

Network to Work Meeting – August 2022

RESOURCE DOCUMENT – *EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS: BUILDING TEAMWORK*

Holding the Best Intentions when Engaging with Others

No matter what your job is or where you work, having good teamwork skills is essential for job success. Teamwork is the ability to work well with others in your workplace (co-workers, bosses, customers and others). It allows you to build strong relationships and new connections, be efficient in completing your work, and create an enjoyable environment both for yourself and others.

There are a variety of skills that are essential elements of teamwork and are crucial for getting along well with others. They include:

- Being able to communicate well;
- Being able to actively listen;
- Being responsible and reliable;
- Being honest and trustworthy;
- Having empathy;
- Showing respect for others.

Likewise, there are many strategies for building teamwork. This resource document will focus on one of these strategies: ***holding the best intentions when engaging with others.***

Establishing trusting workplace relationships.

In the course of interacting with a colleague, if you assume a negative intent on their part behind their words or actions, you are showing a lack of trust. This makes it quite hard to operate as part of a team. However, **when you hold the best intentions – and give that colleague the benefit of the doubt** – you are much more likely to develop a good rapport and trusting, collaborative relationship that person.

It has been proven over and over again that for a group of people to work together and make forward progress, they need to have trust in each other's abilities and also in each other's intentions. When

dealing with differences of perspective and opinion that have the potential to become heated and personal, the only productive way through is to ***engage with the best intentions, give others the benefit of the doubt, see all that they bring to the team, and believe that the people you are dealing with have good in their hearts.***

What are you doing when you give the “benefit of the doubt”? You are ***“accepting something/someone as honest or deserving of trust even though there are doubts.”***

There are fundamental reasons for giving someone the benefit of the doubt. It lets them know that you believe them, that you trust they are doing the best they can, and that you know they also want a good outcome.

Four ways to establish trust in order to improve your relationships:

1. Give other people the benefit of the doubt.

When you give another the benefit of the doubt, you are being open-minded and curious about another. If you are able to approach your interactions – even difficult ones – with a benefit of the doubt mindset, you will be a better listener, and the other person will feel more positively about speaking with you.

Think about these workplace scenarios:

- Your supervisor appears to be closed off and unapproachable, perhaps even upset. Do you automatically assume they are angry or unhappy with you, that you did something wrong?
- You are working on a project with a co-worker. They send you an email saying, “I don’t care, do whatever you want to do.” Do you believe they really don’t care if you take the lead? Or do you read deeper into their words and wonder if their intention is to convey they are unhappy with you and so don’t care?
- You send your manager your weekly report, and you don’t hear back from her. However, she praises another team member for their timely and comprehensive report. Do you assume your manager is disappointed in your report or is intentionally ignoring you for some reason?
- Your boss walks through the building and he passes your desk without saying hello. Do you assume there’s a problem developing?

These scenarios are examples of starting with a negative assumption as opposed to giving the other person the benefit of the doubt.

If you find yourself trying to interpret someone's behavior and either blaming yourself or assigning ill intent, choose one of the following actions instead.

- a. Decide to give the other person the benefit of the doubt until it is clear that it is no longer warranted. Showing people trust first is a highly effective way to have trust returned.
- b. Remind yourself you are reading too much into the situation and give yourself permission to wait to form an opinion until you know more.
- c. Test the waters by initiating a casual conversation and see how they respond. The topic might be their child's hobby, a birthday cake in the office kitchen, or a personal project you are working on.
- d. Consider asking about what you are observing. You might say, "I'm just checking in. Is something going on? Are you upset about something?"

2. Ask to be given the benefit of the doubt.

Think about a situation where someone isn't giving you the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps you are going back and forth in a disagreement and there's no end in sight. Maybe you said something that the other person misunderstood, and you can tell they didn't receive the information in the way you intended. In such an instance, stop going back and forth trying to explain your position.

Instead, directly and out loud say "Please give me the benefit of the doubt" so they know you are asking them to trust you, even though they may have some doubts.

Your request could look like this:

"Please give me the benefit of the doubt that _____ (choose one of the following):

- ***"you misunderstand what I said, and that was not what I meant."***
- ***"I didn't mean it the way you took it."***
- ***"I did the best I could."***
- ***"I'm being honest about the outcome."***
- ***"My work / my job / this organization matters to me."***

3. Be charitable.

Be charitable. Offering the benefit of the doubt is essentially deciding not to assume the worst. It is a neutral, inactive position where we allow another to prove themselves.

Being charitable, on the other hand, is **deciding to assume the best in another**. This is an active position – seeking out the kindest explanations and starting there when dealing with other.

When in a challenging situation and emotions begin to run high, stop and ask yourself, **“What is the most charitable way to interpret this situation?”** This doesn’t mean that one shouldn’t speak up when they disagree. What it means is that when presenting an opinion of disagreement, start from the place of charity. It is even possible the other person will change their mind – and even admit they overreacted or were wrong – if you show that you believe they have a good heart.

Here’s a scenario. Someone is listening to a presenter during a virtual meeting. The presenter is discussing his life’s work which involved saving the lives of endangered animals. A listener in the virtual audience is bothered by something said by the presenter. They post an angry comment in the chat that the presenter’s words have triggered them, saying, *“Is anyone else hearing this? How dare he say X! I’m shocked that the conference would allow someone like this to speak.”*

This sets off back and forth exchanges among the attendees that devolves into nasty criticism and personal attacks of both the presenter and the original commenter. In this scenario, a difference in opinion between the commenter and the speaker derailed the conversation and tore the group apart.

So what would have been **the most charitable way** for the commenter to have responded in this situation? It might have sounded like this: *“This man has dedicated his life to saving animals. He’s here donating his time as a speaker to help people learn and to spread these noble ideas. I may not agree with his word choices or perspective on everything, but gosh darn it he means well.”*

Another way to frame this contrary opinion could be: *“I believe this guy is doing good work and comes from a good place. But when he said X, I felt very uncomfortable. Can the moderator please ask him to clarify what he meant by this when it’s an appropriate time for a question? I’d love to understand his perspective better.”*

4. Challenge yourself to practicing #1 and #2 the above for a 24 hour period.

In all your important interactions give the benefit of the doubt to others. Enter each conversation believing the other person cares about you and the matter you are discussing, and that they are doing their best. What do you notice about yourself and the outcome of your interactions?

When we give others the benefit of the doubt, it takes some of the pressure off the conversation. It allows us to listen actively, connect, and hear what the other person is saying. And if someone is not giving you the benefit of the doubt, instead of getting frustrated or annoyed, ask for what you need and say respectfully but directly: "Please give me the benefit of the doubt."

Giving and receiving the benefit of the doubt helps us bypass hours of negative thinking, cope with constant frustration during difficult conversations, and move forward. It frees us up from distraction and discontentment. And, best of all, it's a big part of the trust-building process between you and the other person.

Sources:

"Giving Benefit of Doubt - A Building Block to Build Trust and Relationship at Work", Satnam Kaur, June 8, 2019, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/giving-benefit-doubt-building-block-build-trust-work-satnam-kaur/>

"The Simple Secret To Establishing Trust in your Relationships at Work and Home", by Debra Roberts, INC.com, May 26, 2021. <https://www.inc.com/debra-roberts/the-simple-secret-to-establishing-trust-in-your-relationships-at-work-home.html>

"This Remarkable Habit will Change How You See "Benefit of Doubt", Shane Snow, Contributor, FORBES, April 28, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/shanesnow/2020/04/28/this-remarkable-habit-will-change-how-you-see-benefit-of-doubt/?sh=2522afb75da4>