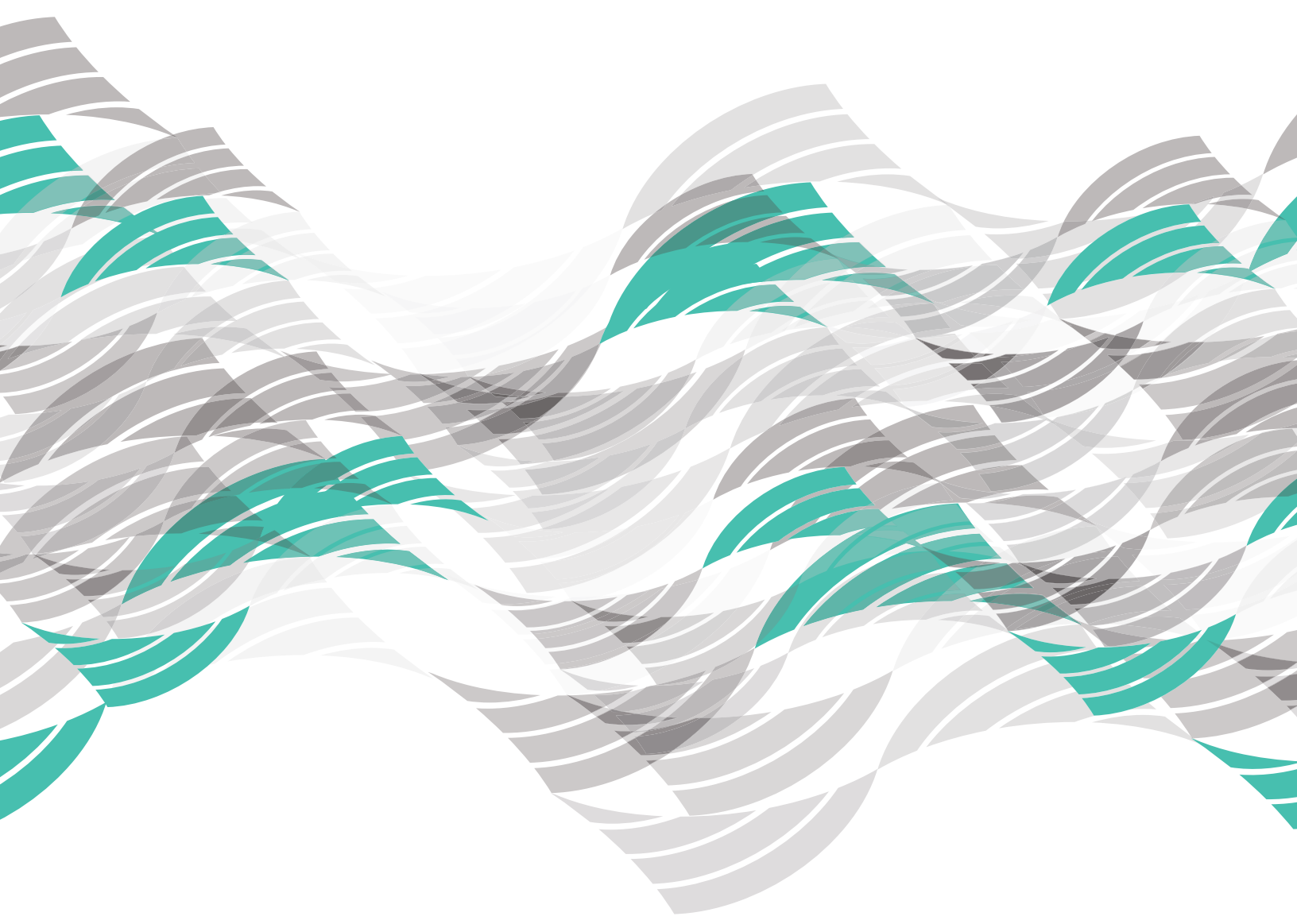# Through the Looking Glass
How Relationships Shape Managerial Careers

By: Regina Eckert, Marian Ruderman,
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Center for
Creative
Leadership®

Contents

Introduction

Every one of us is surrounded by, and dependent on, other human beings—at work, at home, in daily life. Some of these people we choose to be with, while for some others, we have to accept their presence. All of them together influence us and shape our lives, and our careers, in a multitude of ways. This white paper explores the many ways that relationships shape our careers, for better (as tools for access, support, and sense-making) or for worse (as obstacles). It is based on a five-country study by the Center for Creative Leadership of men and women managers in wider Europe.
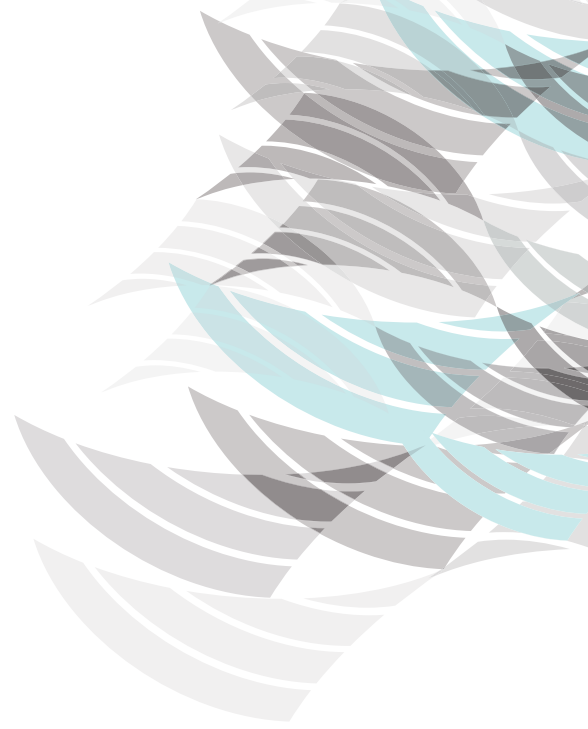
When Anne, a successful controlling manager, started to work for her new company in Madrid, she was eager to make a fresh start, work hard, show her competence, strive in her new job, but also maintain a better work-life balance than in her old job. At the same time, Leo joined the company as a senior account manager. He knew he was a great salesperson and wanted to prove himself with some key accounts in a new industry.

Three years later: Leo has shown steady performance on his accounts, retaining all but one of them and acquiring two new ones. Yet when asked whether he is happy, he shakes his head, saying he doesn't see much of a future in the organization. Even though he works hard and knows he has the skills to be an excellent account manager, people just don't seem willing to help him when he needs their cooperation. He is tired of constantly fighting internal battles in order to deliver excellent customer service. Anne, on the other hand, has also proven herself in her new job. Anne is happy—she got a promotion while pregnant, and she feels that even her maternity break hasn't damaged her career. She attributes her success to the people around her, who reach out and help her in many ways, both big and small. A colleague's mother-in-law has become her default babysitter. Anne is glad that her colleagues remain friendly and professional even if she encounters serious conflicts with some of them, mainly about internal audits.

Anne and Leo started off in nearly identical situations. What's different three years later is the kinds of relationships that Anne and Leo have developed. These relationships shaped their professional lives over the three years that Anne and Leo have been with the company, and have had a major impact on their career and job satisfaction.

In this white paper, we focus on the different ways in which relationships can help or hinder managers' careers. Based on our research with nearly 100 managers, we outline strategies detailing how to utilize relationships to increase one's career success and job satisfaction.

Even though the importance of relationships at work is intuitive, the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) undertook this research to gain a comprehensive insight on (1) how exactly relationships matter, (2) what types of relationships are most important, and (3) how the organizational and societal context might influence the role of relationships for managerial careers. This is crucial to understand as we coach and train managers from around the world. Through our interviews, we wanted to gain a better understanding behind these important questions: How do managers view and describe the variety of relationships that benefit their career? What kind of relationships help a manager's career, and what kind of relationships hinder their career?

To answer these two questions, we conducted interviews with managers from five countries throughout Europe (the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Spain, and Turkey). We chose these countries because we wanted a maximum diversity of cultural norms and values in our sample, while still maintaining a focus on wider Europe. All interviewees were experienced managers in large multinational firms, originated from the country in which they were interviewed, and spoke fluent English. Through face-to-face interviews that focused on career-relevant relationships, we found accounts, stories, and lessons from 576 relationships the managers had, all of which were relevant to their career. Here are our most important insights:

Our Sample at a Glance

OUR SAMPLE CONSISTED OF 98 MANAGERS IN EUROPE:

53 MEN and 45 WOMEN

16 from the Netherlands

21 from Norway

21 from Russia

20 from Spain

20 from Turkey

Average age: 40

Years with current organization: 9

75% married or partnered

70% have children

Nearly 100% have university degrees

Nearly 100% work for for-profit companies with more than 250 employees

Nearly 100% hold upper middle-management positions

**More than 50% managed employees in other countries**

1. Relationships Can Enhance *and* Impede a Career.

Relationships influence careers, in positive and in negative ways. We didn't directly ask participants to share either helpful relationships that facilitated their careers or harmful relationships that were obstacles, but we did ask them which people were most influential for their career, and why. Overall, our 98 participants reported 487 relationships that were helpful for their career and 89 relationships that were harmful. What this means is that, on average, these managers had a 5:1 ratio of helpful to harmful relationships. The helpful relationships facilitated careers in a multitude of ways, which we describe later in more detail. They can be categorized as access, support, and sense-making.

However, managers should also expect to come across some people who will be obstacles for their career, and learn how to cope with them or even turn these harmful relationships into helpful ones.

The harmful relationships that were obstacles were less diverse in nature. A typical obstacle at work was a bad relationship with one's boss. Bosses have the most direct career impact of all relationship partners, and not all of them act in a developmental way. Most interviewees then said that a change of boss, department, or organization is the fastest way to limit the boss's negative impact on their career development.

"After my first job I really changed function. My first manager didn't give me any opportunity. He knew that I could do many more things and he was just hindering me. There were people in the organization asking for me, which would have meant a promotion for me then, and he stopped it. He just stopped it. He wanted to keep me in the role that I was in. In fact, I had to solve a lot of difficult situations for him in the role that I had then, and I could do that. He didn't want to lose that." (Dutch man)
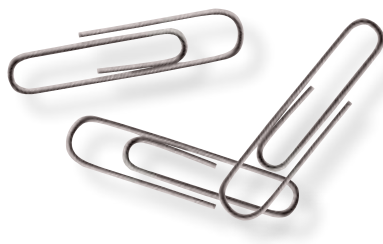
A similar case of a harmful relationship was when managers ended up "in the wrong camp" at some stage, due to their reporting relationships or through group dynamics. In times of organizational restructuring or crisis, office politics often change very suddenly, and people might find that they are not well-positioned to continue their career development in an organization because of the relationships they have with those who are labeled as scapegoats or culprits. This is linked to the saying "You can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs." In these cases, a reorientation of career often follows suit.

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"I left after the merger with another company. During the merger I had responsibility for the integration of the two companies. I got stuck with an executive board member who wanted to retire and find his time, and didn't want me to assign any additional function to his area. I was an angry young man." (Russian man)

Many participants told us that in some organizations, you could only develop career-enhancing relationships if you were male or a member of certain networks (old boy's club, a golfer, or belonging to a culturally dominant group). In other cases, stereotypes in the organization about certain groups (cultural groups, ethnic groups, or women) determined the types of relationships that people belonging to these groups were allowed or empowered to build. Women in particular told us that in some organizations, their relationships tended to be harmful to their careers, because they felt inauthentic or were nonprofessional.

"When I was younger, I was more attractive and that was a real challenge. Men have difficulties to understand that even if a person is attractive as a woman, she has something in her head. So, that's something that I think is running unconsciously through their heads—prettiness, on one hand, and being intelligent, on the other hand, that is a bit of a problem when you're younger." (Dutch woman)

Most frequently, though, relationships were seen as harmful when they involved private values, commitments, and responsibilities that conflicted with one's desire for building a career. In particular, these were relationships with family members, children, and parents alike. Managers had to make a trade-off between career advancement and caregiving responsibilities. Many of our interviewees made a conscious choice to limit their career development or slow it down for the sake of family and caregiving.

"There is possibility to go on an expat assignment and move to the U.S., to our headquarters, but I don't want to. I have a lot of friends here, my parents, my hobbies. I am captain of a cruiser yacht here and participate with my team in regattas. I cannot leave it here and move to the U.S. For me, that is much more important than my job." (Russian man)

Importantly, these kinds of career-limiting relationships were not seen as inherently negative by participants—they were overall very happy with their choice and emphasized that these relationships were more important to them than a career. This is an interesting tension point in that it highlights that even for successful, mid-level and senior managers, career development is only one of their core values, but often not the most important one.

2. Career-relevant Relationships are Not Bound to One's Workplace.

We set out to explore what kind of relationships are developmental for careers, and implicitly expected to hear many instances about relationships at the workplace—this is, after all, where careers happen. Common sense tells us the most important person for your career is your boss, so we expected—and found—many examples of bosses who helped managers' careers get started or accelerate. Surprisingly, though, many of the relationships that our managers told us about were with people outside of work—family, friends, and professional acquaintances. Even relationships with people of less or no professional experience were seen as helpful for one's

career—we didn't find any one type or kind of person with whom a relationship was only classified as harmful for one's career. The table below gives an overview of these findings:

The harmful relationships that were obstacles were less diverse in nature. A typical obstacle at work was a bad relationship with one's boss. Bosses have the most direct career impact of all relationship partners, and not all of them act in a developmental way. Most interviewees then said that a change of boss, department, or organization is the fastest way to limit the boss's negative impact on their career development.

	CAREER-FACILITATING RELATIONSHIP	CAREER-HARMING RELATIONSHIP	TOTAL
WORKPLACE: BOSSES AND PEOPLE HIGHER UP IN THE HIERARCHY	130 (89%)	16 (11%)	146 (100%)
WORKPLACE: PEERS AND OTHER COLLEAGUES	130 (83%)	27 (17%)	157 (100%)
FAMILY MEMBERS	129 (78%)	37 (22%)	166 (100%)
FRIENDS AND ACQUAINTANCES OUTSIDE OF WORK AND FAMILY	98 (92%)	9 (8%)	107 (100%)
TOTAL	487 (86%)	89 (15%)	576 (100%)

Interestingly, this shows that over 40% of all career-relevant relationships were with people outside of work, in particular family members. This included one's spouse, parents, children, grandparents, as well as more distant relatives. Moreover, career-relevant relationships at work were pretty equally split between one's peers and colleagues on the one hand, and one's bosses and superiors on the other hand. Thus, even though it is often endorsed for managers to be able to "manage upward" to develop their career, there are clearly many other people at work who are equally as important for career development and who are not in a hierarchically higher position.

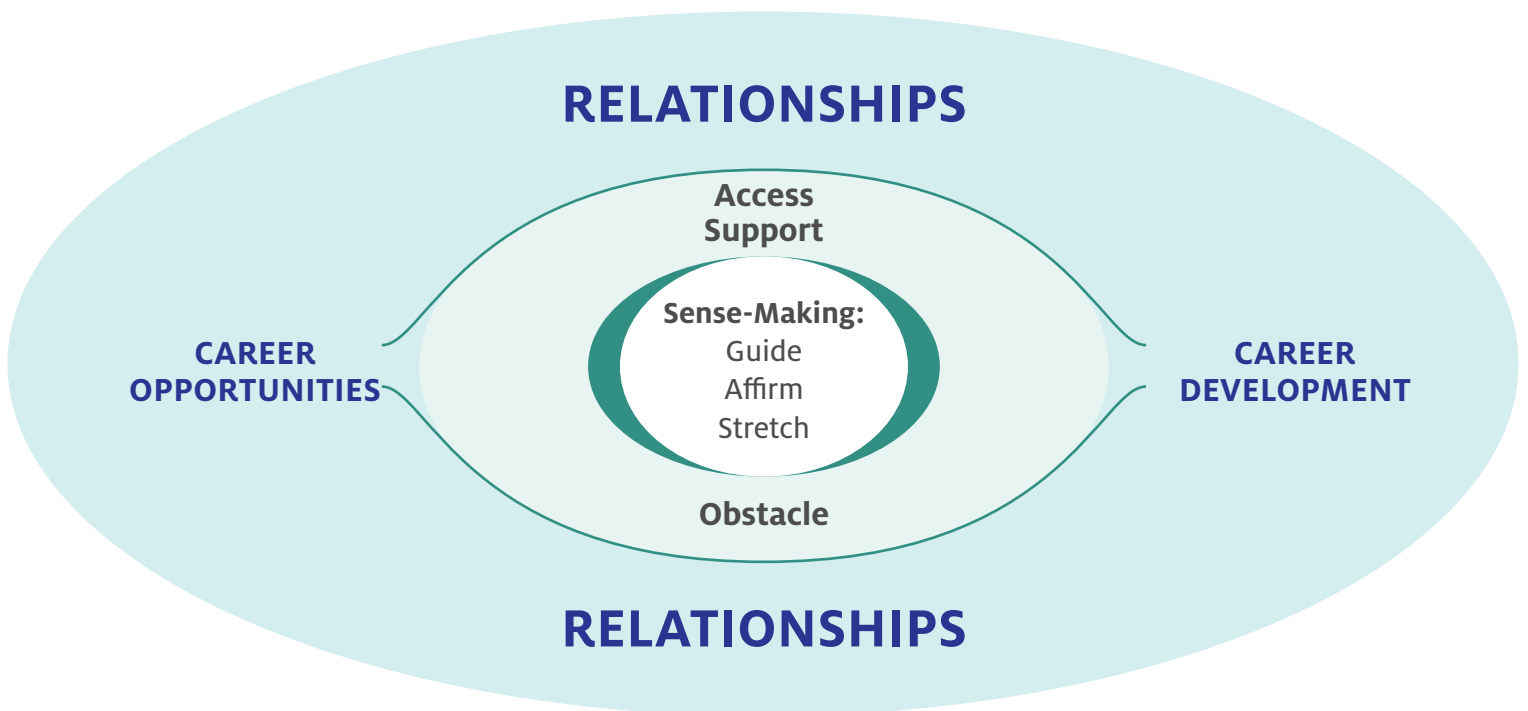# 3. Relationships Impact Managerial Career Development Directly and (mostly) Indirectly.

Looking at all the rich examples of career-relevant relationships that participants shared with us, we realized that relationships shape careers both directly and indirectly. The direct impact of relationships for career development can be in forms of giving access, providing support, or being an obstacle to career development. In particular, relationships with bosses tend to directly impact the careers of our interviewees. For some, bosses act as career stoppers; for others, bosses directly enhance managerial careers through hiring decisions, granting a promotion, or a development opportunity or training. The latter is depicted in the story of a female manager from Russia:

"After graduating, I worked almost two years for another company and then I moved to my current company. And you know who moved me to this organization? My previous boss. He had started working for this organization and after a year, invited me to join him, and we are now applying the same successful process for our current organization as we had applied in the other company. Even now, we're still working together and we keep a friendly relationship." (Russian woman)

For most other relationship types, however, the influence on managerial career development is more indirect. In these relationships, the influence is similar to that of the function of a lens for our eyesight: It enables us to see things more clearly and in more detail. The clear vision we get from our eye-lenses helps us make sense of what we are looking at and understand what it is that we see. Similarly, relationships can help us see more clearly that we need to focus on specific activities or behaviors and make sense of our own career development. In the following, we describe in more detail the specific functions that relationships have in this lens model. Note that any relationship is not limited to only one of these functions—indeed, they easily can go hand-in-hand and are complementary.

RELATIONSHIPS

Access
Support

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Sense-Making:
Guide
Affirm
Stretch

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Obstacle

RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships as an Access Tool

Relationships give access to career-relevant information and opportunities. This function can materialize in a lot of different ways. In a very direct manner, as described above, relationships give access to new job opportunities. But relationships can also provide access to resources that help managerial development, such as expert knowledge, politically useful information, and opportunities to influence senior stakeholders.

"There are several senior engineers in my company of very, very high technical value. I can learn from their expert knowledge and that helps a lot and is very fruitful for the technical aspects of my work." (Norwegian manager)

Relationships also open up new networks inside and outside the organization and highlight new job openings.

Relationships as a Support Tool

Relationships, whether at work or elsewhere, are a basic human need in that we are social beings. In these relationships, we get support from others who listen, accept, and care for us—and this kind of support is also beneficial for career development. Managers in our study were clear that the emotional support they got through relationships helped them through difficult times, but it also strengthened their resilience to pursue specific goals and their career development. Psychosocial support from others—often friends and family, but also colleagues at work or even bosses—is a powerful booster of self-confidence and motivation. Especially in times of crisis and high challenge, such support enables people to achieve results and overcome obstacles.

"We've been through a significant series of acquisitions over the past five years, and it has been a difficult part to integrate people and let go of many people that were excellent professionals. But still they need to be let go. [At] a certain point in the process, support from my management team, was vital. I don't think that I, by myself, could have made it through." (Spanish woman)

"A long time ago, I remember a conversation with my father when I was offered my first fixed job with the company, and I was a little bit afraid if I was going to be able to do it or not, and my father told me, he says, 'Don't you ever think that you cannot do things. Go ahead and do it,' he said. And those words I've brought along with me for the rest of my life. And that type of encouragement, and being a little bit brave, and although you're a little bit scared, but still have the self-confidence to do things. I think it's important." (Norwegian woman)

Relationships as a Sense-Making Tool

In the interaction with others through career-relevant relationships, sense-making is a very important aspect often overlooked. Sense-making refers to the process of assigning meaning to a phenomenon or development. Thus, in our case, relationships were helpful for managers to make meaning of their career and career development: Relationships would help them define what they want to achieve and why; confirm their understanding of how they develop, as well as how other people develop; encourage them to stretch themselves for their own development; and challenge their implicit beliefs about their potential and career goals. This form of sense-making is clearly different from psychosocial support or empathy. Such support might or might not be there in the relationship, but even if no support is present, the sense-making function of relationships in and of itself can be seen as helping managers in their careers.

We found three ways in which relationships help managerial sense-making:

Guide, Affirm, and Stretch.

Guide:

Relationships with others provide guiding examples. Such guiding examples could be role models or mentors. Parents or other more experienced or senior people may play this role, but also friends and others who simply share their experiences with a manager and thereby enable vicarious learning help guide managers as well. Of course, such guiding can also be very direct in the form of practical advice and tips. Guidance can also come in the form of what not to do—learning from other people's mistakes or the consequences to their own career decisions is a powerful source of guidance.

"There were some good role models that helped me a lot in learning the right way of doing things. But there were also role models who were, in my perception, very different and difficult for me to work with. At the time, those cases created a crisis for me, but looking back, they were one of the biggest learning experiences I had for managing and leading people." (Turkish manager)

"My sister, who holds a senior position in an international company, guided me. Three years ago I was offered the position of commercial director in a chain of specialty supermarkets, eight stores and expanding fast. My sister told me: 'Sure, you can leave now to that company. It's a good place for you. But in the future you always have to work in Russian companies. After you work as a Finance Director in Russian company, it will be almost impossible for you to move again to a foreign company.' So I stayed in this international company, because I want to have an international career." (Russian man)

Affirm:

Career-relevant relationships allow managers to check their sense-making of their career and their strengths and development needs with others in a trusted environment. Especially for middle managers, such sense-making help is important to calibrate their understanding of what's going on in their own career development, as well as in the career market inside and outside their organization. In a day and age when careers are not directed by organizational hierarchies, but are created proactively by managers themselves, confidence in one's chosen career path is a key requirement for successful careers. This confidence is achieved through social confirmation.

"I had quite some external coaches and advisors for periods of my career, and that was very helpful, because sometimes it doesn't feel right to talk about things with people within the organization. I came into top management with a different background from the rest of the people—15 years younger, different gender, and no commercial or sales background as I am a lawyer. It was good to have an outside perspective at that time." (Norwegian woman)

Stretch:

Relationships help managerial careers by providing ways a manager can learn from experience. Particularly if the relationship partner has a very different perspective or take on an issue, this is a huge opportunity for a manager to reframe one's own experience, understanding it to a deeper extent and within a broader context. Our participants described this as a stretch—being confronted with a totally different perspective often felt uncomfortable, but it enabled them to make better sense of their career or the task at hand and therefore was beneficial.

"My manager was one of the people who pointed out to me that I had a problem with one of my colleagues in the management team. And it was going on and I said, 'I just don't understand this guy, why is he acting that way? I just don't understand why he treats me this way.' He said, 'Well . . . have you ever considered that he might be frightened of you?' And I was like, 'Hmmm, No.' I had never, ever given that any thought. Having him confront me with how people see you and how you behave and how people react to that, that was really helpful for me." (Dutch woman)

"My wife always helps me. Sometimes we talk about recent trends in the business world or in the world at large. It may seem unnecessary to talk about the things that people in the UK are struggling with, but you may just discuss it from our angle and it can add to your future decisions and your future discussions." (Turkish man)

Relationships as a Developmental Challenge

We already mentioned that not all career-relevant relationships were necessarily helpful for careers—indeed, some relationships were harmful or obstacles that limited people's careers in ways that couldn't be helped. However, we found that some of the relationships that could be career-limiting or harmful were reinterpreted by managers as developmental challenges. Interestingly, this interpretation opens up the opportunity for personal and professional learning from overcoming "obstacle people." For example, one interviewee reported that he solved a relationship conflict with his boss, which could have turned into a serious obstacle:

> "My first month or so in this work, I was working with a boss whom I totally misread. I thought he didn't want me to be as active and taking so much initiative because it looked to me like he killed it all the time. And then suddenly he was disappointed that I hadn't performed. He was too stressed to be able to get his own priorities right. So he didn't use enough time for me to develop and then I stopped developing, and I thought that was what he wanted because he wanted to prioritize his own stuff first. But when the deadline came, he was angry for me for not pushing harder. As soon as I found out his problem, which took a month or so, then we solved that issue very easily. And I now was able to communicate, and he still is one good colleague of mine." (Norwegian man)

Another type of developmental challenge was relationships that instilled limiting beliefs in managers or made them lose their own confidence. These limiting beliefs could concern the manager ("Nobody in your family has done this before, so why should you be able to?"), the task ("This is impossible"), or the organization ("Don't hope that you can achieve that goal in this organization"). Overall, we don't discredit that, sometimes, managerial aspiration and motivation is rightly cautioned by experienced others—but our participants were very clear that some relationships led to them losing their belief in themselves and their capabilities to reach a desired goal. Picking themselves up from these situations and finding a way to regain their confidence and motivation was an important lesson learned from such relationships.

> "If they see and if they know how competent I am in that area, they will start believing in me. Of course, that is not always the case. And then sometimes I feel like 'Oh, I should have better done something else. Because I had no role models who succeeded at a certain task before me, so how could I?'" (Dutch man)

One manager told us he used bosses "that didn't work out for him" purposefully as a stretching tool to enrich his sense-making of his own career. Rather than letting their lack of support or encouragement limit himself, he reframed them as a challenge and tried to "prove them wrong," thereby mastering skills he would never have mastered without this challenge.

So How Can I Maximize the Developmental Impact of My Relationships?

We all need relationships with others, both within and outside of work. And certainly our relationships serve multiple functions. However, our growth and development as managers is impacted significantly by others, as this white paper has shown. To maximize the positive impact on your own development and the development of those in your organization, you should:

Work on your relationships to keep them healthy and stable.

Overall, it is hard to foresee whether and which relationships might become a career obstacle, or whether an obstacle-type of relationship bears career-relevant elements that are positive. Many relationships that become obstacles start out with a positive influence on a manager's career, but this positive influence has waned over time, external circumstances might have changed, or the quality of the relationship might have deteriorated.

Remind yourself that any relationship can be career-facilitating and limiting at the same time.

This also showed up in our research. For example, while family support for child care was often mentioned as an enabler for female managers to go back to work, it was also a limiting factor for international career moves. It is important to ensure you get the balance in your favor—that the facilitating nature of a relationship outweighs the limiting nature—or else you want to change the relationship or reconsider having it at all.

Make a realistic assessment whether your circumstances can change, which would influence the developmental value of a relationship.

In our interviews, many managers reported they could turn around a relationship and make it "work" for them—but they were also clear on the boundaries of their influence.

"I have a really great relation-ship with management these last years. In the beginning I felt that they had to get used to me. Then the feedback I got was okay. If I would have had to change that, I would have had a problem because then I would have had to go. Because you also have your own way of doing things and you have your drive and your character and you can adapt to certain things, but you cannot and should not change yourself as a person. And if you don't fit in that sur-rounding in that world, then you have to go. And that's very clear." (Dutch man)

"The relationships with people are tough sometimes because all people are emotional and sometimes you need to spend like a quarter or sometimes even 50 percent of your time like to create some good rela-tions with some person—to understand his emotional part or to understand this person or personality. Only when you're able to understand the person, then you're able to work with the person." (Russian woman)

So How Can HR Professionals Use This White Paper?

Organizations routinely create relationships to foster career development and mutual support of their employees. These relationships can take very different forms: They can be dyadic or networks; they can be official or unofficial. Many of them are initiated and maintained by the HR function. Talent managers discuss mechanisms as diverse as employee resource groups, networking events, team outings, mentoring programs, buddy systems, and enterprise social networks. Yet in order to know how these mechanisms can be used effectively, it is important to understand how and why they help people's careers—and how they might hamper careers, too. This white paper has shed light on these important questions and can help organizations foster relationships that are truly career-developing for all stakeholders. Here are some suggestions for HR professionals:

Especially in today's modern world, where technology enhances productivity and performance across multiple domains,

relationships are increasingly important for both the work of the organization and the career outcomes of the individuals.

However, a developmental relationship is of a different quality than just adding someone to your LinkedIn contacts. Create awareness within your organization that developmental relationships are a great asset, but one that needs to be cared for and maintained regularly. You can support people in the organization by offering workshops and tools for relationship management and maintenance.

Create opportunities for employees to establish meaningful relationships that are also career-relevant.

Simply having an employee resource group, a mentoring program, or a buddy system is already a step in the right direction—these networks often provide great access and support. The beneficial career impact of relationships can be increased even if such networks and systems offer opportunities for employees to affirm, guide, and stretch each other, e.g., by including peer-coaching sessions, routine career discussions, and feed-forward exercises.

Utilize relationships as a resource for career development in uncertain times and times of crisis.

Relationships are *free*—you don't need an HRD budget to utilize them for career development. As our insights have shown, relationships help people make sense of their career and navigate the career jungle, which is particularly important in times of constant change, complexity, and ambivalence. Relationships give us security, recognition, warmth, inspiration, appreciation, love, new perspectives, self-awareness, opportunities, and care. They replenish our resiliency and agility, and therefore allow us to flourish in challenging times.

Relationships are a tool of proactive career management and can complement planned career development.

In times when career mobility, agility, and learning orientation are key drivers for careers, organizational planning tools for managerial careers—such as career paths and unified talent ratings—are often seen as less useful as they are soon outdated or operate too slowly. De facto careers are less and less planned by organizations and more and more self-directed by managers themselves. Relationships as a tool for career development fit perfectly with this focus on proactive career management for leaders, as they are always available, easy to access, and need very little to no management or supervision from HRD. They are a development tool ideally suited to help managerial career development in the twenty-first century.

Snapshot Relationship Analyzer

Take a minute to analyze your existing relationships to spot if they're covering all development functions. Write down the names of your relationship partners who provide each function for you. Certainly you can write the same name down for multiple functions.

Provides access to career opportunities and information:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Provides emotional support:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Stretches & challenges my sense-making, adds perspective:

_____

_____

_____

_____

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Support

Sense-Making:
Guide
Affirm
Stretch

Obstacle

CAREER DEVELOPMENT
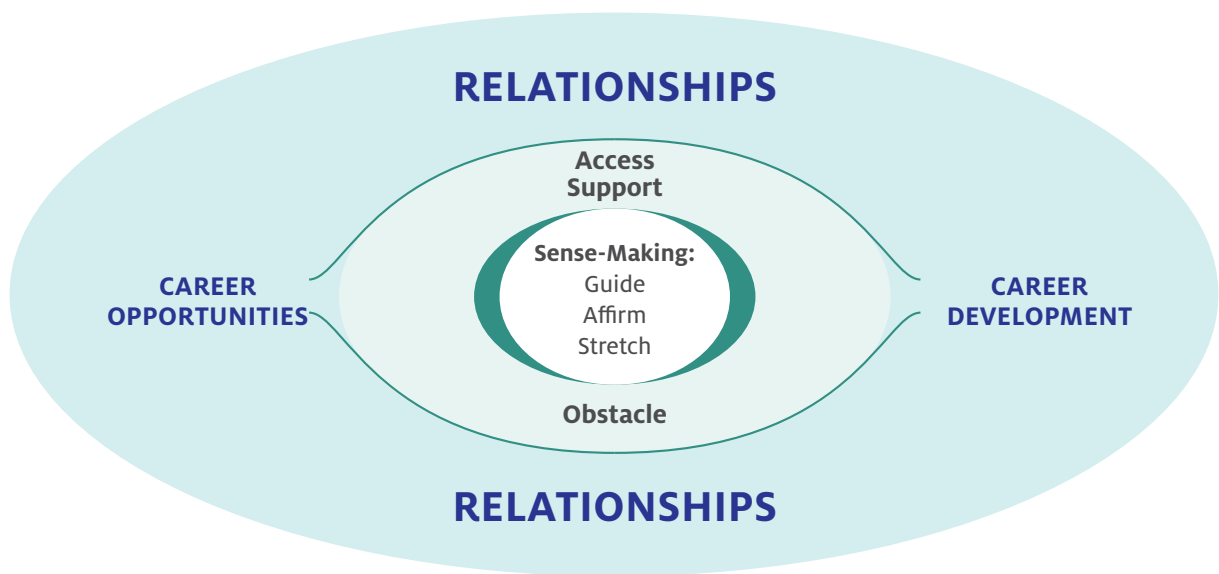
RELATIONSHIPS

Affirms my own sense-making:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Guides me, is a role model:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Provides a developmental challenge for me:

_____

_____

_____

_____

When you're done, analyze your relationships as you noted them down here:
Which relationships provide most development for you? Which could provide more?

Think about the balance in your relationships and how to change it. For example, do you get enough sense-making from others? If not, who could provide some sense-making for you, and how would you go about getting it?

About the Authors

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