

Invisible Work: The Disappearing of Relational Practice at Work

Relational Dilemmas

- An engineer working in a major high-tech firm spends hours briefing someone from another company division, sharing her team's preliminary solutions to a design problem, the product of six months' of work. She feels good knowing that the other division won't have to spend time simply reinventing the wheel.
- A technical analyst at a scientific research center assists a team of scientists by suggesting, and then helping to implement, an obscure statistical analysis. It pleases him to go beyond his formal job description and official role—which is simply to carry out the scientists' decisions—by making intellectual contributions to the project's success.
- At a mid-sized manufacturing firm, a new, self-managed team is developing a list of performance criteria. One member suggests that the ability to bring people together, resolve differences, and make team members feel at ease with each other is essential to getting the job done and should be included on the list.

Each of these examples focuses on the kinds of behavior that have become increasingly important in organizations: sharing information across organizational boundaries; doing whatever it takes to get the job done; fostering teamwork and collaboration; thinking systemically rather than individuals focusing on just their own little piece of the picture. These are exactly the kinds of actions that management writers are saying employers must encourage in order to compete in the glo-

bal, knowledge-intensive economy. Indeed, new models of leadership tout these practices as the essence of good leadership.

Here is the problem: In each of these examples, the employee later had second thoughts about what she or he had done. The engineer began to worry that the other division's team would be credited for an innovative new approach, which her own team had actually developed. She realized that giving away her team's learning might not be a very sound career strategy and said she regretted having been "led down the garden path." The technical analyst realized that, although the scientists had thanked him profusely in private, they, alone, got the public recognition for their research design. And the person who suggested that team competencies should be included with other performance criteria saw her suggestion shot down when others complained that such skills were too difficult to measure. What bothered her most was that she felt these competencies were her most important contribution to the project's success—more valuable, even, than her technical capabilities. Yet the team's decision to leave them off the performance criteria was as good as saying they did not count.

Why are contributions such as these—which I call relational practice—devalued or dismissed even in organizations that tout the importance of collaboration and supportive teamwork, while behaviors that reflect a contrasting set of values—such as individual achievement, autonomy, and specialization—continue to be celebrated and rewarded?

The underlying problem is one that affects many organizations. It is not just a case of outmoded performance appraisal systems that do not align with new organizational objectives. The fundamental issue runs a lot deeper. It is about gender and power and the way relational practice gets "disappeared"—that is, denigrated, ignored, or even penalized—not because it is ineffective, but because it is out of line with deeply held, gender-linked assumptions about good workers, exemplary behavior, and successful organizations.

Below I explore why and how relational practice gets disappeared in the workplace. I suggest strategies that individuals and organizations can use to interrupt the cycle.

Relational Practice

What does relational practice look like? As the opening examples illustrate, relational practice is a way of achieving goals and getting the job done using skills such as listening, mutuality, reciprocity, and sensitivity to the emotional context. It is founded on a set of implicit beliefs, for example, the idea that growth, achievement, and effectiveness occur best within a network of connection and support. Another underlying belief is that interdependence is something to strive for. It is powerful and productive to be mutually reliant on others. A third is that important work outcomes include not only what one achieves oneself but also what one enables others to achieve, for example, by facilitating effective relationships between stakeholders, or teaching others, or paying attention to the emo-

tional dynamics in a situation to ensure that a project stays on track.

The particular notion of relational practice referred to here is based on the work of Jean Baker Miller and her colleagues at the Stone Center at Wellesley College. First articulated by Miller in her 1976 *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, relational theory poses an alternative to prevailing models of adult development that emphasize autonomy and separation in the growth process. In contrast, the Stone Center model emphasizes growth-in-connection and conceptualizes development into fully functional adulthood as a process of becoming increasingly proficient at *connecting to others*, as opposed to separating and individuating oneself from others.

While it may not seem so initially, this is a radical departure from the established view, in which relational activities are seen as female traits rooted in women's greater emotional needs. By contrast, Miller argues that relational prowess is actually a *skill*, not an attribute, and a *strength*, rather than a deficiency. Society socializes women to accept responsibility for relational growth, she says, while men are encouraged to deny it. What makes this dynamic especially pernicious is that neither the skills required to create relational conditions for growth, nor the work of doing so, nor society's need for such relational activity is acknowledged. They remain invisible. Thus, by both requiring and devaluing support activities, society can maintain its belief in independence and individual achievement, even though most people have a (largely female) network of people supporting their so-called individual achievement.

This "myth of individuality" runs deep and forms the basis for much of our conventional wisdom about life, business, and society. As a result, the "logic of effectiveness" that underlies most workplace practices is *not* a relational logic, but instead emphasizes and reinforces individuation. Conceptualizing growth and development as a process rooted in connection offers a different logic of effectiveness. At least at the level of rhetoric, it would appear that most organizations

recognize the need to shift to this more relational model—one that is more team oriented, empowering, collaborative. But this is where the story gets complicated, because gender/power dynamics actually inhibit this shift in interesting ways.

Disappearing Acts: Gender and Power at Work

Understanding how relational work comes to be seen as "women's work" helps us to see a similar gender dynamic in the workplace, where relational practice gets disappeared as "real" work and gets constructed as something else—something with personal, rather than task-related objectives and consequences. It is this disappearing dynamic that accounts for the dismay many workers feel in practicing "new" models of working based on collaboration and teamwork. By analyzing the experiences of a variety of workers—beginning with my study of female engineers and expanding to include women in many different types of work settings—I have identified three "disappearing acts" that marginalize relational practice:

- the misunderstanding of motive;
- the limits of language; and
- the confusion of relational practice with traditional notions of femininity.

Misunderstanding the motive. The first disappearing act is to misinterpret *why* someone would be working this way. Although it is motivated by a desire to work more effectively, often relational practice is (mis)understood as a personal idiosyncrasy or trait. These traits sometimes have a negative connotation, such as naivete, powerlessness, weakness or emotional need. But they may also be more positive, as when relational practice is seen as an expression of thoughtfulness, personal style, or being "nice."

Take the team member who puts effort into keeping others informed of things that were decided in meetings they missed, or passes on information others need to know so they can understand the rationale behind actions, or takes time off-line to act as a go-between for mem-

bers who are having difficulty working together. She takes the time to do this because she believes that it is necessary for the success of the project. In other words, she believes the short-term investment of her time and effort will pay off in long-term business results. When other team members talk about her, however, they call her the "glue" of the team and comment about how "nice" and "thoughtful" she is. Notice what happened in this situation. First, the *strategic intention* of her behavior is lost. Its pragmatic, goal-directed purpose to keep the team on track is obscured. Instead, she is seen as acting on her natural tendency to be nice or to care about people or process. As a result, the *relational skills* she exercised such as anticipating what others will need, or understanding and responding to the emotional context of situations, or exercising her ability to empathize with each party in a dispute, go unacknowledged. Instead, behavior motivated by her belief that maintaining connection is a prerequisite to getting the job done is marginalized. It becomes tangential to work, rather than essential to it. Notice too, the impact that misattributing the intention of relational practice has on traditional assumptions about achievement, success, and effectiveness. They remain unchanged. When team accolades are handed out, it is the technical contributions that will get highlighted. With technical skills as the surest route to success, ambitious engineers have little motivation to develop relational as well as technical skills. The relational practitioner is seen as "nice" to have on a team, yet the beliefs about what is essential to achieve project success go unchanged.

Limits of language. The second disappearing act has to do with language. Listen to this engineer as she describes what she does in her job. "I know I am doing a good job when people think of me... as someone who is, one, competent and, two, someone who will help," she says. "Most people around here only care about the first thing—competence. They don't care if they are seen as approachable. I do." Notice how she defines doing a good job as having two separate components. One, the technical part of the job, she calls com-

petence. The second, she calls approachability and a willingness to help. In this way, she is—unwittingly—reinforcing the prevailing view that enabling others is *not* part of competence but is something separate, the “soft side” of doing a good job.

That’s just one example of the way people often undermine relational practice in the way they talk about it. It happens in other ways, too. Using collaborative language to build on others’ ideas is a savvy and effective way to build consensus, but it may be labeled as simply “being polite.” Maintaining relationships that are critical to accomplishing the task may be dismissed as just “being nice.” Language such as this tends to feminize the behavior and, because of longstanding gender norms in the workplace, weakens it.

Why is it difficult to use organizationally strong language when describing relational forms of work, such as creating the experience of team or enabling others? The answer lies in the prevailing “logic of effectiveness” described earlier. In workplace parlance, words used to denote effectiveness—such as skill, intelligence, achievement or outcome—have already been defined in ways that *exclude* relational activity as “real” work. So, like the engineer who struggles to articulate a new definition of competence, it is often difficult to find words to describe relational work powerfully.

Confusing relational practice with femininity. The third disappearing act—how relational practice gets confused with femininity—is where the gender dynamic really kicks in. When men do relational practice, the first two disappearing acts might disappear their work. They might be misinterpreted as weak and they might have trouble finding a language of competence to describe what they do. But for women, something additional happens. When they do relational practice, it often gets confused with a natural expression of their femininity. They are likely to be seen as “mothering” rather than leading, as selflessly giving (expecting nothing in return!) rather than modeling new leadership practices. Once re-

lational practice is feminized, it is often pathologized. For example, people say, “She takes things too personally,” or “She has an excessive need to be liked.”

But the catch is, if women do *not* do relational practice, the story is not much better. Because of gender expectations, people expect women to be relational, to focus on others, to be helpful, sensitive, caring, and good listeners. When women do not meet these gender expectations, they often pay a price, labeled with the “b” word or called a “man in a skirt.” It’s not surprising that many women resent this double bind: They are expected to act relationally and then are devalued or exploited for doing it.

It does not stop there. When gender expectations get conflated with relational practice, the logic of effectiveness that drives this way of working loses its power to challenge the status quo. The tenets of relational growth—beliefs about interdependence, reciprocity, and mutuality—are lost as general principles and instead become something only a subset of the workforce is expected to provide. The bottom line is: *The workplace benefits from this relational way of working but does not change its norms about valuable work, valuable workers, or promotable behavior.* Is it any wonder, then, that those who do relational practice often worry that their valuable contributions will mark them as naïve rather than competent? As exploitable rather than leadership material?

Practical Pushing: Getting Beyond Disappearing

The notion of disappearing acts strikes a familiar chord for many workers, especially women. But beyond the validation that comes from being able, at last, to give a name to personal experience, how can individuals and organizations reverse the cycle?

When I give presentations on relational practice, the people in the audience have many stories to tell about the dilemmas of working in non-relational environments. Many have become quite adept at challenging dominant norms in small but

persistent ways, without being disappeared, exploited, or dismissed. From them, I’ve learned four strategies for pushing back on the disappearing dynamic: naming, norming, negotiating, and networking.

Naming. Naming is the strategy of calling attention to relational practice as *work*, by recognizing it as a competency rather than a personal characteristic. It can take several forms. One simple approach is to substitute the word “effective” when someone else notes the “nice” or “sensitive” attributes of a relational practitioner. Another is to name the skills and intended outcomes of your own, or others’, relational practice and, in this way, focus organizational attention on invisible work.

Take the example of a team leader who was chastised by her mentor for using the pronoun “we” rather than “I” when making a presentation to top management. Using “we” sounded weak and overly general, she was told. She needed to “claim her space.” The team leader definitely did not want to disappear her own role. Yet she felt her primary contribution had been to create an environment that encouraged a genuine team effort. She wondered how she might have made the presentation differently. One approach would be to preface the presentation with an announcement that she was using the pronoun “we” intentionally to call attention to something unique: her recommendations were the result of a productive collaborative effort and she wanted to recognize her team’s ability to harness all the talent in the group. Naming her intention and tying it to organizational goals of collaboration rescues the practice from obscurity and brings it onto the organizational screen in a powerful way. She is not saying “we” to be nice or because she is uncomfortable calling attention to her accomplishments. Rather, she is saying “we” to signal her competence and the relational skills it took to practice the “new” leadership.

Norming. Norming strategies call attention to organizational norms of effectiveness, point out their potential costs or

unintended negative consequences, and offer relationally based alternatives. The team leader in the previous example uses this strategy as well. By acknowledging her credit-sharing as an intentional exception, she calls attention to the dysfunctional norm in that workplace of taking sole credit for group effort. In addition, she is publicly demonstrating an alternative model of competence: a team leader who fosters collective achievement and is unwilling to disappear the contribution of others.

Negotiating. A partner in an accounting firm described how she used this strategy. Women in her firm are often asked to take on ad hoc assignments that entail relational work, such as heading a selection committee or overseeing an employee-appreciation initiative. Because women often have the relational skills to do these jobs and because they recognize the value of doing them well, they often accept. Only later do they discover the negative consequences. While these jobs are described as developmental, they have little career capital. Others who take on more traditional developmental opportunities in line rather than staff positions are often viewed as adding more value to the bottom-line. Recognizing this, the partner felt she was in a bind when her boss asked her to head up a special task force in response to a class action sexual harassment suit. While she wanted to say yes to the request because she knew how important it was that it be done well, she feared that it might not be good for her career. On the other hand, saying no was also fraught with problems. One of the ways to demonstrate commitment in this firm was to “never say no.” She feared that if she should turn down this opportunity—especially when the firm was under threat—she might not be considered a team player.

Here is how she dealt with this dilemma. When responding to her boss, she decided to negotiate conditions that would allow her to say yes without being penalized. She enumerated the relational competencies necessary to do the job well and expressed pleasure in having those skills recognized. Then—since the most important measure of success used by the firm was rainmaking, or generating client revenue—she proposed a plan for calculating the costs and benefits of the initiative. She also suggested a formula, using her last year’s revenue base, that could be used to assess her contribution.

Thus she was able to use two push-back strategies: First, she named the required relational skills using a language of competency. Second, she challenged the disappearing of relational work by calculating its monetary value—the currency of effectiveness in this organization.

Networking. The fourth strategy is to form a growth-in-connection network to support and foster relational practice. As one woman noted, having such a network helps her to identify the systemic issues she is experiencing and devise practical ways of pushing back. Many women prefer that their network be outside their immediate work environment, since “women’s groups” are often stigmatized in the workplace.

Conclusion

Many books on organizational learning call attention to the difficulty of advocating change that runs counter to deeply held assumptions about success. But examining how relational practice gets disappeared helps us see that outmoded assumptions are not the only problem. It is the *gendered nature* of many of these assumptions that complicates the problem in invisible but powerful ways. The disappearing dynamic helps us see that there

are potent, gender-linked forces that silence and suppress relational challenges to organizational norms. They do so at a serious cost not only to women and men but, most importantly, to the organization’s ability to meet its goals.

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