

# Strengthening Work Relationships

*Creating common ground for successful relationships at work*

Successful relationships at work are the key to achieving great outcomes for your workplace and for your own career. But sometimes we face difficult situations where conflicts between staff can impact on the way we work and on the outcomes we achieve.

Getting to common ground requires effective negotiation and relationship skills, especially because when people disagree on one area, any other areas of agreement can slip from view. As disagreements become more heated, each person's position may become exaggerated as they engage in persuading others or challenging their points of view.

When these types of disputes happen in your workplace, it can help to reflect on a situation in your personal life where you were able to find common ground with someone else that you disagreed with. What did you learn from resolving that conflict and how can you apply that learning to settling a disagreement at work?

## What is 'common ground'? How can we identify it?

One way to take the heat out of a workplace disagreement is to acknowledge the disagreement and the challenge in the way of finding common ground. This is a helpful, less confronting way to pause a disagreement and provides an opportunity to 'reset' the discussion at a point where both sides can look for common goals that they are working towards.

Areas of common ground can include:

- The shared goals of your team or your workplace
- Adopting recognized industry best practice approaches
- Agreeing to work together effectively, share information and maintain respectful communication and approaches to resolving conflicts

## A proactive approach to building common ground & improved relationships

Here are some practical steps that you can take to build common ground among your workmates:

- Listening to and acknowledging other people's points of view is vital. You can also thank others for listening to you and for asking you to share your views
- Sharing your understanding of the areas of dispute, acknowledging that tensions exist and highlighting that you do want to reach common ground and minimize the nature and impact of the conflict
- Acknowledging progress in any discussions. Recognizing this progress helps to create a perception that real steps are being taken to resolve the conflict. When disagreements continue, refer back to, and celebrate progress made. This can assist in addressing other issues
- Identifying common goals to highlight that, while there may be disagreements on steps to be taken, everyone is working towards shared objectives

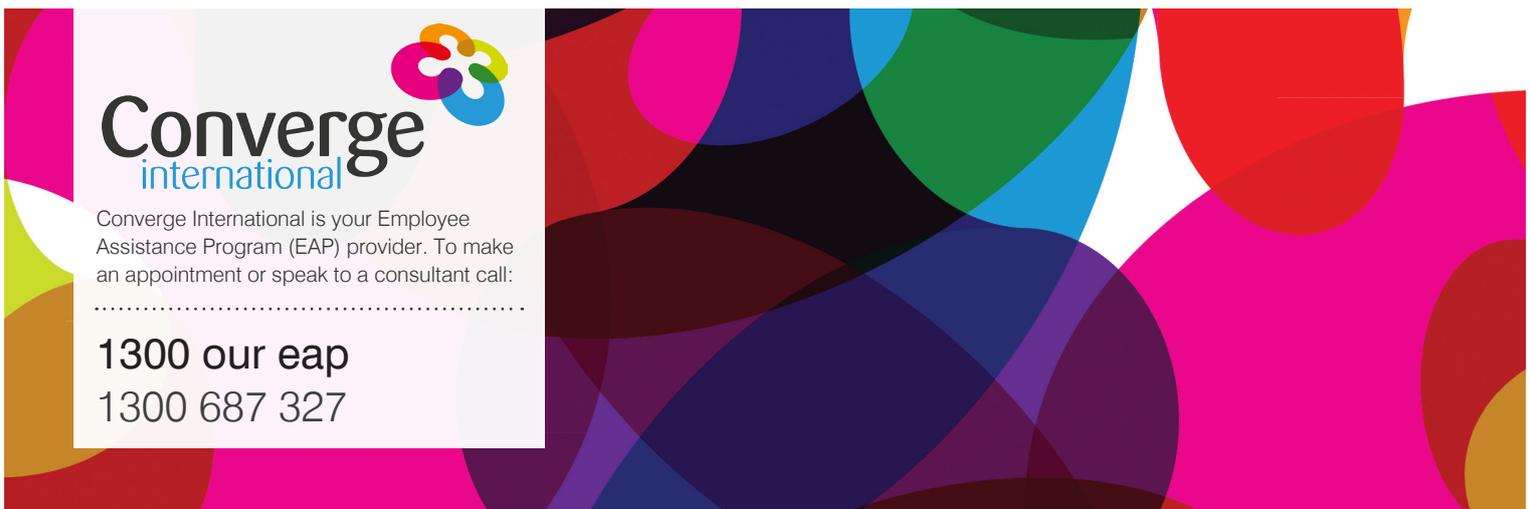
## What can we learn from working towards common ground?

When we place aside our desire to prove a point or to 'be right' or to judge a colleague, we can understand and accept a difficult situation and strengthen our workplace relationships. We can also collaborate to achieve stronger outcomes.

When you keep 'achieving common ground' as front of mind in your approach to a difficult situation, this can act as a helpful reference point to come back to if your negotiations reach a roadblock.

Working towards common ground isn't about 'glossing over' disagreements or leaving disputes unsettled. Disagreements may continue in other areas, and that's OK. The important outcome is that in looking for common ground you can re-focus discussions towards shared objectives, positive outcomes and eventually resolution of conflict and building stronger relationships.

1. Study by Neil Rackham (1999) referred to in 'The Negotiation Toolkit' by R Volkema (1999)



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# Strengthening Personal Relationships

## *Investment Tips for your Relationships*

**Over time all relationships face tests. We can grow apart from longtime friends or experience stresses in our relationship with a partner or with members of our family.**

We can be proactive and build capacity in our relationships to overcome these tests by building a positive “relationship bank balance”. This means that before times become difficult, we have put in the work to build into our relationships the trust and support we need to get through any rough patches. A relationship with a ‘rich’, positive bank balance is more likely to succeed.

When we have positive, strong personal relationships we are happier – but there are other beneficial outcomes too. Research has shown that:

- happy people are more likely to help strangers in need
- we are more likely to be loving towards people we are close with when we are happy

### **Love Lab research shows the way on strengthening our personal relationships**

Positivity in relationships has also been explored through the “Love Lab” research project launched in the mid 1980s by Dr John Gottman at the University of Washington. For this experiment, Dr Gottman installed cameras into an apartment where couples were sent to live for a day. Hundreds of couples were observed as part of the research and have since been followed up to track the progress in their relationships.

Gottman’s research findings provide detailed insights into how successful couples maintain a positive connection, handle conflict and discuss ongoing problems in their relationship. Key findings of his research show:

- couples who successfully sustain their romance have 20 times more positive interactions to negative interactions during peaceful times
- during times of conflict couples who successfully sustain their romance have five times more positive interactions to negative interactions.

These findings demonstrate the vital role that positive interactions play in strengthening our relationships.

A proactive, positive approach to investing in relationships

Gottman’s research found three proactive steps we can take to implement a ‘positive investment strategy’ for our important relationships:

- friendship and knowing one another: Taking an ongoing interest in each other helps your partner to feel interesting and “known”
- showing fondness and expressing admiration: Being proactive in speaking and acting to demonstrate care and respect for others
- turning toward, not turning away from one another: When one person makes an attempt to connect, even in simple ways, the other will respond in a way that ‘turns toward’

### **Relationship resilience is your return on investment**

Gottman’s research shows that strong, resilient relationships are built through positivity and this is true for all of our relationships at home, in our personal lives and at work.

However, it’s worth remembering that your relationships will be tested. The Love Lab research shows that negative feelings and behaviours are still part of our relationships. In a strong, resilient relationship you do not have to always agree with your loved one or seek their approval.

When a resilient relationship is tested, your positive emotional bank account means that people are more likely to give each other the benefit of the doubt. For example when hearing a negative statement, the situation is much less likely to escalate to conflict. Here is where their relationship investment really pays off – you’ve created a strong reserve of positive experiences so you can safely assume that your loved one isn’t out to hurt you. In these situations, your positive emotional account means there is a reserve of positivity that you can both draw on to overcome any test.

1. Kahneman, D. (2011) Thinking, Fast and Slow  
2. Gottman, J & Silver, N (2012), What Makes Love Last

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