validates that. As a manager, you can make a difference in your direct reports' fulfillment and engagement by taking time regularly to prioritize your relationship with them, not just focusing on their performance. This investment can also benefit you, the team, and the organization: your influence increases as your employees feel more connected and valued.

Two key methods for building strong relationships are to develop rapport and act to instill trust. This article is a brief summary of those two methods.

Develop rapport through 1:1 conversations

Rapport is a supportive connection that develops between people who communicate with interest and care. Take time in your 1:1 meetings to get to know your direct reports as individuals. Early in the relationship, you might schedule more time as both of you share what each of you wants and needs in the relationship. Circling back to prior conversations is powerful. It demonstrates that you've listened well and you care about what they care about.

As time passes, rapport building needs to continue. Ask new questions and revisit earlier ones. Your learning will grow, along with your ability to support and influence them.

What you might say or ask to build rapport with your direct reports

When you are building rapport, it's important to be curious and try to focus your attention on them, not the work. This means you explore their work-related experiences and needs, not task-specific goals or issues. You might try to learn about them as people, not just as your direct report, to find out what matters to them outside their job and the workplace. If you aren't comfortable with getting personal, stay focused on a professional, but also caring, level.

Whichever approach you choose, be sure you are consistent, to the extent that your direct reports are comfortable. Getting personal only with those who are similar to you is an almost sure way for some folks to sense your bias and their being excluded or devalued.

Here are some ideas for building rapport with professional, caring questions:

- What's happening in your world that's bringing you [joy, satisfaction, grief, concern]?
- What are some features of your [best, worst] relationships with previous managers?
- What kind of recognition or praise is [most, least] meaningful for you?
- How do you like to receive constructive feedback?
- What do you want me to know about your [working, thinking, communication] style?
- What experiences make you [happy, stressed, frustrated] at work?
- What are some things you're hoping I can help with?
- What could I do that would help you feel more [valued, supported, understood]?
- What would you like to know that would make it easier for you to work with me?
- In what ways can I support your [job, skills, career] development?



Beyond asking them questions, be sure to say what they mean to you – for example:

- What do you appreciate about them as a person, direct report, or team member?
- In what ways have they contributed to your own fulfillment and learning at work?
- What positive memories do you have about your time with them?
- In what ways do you hope to support their success and well-being?

Act to instill trust

Developing rapport through conversation is an initial step to trust: if you demonstrate your care for your direct report by taking time to ask caring questions, they are likely to believe you are worthy of some level of trust. They are also likely to want you to demonstrate trust through action by:

- following up on your commitments
- treating them fairly and standing up for them when they are treated unfairly
- caring and helping when life happens (e.g., time to deal with a failed water heater)
- making room for their contributions, respectful challenges, and safe risk-taking without fear of marginalization, humiliation, or punishment.

This last area of action is referred to as “psychological safety.” Research has shown that teams demonstrating psychological safety result in better work product and individual fulfillment and engagement. As a manager, foster these conditions in 1:1 meetings, as well as in team settings:

Stage 1: Inclusion Safety: Inclusion safety satisfies the basic human need to connect and belong. In this stage, you feel safe to be yourself and are accepted for who you are, including your unique attributes and defining characteristics.

Stage 2: Learner Safety: Learner safety satisfies the need to learn and grow. In this stage, you feel safe to exchange in the learning process, by asking questions, giving and receiving feedback, experimenting, and making mistakes.

Stage 3: Contributor Safety: Contributor safety satisfies the need to make a difference. You feel safe to use your skills and abilities to make a meaningful contribution.

Stage 4: Challenger Safety: Challenger safety satisfies the need to make things better. You feel safe to speak up and challenge the status quo when you think there’s an opportunity to change or improve.

Resources

- [The Boss Factor: Making the World a Better Place Through Workplace Relationships \(article\)](#)
- [Relationship Skills in Demand \(podcast\)](#)
- [What is Psychological Safety at Work? \(article\)](#)



Meeting planning template

Consider using this template to help plan your meeting. Take notes during the meeting to help you reflect afterwards, keeping track of what you learn and how you need to follow up.

Orienting yourself and your intentions

Take time to think about your intentions for these relationships and how you might handle your inner challenges as you plan and before you meet with each direct report.

What would you want this person to say about you as their manager, when they reflect on their experience with you? (Recognize what *they* want could be different – ask them!)

What do you believe or feel about this person or the relationship that could get in the way of your being interested, caring, and receptive to them and their needs?

How will you ensure you are fully present and open to learning from them in this meeting?

How could you set the stage for psychological safety, so that they feel accepted for who they are, they can make mistakes without judgment, their contributions are valued, and they can speak up when they have concerns?

Planning for the content of the meeting

What is your goal for this meeting?

What questions do you want to ask?

What positive, affirming statements do you want to offer to them?

Post-Meeting Reflection

What did you learn about them, yourself, or the relationship?

What do you value from this conversation?

In what ways do you need to follow up and when will you do so?