

Michael Bungay Stanier

Bestselling author of *The Coaching Habit*

How to Work with (ALMOST) Anyone.

Building the best
possible relationship

Hi there

It's early October 2022, and I'm wading chin-high through the swamp of the third draft of this book. I'm lost, the mosquitos are vicious, and I'm hoping that I don't sink any deeper...

I had a pretty good second draft, or so I thought. I then put it out to some early readers for their feedback ...

It's a great gift to discover that what you thought was a solid draft isn't, and that you need a whole new structure to make the book work. And by "great gift" I mean excruciating ... and maybe also a great gift.

I'm rebuilding from the ground up, and it means I don't have as much of an excerpt to share with you as I'd hoped. I've selected four short sections. They don't quite follow on from one another, but I'm sure you'll figure it out.

Meantime, thanks for your encouragement and support. I know I'm going to be excited to share this with you next year.

You're awesome and you're doing great,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'MBS' in a stylized, cursive font, followed by a horizontal line that ends in a small upward tick.

Michael Bungay Stanier

The quality of your working relationships determines your success and your happiness.

Stop leaving it to chance.

Start building the best possible relationships.

A handwritten signature consisting of the letters 'MBS' in a stylized, cursive font. Below the letters is a single horizontal line that starts under the 'M' and ends under the 'S'.

Michael Bungay Stanier

(Which is a bit of a mouthful of a name, which is why most people call me MBS ... But not the Saudi Arabia MBS, who's another guy altogether.)

The Best Possible Relationship

**Love is a verb
~ Esther Perel**

Stop leaving it to chance

Your happiness and your success depend on your working relationships.

Yet the truth is most of us leave the fate of these to chance. We say “hi,” exchange pleasantries, hope for the best, and immediately get pulled into the work. No wonder. What needs to get done is present, obvious, urgent, demanding, and often enough, interesting. Meantime, you cross your fingers and silently hope that the other person’s a half-decent person to work with.

Soon, though (sometimes it takes weeks, sometimes it takes minutes), the first dents inevitably appear. A misunderstanding. An expectation not met. A low-grade irritation. A flare up. Disappointment.

The truth is that every relationship is destined to go off the rails at some point. When it does, most of us don’t know what to do about it. You blame them, or you blame yourself, or you blame the universe. You feel sad, let down, and/or frustrated. But you’re resigned to the fact that this is just what happens: it always gets a little broken, or a little stale, or somehow a little worse. That’s just the way it is. Carry on.

But it doesn’t have to be like this.

Every working relationship can be better

Imagine if you could:

Keep the brilliant relationships **humming** for as long as possible.

Contain the dysfunction of the messy ones so they’re less painful and more productive.

Shift the solidly-OK ones so that when they wobble, they more quickly get **back on track**.

For all of these, the solution is the same: **actively build the Best Possible Relationship (BPR)** with your key working relationships. When you commit to a BPR, you commit to deliberately designing and managing the way you work with people, rather than just accepting your fate. With a BPR you create relationships that are safer, more vital, and more repairable; and that will make them happier and more successful.

Not therapy, not Tinder

This is a short book that's full of practical value.

To set your expectations, I'm not a psychologist and this is not therapy. I do draw on the wisdom of professionals such as Esther Perel, Terry Real, and John Gottman, but I'm not trained in that discipline. Nor is the book a Tinder solution for you to just swipe left or right for a quick fix. It asks more of you than that.

Rather, it's a practice built around the idea of a **The Keystone Conversation** the practice that lies at the heart of a BPR. Sixty years ago, if you'd started talking about keystones, people would assume this was a conversation about architecture. The keystone sits at the top of the arch, bridging the two sides, locking them together in stable equilibrium, and allowing the arch to bear weight. Without a keystone, the arch collapses.

But in 1969, zoologist Robert Paine borrowed and tweaked the idea and introduced the concept of the keystone species, a species that disproportionately affects its environment relative to the species' abundance. The keystone species is the organizing force for a healthy ecology; without it, the ecosystem would be radically different or collapse altogether.

When grey wolves were reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park in 1995 after a seventy-year absence, a cascade of changes began that continue today and create a more resilient and diverse environment. More wolves meant less time for elk to forage, and so more robust and diverse vegetation, including willows. More willows meant more songbirds and more beavers. More beavers changed the shape of the river. The changed river meant an increase in fish. And so it went.

You can pick your preferred metaphor, a built environment or a natural one. But in either case, it's the keystone that allows the system to bear stress and stay healthy.

But what's success? (It's not what you'd expect)

The Keystone Conversation builds the infrastructure and ecosystem for a Best Possible Relationship by establishing three things.

First, it creates a **shared responsibility** for building a BPR. Caring for this relationship that's so central to success and happiness cannot be just one person's responsibility. Rather, the understanding now is how will we, together and individually, will work towards this shared objective.

Second, the Keystone Conversation gives **permission** to continue to talk about the relationship in the good times and the hard times ahead. It acknowledges that things won't always be great, and the relationship will need to be adjusted and repaired, reset, and revitalized. Once you talk about how you want the relationship to be for the first time, you can and will do it again. You start with "How do we want this to be?" and then you can ask "How are we doing?" The shared goal of a Best Possible Relationship becomes a permitted topic of conversation.

Finally, and most obviously, the Keystone Conversation gives you a **deeper understanding** of that person across the table from you. We often feel that others don't fully appreciate our complexity and nuances; and at the same time, we do exactly that to others. We assume things about the other person and create tidy stories about who they are, what animates them, what they can give, and what they're hungry for. This conversation will bring you closer to the truth about the other person.

With whom would you like a Best Possible Relationship?

It's not 100% necessary to have a person in mind as you work through the book, but if you do, you'll be better able to connect my suggestions with your reality. Here's some guidance on how to identify someone with whom a Best Possible Relationship might be just what you'd like.

Types of relationship

A direct report

Your boss

A key colleague

A senior player

Someone with influence

Someone with resource

A gatekeeper

A vendor

A prospect

A client

Tenure

Brand new

Early days

In the middle of the journey

Coming to its end

Currently health

Untested

A thing of beauty

Frustrating and broken

Perfectly adequate

Going stale

Why does it matter?

I want to set us up for success

How we're currently working together is source of unhappiness

I want to keep a good thing going

It feels like we've accepted mediocrity

How we're currently working together is a source of anger and frustration

I want to lessen future disappointments

I want to be braver/clearer/more transparent in how I show up in working relationships

If we don't course correct now, it might be too late

So...who's your person?

It's relationships all the way down

Rooted

It's a pet peeve of mine that the ways and means to work with other people is lumped under the label of "soft skills." We've got "hard skills" for logic, coding, strategy, and whatever; the rest of that mushy stuff we'll dismiss as "soft skills."

It's a tad insulting, and it's increasingly at odds with how actual scientists see the world. For a while now science has been pointing us away from units as the primary organizing factor of life. The interesting work isn't about things, about atoms. It's about the relationship between things.

Quantum mechanics, which the physics Professor Carlo Rovelli has called "perhaps the most successful scientific idea ever. So far, it has never been proved wrong" has started to frame properties of things in terms of how they are relative to other things. Rovelli puts it plainly when he writes that a good scientific theory should be "not about how things 'are', or what they 'do': it should be about how they affect one another."

Quantum mechanics feels obscure to most of us, but it's not just in that realm that the focus on relationships is increasing. At a more human scale, authors like Peter Wohlleben (*The Hidden Life of Trees*) and Suzanne Simard (*Finding the Mother Tree*) describe how no tree is separate from the forest that surrounds it. Through the "wood wide web" of mycorrhizal fungi, trees talk to each other across distances, give and take resources from one another, and build agency about the future.

What's true for atoms and for trees is true for us. We are our relationships.

Not every working relationship is going to be fantastic. But nearly every one of your working relationships could be a little better than it currently is. A commitment to build the Best Possible Relationship with each one of your key people is a commitment to increased success and happiness.