Explore
The Relational Proximity® Framework

Relational Schools

Measuring Relational 'closeness'

1.1 How do you measure closeness in a relationship? After all, relationships are not numbers. Over the past 20 years, the Relationships Foundation and more recently Relational Research have developed the ideas of Relational Distance and Relational Proximity to assess the quality of relationships in organisations and make recommendations for improvement. By redefining the goals of education through a Relational lens, and a common language and framework of relationships, education becomes less about personal development and far more about the contribution of the individual to the social and political world as a community and as a humanity. In order to answer the fundamental question about what education should be for, Relational Thinking suggests a new vision for what we want to achieve as a society and the processes by which to achieve it; it suggests a new vision for organisations which results in a different set of academic outcomes and different pedagogical process to accomplish them.

1.2 The goal in family life, public policy, and stakeholder relationships in and between organisations should centre on the 'closeness' in a relationship. It is not about physical closeness but about relational connection. Close relationships need both communication and justice in order to function properly.
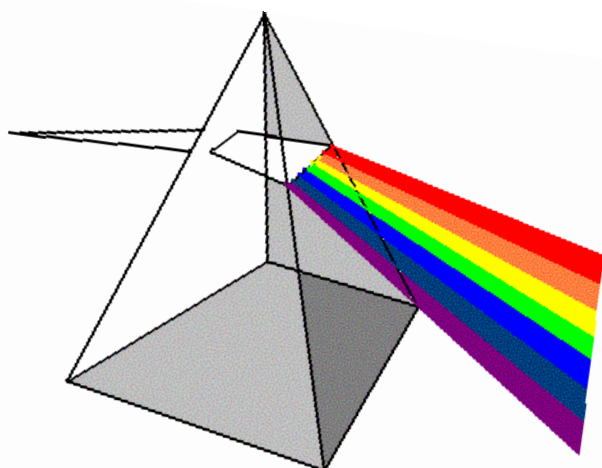
Five Domains of Relational Proximity®

The Relational Prism

2.1   Just as a prism divides white light into its constituent parts, the Relational Proximity framework enables us to view the key elements of a relationship.

2.2   This allows for targeted recommendations to be made for improving the relationship and also provides a point of reference from which outcomes can be measured.

The domains

2.2   Power, Information, Communication, Purpose and Story are the five elements (or domains) in the Relational Proximity framework. Each of the five domains represents a particular aspect in a relationship.

2.3   The diagram outlines some of the benefits that can be achieved through improving individual aspects of a relationship.

2.4   Strong relationships are well-developed across the five domains. Weaker relationships can be strengthened through improvement in one or more domains.

03 COMMUNICATION
Clarity
Connection

04 PURPOSE
Motivation
Synergy

INFORMATION
Predictability
Understanding

05 STORY
Resilience
Momentum

01 POWER
Respect
Fairness

Background: Relational Proximity® Framework

3.1 Supportive personal relationships cannot be legislated into existence: they can be encouraged, supported or undermined. A useful way of exploring the interface between policy and relationships is to look at a framework of preconditions for relationships. These help to identify some of the characteristics of relationships that are likely to enhance well-being, as well as the conditions that tend to foster such relationships. From our experience we have observed five key dimensions (domains) of relationships:

Directness of Communication

3.2 This looks at the nature and degree of presence (physical or emotional) in a relationship and how this presence is mediated by technology (eg phone, email, and video conference), time or other people. The experience of encountering the presence of another reflects a desire for 'connectedness' and is at times, an end in itself. It also has functional benefits in enabling more effective communication and group bonding.

3.3 Directness matters not just for the quality of communication it enables, but also because other tasks require physical presence. A phone call to an elderly relative is not the same as a visit, where practical assistance can also be offered. With many employees living some distance away from relatives, facilitating elder care (as well as relocation to fulfil care

responsibilities) is one area where organisations can assist the task of maintaining social sustainability. In promoting social sustainability within communities public policy should seek to avoid diminishing directness in family and community relationships. Just as office size and design influences patterns of communication (most people won't walk very far for face to face contact), so too urban planning and architecture influence patterns of encounter. Housing policy may need to address the need for a higher number of larger multi- generational units, for example.

Continuity of Story

3.4 Time is the currency of relationships, and so time use within a relationship as well as the overall length and stability of the relationship is a second dimension to consider. Relationships are distinguished from interactions by the way in which the present encounter is shaped by the experience of previous interactions and expectations of future interactions. High levels of turnover in a relationship break this informational continuity, can reduce accountability as people are no longer around when the consequences of actions come to light, and can disincentivise investment in relationships if they are expected to be short-lived.

3.5 Trust and understanding take time to develop. Lack of time spent in

building and maintaining a relationship can lead to poor communication and misunderstandings. But many people experience acute time pressure as a result of the demands of multiple relationships, increased expectations of time productivity and requirement for fast turnaround. Time for key social relationships is therefore one important indicator of sustainability. Shared time is important for both family and community and so high levels of unsocial hours, particularly where employees are required to work them, could be a negative indicator. Working both weekend days can create particular problems for parents of school age children. 'Shift parenting' resulting from income pressures and the lack of provision of reasonably priced childcare is certainly detrimental to strong couple relationships. Frequent relocation can disrupt both extended family and community relationships as roots and belonging take time to develop.

3.6   The continuity aspect of continuity can thus be summarised as a concern for the overall duration of a relationship, change management processes that preserve continuity (e.g. through effective handovers), time allocation within and between relationships, flexibility and control over time, and recognition of the time costs imposed on others.

Multiplexity of information

3.7   This refers to the breadth of knowledge in relationship. Limited knowledge can cause

misunderstandings (eg not realising the pressures that counterparts face) or missed opportunities (not knowing someone's skills, contacts or interests means their contribution may not be invited). Ensuring that relationships are conducted in a way that enables this knowledge to be gained is therefore important. Meeting in different contexts can aid this as it allows the expression of different skills and interests to be seen.

3.8   Not knowing the needs and circumstances of employees and their families may mean that companies do not act or respond appropriately. The impact of changes in working practices or times may be misunderstood, not only causing problems in staff relations, but also with unintended (and perhaps unrealised) consequences for family and community relationships.

3.9   Similarly companies need to know what they can usefully contribute in community engagement, and external stakeholders need to understand what works for the company. Lack of mutual awareness of needs, capacities and interests may mean that opportunities for positive impacts may go unmissed. Or, more negatively, limited understanding of the community may lead to 'white elephant' projects which are underused, ineffective or unsustainable.

3.10   Assessing multiplexity focuses on whether this is adequate breadth of knowledge (which may require perception gap analysis) as well as the processes for gaining and sharing

that knowledge. Multiple knowledge may be retained within personal relationships but not transferred to organisational relationships. Where decision making processes increasingly strip out this contextual knowledge, mistakes can occur.

Multiplexity of information

3.11   This is concerned with the use of power within the relationship. It recognises that there may be legitimate power differentials, but seeks the use of power in ways that build relationships by fostering participation and conveying respect. The fair distribution of risks and rewards is also important in this regard.

3.12   This touches on many of the issues commonly raised in 'employee' indicators. Pay differentials, consultation processes, policies on bullying and discrimination are all relevant. These tend not to capture the culture, though, which is often more powerful. The 'rules' may be right but the actual experience awful. Running a 'relational health check' would add flesh and colour.

3.13   A lack of parity is corrosive and tends to lead to disengagement, or destructive behaviour within the relationship, and can therefore seriously undermine sustainability. Concerns are often raised about the power differential between large multinationals and some of the communities within which they operate, particularly where the community feel excluded from the relationship with host government.

Consultation and participation in decision making, equity in the distribution of risk and reward, and dignity and respect in the conduct of the relationship are all important aspects of parity to explore..

Commonality of Purpose

3.14   This looks at the extent to which goals and/or identity are shared. Divergent goals and priorities create strain in relationships. The 'real' or personal agenda can be very different to the official line, and so commonality must look beneath the glib surface statements of agreement to that which really motivates and informs priorities. Difference enriches relationships, and thus a second element of commonality is the extent to which diversity can be embraced under some shared identity or purpose.

3.15   One issue here is whether the meaning/content of 'social sustainability' is understood and shared, and whether these are part of the motivating goals for people as citizens, residents, employees or interest group members. If not, there may be a completely different 'real' agenda. It's important to dig behind the surface statements – everyone may say they're working for the good of the community but mean different things and have competing priorities.

3.16   Professional, ethnic and faith cultures can all differ. Failure to understand and manage these differences can create conflict and misunderstanding. Commonality does not require people to be the same, rather it is concerned

with the robustness of the unifying focus of the relationship. Different relationships have different 'centres of gravity' for their commonality. It may be the customer or service user or the target- setter (whether government or investors). Within a complex system the unifying gravitational centre must be stronger that the other potential accountabilities that may pull the relationships apart.

3.17   The fullness of relationship is not always sought. Fear of risk and obligation may outweigh the perceived benefits of the possibilities that are opened up. But it is also sometime unnecessarily constrained. Building relational proximity involves reducing a number of 'gaps' that limit the achievement of the above:

3.18   The mediation gap. People and technology create indirect connectedness. They can increase the feeling of connectedness to the extent that they help to overcome other gaps which may be spatial or to do with power (advocates and brokers). But people and technology can also result in edited, lower bandwidth connections within which the 'other' is less fully encountered.

3.19   Temporal gaps. Long intervals between encounters may reduce the perceived significance of that particular 'relational story' and lead to a reduced sense of the enduring presence of the other. Continuity may be concerned with either reducing the duration and frequency of these gaps,

or with managing them so that the story of the relationship can continue to unfold, and awareness of the presence of the other be maintained.

3.20   Knowledge gaps. There are known unknowns, and unknown unknowns. Breadth of information is gained through encounter in different contexts, through learning from other people, and from the ability and desire to acquire information in the context of encounters. Reducing the gap between each party's knowledge of themselves and the other party's knowledge of them reduces misunderstanding and false assumptions. And because we don't know what we need to know, or what can be known, the greater the breadth of knowledge the less the risk that important knowledge will be missed.

3.21   Power gaps. Power differentials, particularly without checks, balances and accountability, are risky. Aversion to experiencing injustice is more deeply rooted in our nature than the commitment to promote justice for others. Where respect for self, differs significantly from respect for other and/or from other (either more or less), power is more likely to be abused.

3.22   Alignment gaps. Divergence of goals and identity can weaken relationships. It is not difference that matters – indeed it is often enriching – but the inability to align those differences around some common reference point.

More information about Relational Thinking and the Proximity Framework can be found at:

www.relationalresearch.org
www.relational-analytics.com
www.relationshipsfoundation.org

The network of organisations and people seeking to put Relational Proximity into practice can be found at www.relationalthinking.net.