

High-Quality Relationships are Vital to Health, Performance, and Professional Success

by Martha Knudson, J.D., MAPP

I'm going to let you in on a little secret: lawyers aren't as tough as we like to think we are. Sure, we do hard things every day. We make difficult decisions and deal with complicated and weighty matters that often impact the future and livelihood of our clients. But do you know who is really tough? The life and death kind of tough? United States Army soldiers. A primary resource they rely on to stay sharp, resilient to stress, healthy, and happy is their knowledge of how to build and sustain high-quality relationships.

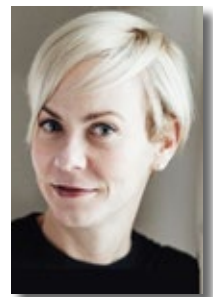
Solid relationships are so critical that the U.S. Army actively teaches its soldiers the skills to build and support them. Among other things, this training has translated into better stress coping, higher emotional fitness, and significantly lower rates of substance abuse and diagnosis for mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. See Paula Davis-Laack, *Resilient and Ready: Tools for Adapting to Stress and Change in the Law*, in *THE BEST LAWYER YOU CAN BE: A GUIDE TO PHYSICAL, MENTAL EMOTIONAL, AND SPIRITUAL WELLNESS* 59, 67 (Stewart Levine ed., 2018).

While the challenges that lawyers face might be different than those of soldiers, our need for high-quality relationships at work are not. Our brains are hardwired for connection. Overwhelming amounts of scientific research shows that high-quality relationships are critical to our happiness, health, and resilience. In fact, a study of more than 6,200 practicing lawyers showed the need to belong, feel we matter, and feel cared for by others at work to be one of the most important ingredients for lawyer well-being, motivation, and satisfaction with work. See Lawrence S. Krieger & Kennon M. Sheldon, *What Makes Lawyers Happy?: A Data-Driven Prescription to Redefine Professional Success*, 83 *GEO. WASH. LAW REV.* 554 (2015). High quality relationships are also linked to reduced stress, good physical and mental health, and reduced levels of burnout and depression. See Anne Brafford, *Positive Professionals: Creating High-Performing Profitable Firms Through the Science of Engagement* 84–85, 97 (2017).

If these things aren't enough to get you to pay attention, high-quality workplace relationships, and perceiving that you have social support, impacts many things we care about professionally. It enhances our cognitive processes and our creativity, and it boosts work engagement. See *id.* at 84–85. It also helps us to like our jobs more, so we are less likely to leave. These things translate to quantifiable performance gains for our legal organizations. Davis-Laack, *supra*, at 63. This makes sense. Much of our legal work gets done through our interactions with other people. Work environments where legal professionals feel supported, feel valued, and have a sense of belonging are far more likely to function at a higher level.

On the other hand, organizations where people perceive that they don't matter, aren't supported, or don't belong won't operate nearly as well. This is because these feelings can trigger self-defeating behaviors like procrastination, disengagement from work, burnout, and attrition. Symptoms of depression are also strongly related to an unmet need for connection and social support at work. Brafford, *supra*, at 84–85, 97. With national research showing that practicing lawyers experience depression at four times the rate of the general population, see Patrick R. Krill et al., *The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys*, 10 *J. ADDICTION MED.* 46, 46 (2016), and preliminary results from Utah's 2019 lawyer study showing similarly elevated rates, this is something we all should be taking a very hard look at for ourselves and for our organizations.

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Defining High-Quality Relationships

High-quality relationships at work go a long way toward satisfying our fundamental need for belonging and social connections. Being “high-quality” doesn’t mean you and your co-workers need to be “besties” and brush each other’s hair. The relationships we’re talking about don’t have to be deeply personal, just “high-quality.” This means that they are characterized by four important things: (1) they are empowering; (2) they provide you with a sense of trust; (3) they are respectful; and (4) they allow you to be your authentic self. *See Davis-Laack, supra*, at 63.

Building High-Quality Connections

High-quality relationships start with high-quality connections (HQCs). These are relationship building blocks. Some of the positive behaviors of HQCs are overt and obvious. But others are very subtle, including the many micro-moments of interaction we have with others as we go about our work every day. *See Brafford, supra*, at 85–87.

Humans (yes, that includes lawyers) are sensitive creatures. Without even knowing what we’re doing, we’re constantly scanning for social cues on whether we belong and are valued. Surprisingly, most of the cues we pick up on are non-verbal. Research tells us that when we interpret a message only 7% of it comes from the words being spoken, 50% of it comes from body language, and 38% is from tone of voice. This means that small behaviors like eye contact, body posture, facial expressions, and tone of voice can convey far more about whether one is valued and belongs than the words coming out of our mouths. *See id.* at 91. If our micro-moments of interaction are positive and filled with genuine warmth and openness, they send a message of respect, trust, and encouragement that can be energizing and help us to enjoy our work and do it well. If they aren’t, even unintentionally, they can leave us feeling on edge, disengaged, and like we don’t belong.

Here’s an example from my own experience. Years ago, something frustrating happened with one of my cases. It’s been so long I can’t remember the details. What I do remember is venting about it to my legal assistant. Nothing about the situation had anything to do with her, but I needed to rant, and she was available. As I was carrying on about whatever it was that had sent me off the rails, she burst into tears. I was so confused. Why was she crying? It turns out that to her, my angry tone and body language were communicating that I thought everything was her fault and that she wasn’t cutting it. This couldn’t have been further from the truth. She was awesome. My life and practice didn’t function without her. I thought I was just venting

to someone I trusted. But she read the situation quite differently.

Thankfully, because she was visibly upset, we were able to quickly get to the bottom of it. I reassured her that my freak out had zero to do with her and apologized profusely for my behavior. But, had she been more stoic during that exchange, she might have walked away feeling undervalued, unappreciated, and like she didn’t belong. She would also have been more likely to interpret future messages as confirming this belief. And, if she had carried this belief over time, research tells us it would have likely negatively impacted her productivity, attendance, and commitment to working for me. Me? I would have been none the wiser. Left scratching my head about what happened to my awesome assistant and why she didn’t want to work with me any longer.

This was a powerful lesson for me on how important it is to slow down and consider how I’m coming across to those with whom I work. Frankly, this is something we should all stop and consider. Are we seeing our colleagues and co-workers as people first and not just a means to get our work done? Are we inadvertently communicating things we don’t intend? Could our behavior be negatively impacting the well-being of others? And, can we make even small changes during our micro-moments of interaction to actually support the well-being of those we work with?

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Engaging in this kind of reflection is good for all of us, but the stakes are even higher for organizational leaders. Research tells us we are particularly sensitive to messages from those perceived to carry more power. Not only this, but we often contribute the conduct of our leaders to the entire organization. *See* Brafford, *supra*, at 93. This means that leaders who engage in high-quality connections have great influence on building cultures where lawyers feel valued and supported. And, their positive style can also encourage others to model similar behavior. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true.

Remember how we are sensitive creatures? This means that the behaviors that can defeat our perceptions of belonging and support can also be very subtle. It's things like failing to provide information or explain goals, giving unfair criticism, taking others for granted, not giving credit where credit is due, being rude, having a condescending tone, ignoring an individual, not making eye contact, failing to listen to others, interrupting individuals, using sarcasm (unfortunately), and even simply failing to say please and thank you. *See id.* at 85–86.

How we treat each other matters. It matters to the health, well-being, and performance of our co-workers. It matters to the functioning of our organizations. By making high-quality relationships a priority, our own well-being improves as it makes others want to treat us well in return, sparking a positive sense of reciprocity. And support from others reduces our physiological responses to the stress of practicing law. *See id.* at 89. Not only that, substantial evidence shows that the more we are consistent about enabling the success of our colleagues, the more motivated and successful we will be ourselves. Adam Grant, *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success* (2012).

We can start to make important changes today. A few evidence-based strategies you can use to help build high-quality connections and relationships for yourself and your organization include the following:

Strategies for Lawyers

- Use an appropriate and respectful tone;
- Avoid sarcasm;
- Make eye contact;
- Stop typing and look up from your computer when someone enters your office;
- Say please and thank you;
- Let people know you value them;
- Greet people by name;

- Keep people informed;
- Use inclusive language;
- Ask rather than demand;
- See co-workers as people first;
- Listen and don't interrupt;
- Pay attention to the people around you;
- Communicate support, encouragement, and belonging;
- Provide access to resources and information;
- Give advice;
- Help remove obstacles; and
- Schedule five minutes every day to offer gratitude or lend a hand to others.

See Brafford, *supra*, at 85–86, 88.

Strategies for Organizations

The behaviors that support high-quality relationships can be learned. Remember our U.S. Army soldiers? They receive resilience training that includes learning proper communication, listening skills, and relationship building. *See U.S. Army, Army Sharp, Ready & Resilient (SR2) Directorate*, <https://readyandresilient.army.mil/> (last updated Jan. 28, 2019). This kind of training is an evidence-based area of opportunity for legal employers that can pay-off with quantifiable performance gains.

Another recommendation is for organizations to take a hard look at their policies, practices, and culture to determine if they could be negatively impacting healthy workplace relationships and whether people feel that they matter. Culture plays an enormous role in influencing workplace relationships and employee morale as it shapes shared beliefs, values, behaviors, social patterns, and group norms. The Utah Bar's Well-Being Committee for the Legal Profession has prepared an audit checklist for legal employers that can help measure the well-being of the organization. *See* The Utah State Bar's Well-Being Committee for the Legal Profession, *Best Practices for Legal Employers*, at app. D (Feb. 2019) available at <https://www.utahbar.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/BP1employers.pdf>.

We may not choose to have certain colleagues or co-workers in our lives, but we all have the opportunity to choose how we interact with our colleagues and co-workers. Legal work requires social interaction. The choice to consciously learn and support behaviors that support high-quality relationships can make a difference. It matters. Not only to our own success and well-being, but to that of our colleagues, co-workers, and organizations.