

“Actionable, tactical strategies. And the wisdom is real—it sticks.”

BRENÉ BROWN

Michael Bungay Stanier

Bestselling author of *The Coaching Habit*

How to Work with (ALMOST) Anyone.

Five Questions for Building the
Best Possible Relationships

The quality of your working
relationships determines your success
and your happiness.
Stop leaving it to chance.
Start building the best
possible relationships.



Michael Bungay Stanier
(It's a bit of a mouthful of a name, which
is why many people call me **MBS.**)

*This book is
the start of a movement
to improve 10 million
working relationships*

#BestPossibleRelationship
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Love is a verb.

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The Best Possible Relationship

Working relationships that are
safe, vital, and repairable

Stop Leaving It to Chance

Your happiness and your success depend on your working relationships. The people you manage. How well you work with your boss. The way collaboration happens with colleagues and peers. How you connect with important prospects and key clients.

But the hard truth is this: most of us leave the health and fate of these relationships to chance. We say “Hi,” exchange pleasantries, hope for the best, and immediately get into the work.

No wonder. What needs doing is urgent, demanding, and right there. So, you roll up your sleeves and jump in, all the while crossing your fingers and offering up

a prayer to the gods that the other person is as good as they seem . . . well, is half-decent . . . actually, you just hope they don't turn out to be a nightmare. (Most of us have been disappointed enough times to have significantly lowered expectations.)

Soon (sometimes it takes weeks, sometimes minutes), the first cracks appear. A misunderstanding. An expectation not met. A low-grade irritation. A random act of weirdness. Different ways of seeing the world or getting things done. A flare-up under stress.

In short, disappointment.

Every relationship becomes suboptimal at some point, whether it's a good one that goes off the rails or one that was poor from the start. When suboptimal happens, most of us don't know what to do about it. We blame them, or ourselves, or the universe (or maybe all three). We get all the feelings: sad, let down, irritated, frustrated. But mostly we are resigned to the fact that this is what happens: relationships always get a little broken, or a little stale, or a little worse.

C'est la vie, c'est la guerre. 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.
- Reset the solidly OK ones so that when they wobble, they more quickly get back on track.

For all of these, an essential part of the solution is the same: actively build the Best Possible Relationship (BPR). When you commit to a BPR, you commit to intentionally designing and managing the way you work with people, rather than just accepting what happens. With a BPR you create relationships that are safe, vital, and repairable. That's the foundation for happier, more successful working partnerships.

The BPR: Safe. Vital. Repairable.

Vitruvian Man is one of Leonardo da Vinci's iconic drawings: a naked man faces us, arms and legs in two different positions, within both a circle and a square. It's

Create relationships that are safe, vital, and repairable.

meant to show ideal human proportions and is named for the Roman architect Vitruvius, who proposed that the three essential attributes of a building were *firmitas* (strength), *utilitas* (utility), and *venustas* (beauty).

We're not erecting a temple to Diana here, but we do need our own principles to understand the foundation of a Best Possible Relationship. "Strength, utility, and beauty" are pretty good options, but we can do better.

Safe is about removing fear. Harvard Business School's Amy Edmondson, a champion for the idea of psychological safety, codified it as this:

A belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.

A robust body of research confirms that psychological safety creates individual and team success by unlocking the benefits of diversity, increasing agility with change, and expanding the capacity to innovate.

Not only do the risks of *speaking up* make people feel "less than" at work. Too many fear even *showing up*. A study from Deloitte in 2013 talked about "covering," a sociological term for the way people with stigmatized identities downplayed that identity, hiding it as much

as possible. The study found that almost two-thirds of employees play down parts of their identity. The Google research initiative on management, Project Oxygen, recently added the ability to “create an inclusive team environment, showing concern for success and well-being” as a necessary characteristic of a great manager.

Vital is about amplifying the good. I’ve chosen the word for its dual meanings: both essential *and* enlivening. Vital acknowledges “safe” as table stakes, and then asks: What’s the game, and what are we playing for? It encapsulates the Dan Pink trinity from *Drive*: people’s motivation comes from a sense of purpose, autonomy, and mastery. Vital means constructing a working relationship with the right combination of support and challenge, one where you each have the best chance to do work that matters, take responsibility for and make your own choices, and learn and grow.

Repairable speaks to the reality that all relationships have some degree of fragility and will have moments of being both cracked (damaged from within) and dented (damaged from without). “Safe” and “vital” are all well and good, but if they crumble at the slightest injury, then the relationship lacks resilience. “Best possible

relationship” doesn’t mean there are never difficult moments, but rather there’s commitment and capacity to fix the damage and carry on. This stops harm from escalating and ossifying and allows a relationship to reset and, often, to continue more strongly than before.

The impacts of safe, vital, and repairable relationships are felt at the individual and organizational levels. Better work being done. Better retention of essential people. Better mental health. More flourishing and engagement. And fewer required HR interventions, from arbitrating through to firing.

The Keystone Conversation

At the heart of creating a Best Possible Relationship lies the **Keystone Conversation**. In architecture, a 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. As the keystone settles over time, the arch becomes more stable. Without a keystone, the arch collapses.

People join
an organization but
leave a manager.
You don't want to *be*
that manager.
You don't want to
have that manager.

In 1969, zoologist Robert Paine adapted the idea. Now, in biology the keystone species is one that disproportionately affects its environment relative to the species' abundance. It 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. More wolves meant less time for elk to forage, and so more robust and diverse vegetation proliferated, 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 goes, more resilient and more diverse, evolving and flourishing.

You can pick your preferred metaphor, architecture or ecology. In either case, the keystone allows the system to bear stress, stay healthy, and grow stronger over time. We're striving for the same outcomes with the Keystone Conversation.

Here's how you use the Keystone Conversation to start building a Best Possible Relationship. First, **prepare** by asking yourself the **five essential questions**:

The Amplify Question: What's your best?

The Steady Question: What are your practices and preferences?

The Good Date Question: What can you learn from successful past relationships?

The Bad Date Question: What can you learn from frustrating past relationships?

The Repair Question: How will you fix it when things go wrong?

The questions are straightforward and powerful. They're easy enough to answer quickly... and they take some work to answer well. Their magic is that they create a conversation that is atypical in most working relationships. In the pages that follow, there are prompts and space for you to answer each of the five questions. You'll be surprised by what you discover about yourself.

Then, you need to **have the conversation**. It will feel awkward at first, but there are ways of doing it

with more ease and less stress, both for you and for the other person. I'll share strategies about how you invite someone to have this conversation, then how you make it less tricky and weird at the start, more useful in the middle, and what it takes to end strongly.

Finally, you need to keep your BPR alive and thriving by applying regular **maintenance**, so that it stays safe, vital, and repairable. Like almost anything we create, the relationship needs to be cared for.

There's a bonus section, Know Your Stuff. "Know thyself," said the ancients, and that's a helpful directive for the Keystone Conversation and any BPR. This section includes exercises to help you be more articulate and insightful about who you are, both the shadow and the light.

But What's Success? (It's Not What You'd Expect)

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

First, it generates a **shared responsibility**. Creating a BPR is an unexpected and often countercultural act in many organizations. Caring for this relationship that's

so central to success and happiness is both people's responsibility. How will *we*, together and individually, work towards this shared objective?

Second, the Keystone Conversation creates **permission** to continue to talk about the relationship in the good times and (crucially) 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've started asking each other, "How do we want this to be?" you can then ask, "How are we doing?" The shared goal of a Best Possible Relationship becomes a permitted (and, ideally, normalized) topic of conversation.

Finally, and most obviously, the Keystone Conversation gives you a **deeper understanding** of the person across the table from you. You might have felt at times that others don't fully appreciate all that you are, your complexity and nuances. The person across the table feels *exactly* the same. Creating incomplete and inaccurate stories about who the other person is, what animates them, and what they can give is so easy. This conversation brings you closer to the truth of the story and of the humanity of the other person.

Not Therapy, Not Tinder. But Maybe . . . Radical

This is a short book that's full of practical value. It's not a deep psychological dive (although it draws on that wisdom), nor does it offer easy "swipe right" hacks. Rather, it's in the sweet spot to help you improve your important working relationships using practical, everyday tools.

It will be helpful if you work with other human beings, no matter if you're at the start of your career or well established in it, whether you're a manager or an individual contributor. It works for relationships within your organization and with stakeholders beyond it. You can use the tools no matter if you're trying to start things off on the right foot or looking to improve a working relationship that's already underway.

But know this: in its application, this work is also radical.

When I showed an early version of this book to a friend of mine, a senior exec at a well-known Silicon Valley company, she suggested I acknowledge how much bravery and energy it takes to invest in a BPR. This is, she said, not a normal way of working in most organizations. She's right. And if you've been reading this

so far with a hint of skepticism about whether this is possible, you're not alone. It's a common first reaction.

When you take on building Best Possible Relationships and having Keystone Conversations, you'll meet resistance, not least your own. You will likely be disrupting current expectations of how hierarchy, power, and leadership can work. It will be unusual, awkward, and unexpected—and that's if you do it with people you manage. If you do this with other relationships beyond your direct reports, it's even less expected. It *does* get easier, but like any new skill it will be hard at first. You'll be creating a new way of working with people.

The author William Gibson said that “the future is already here—it's just not very evenly distributed.” When you adopt these methods, you're choosing to be the future. It's all well and good to talk about creating psychological safety and a workplace in which people flourish. This is one of the ways you do it.

Hard-Won Wisdom

In my thirty or so years of starting, being thrown into, growing, breaking, nurturing, ignoring, repairing, betraying, celebrating, and ending working

relationships, I've been loved, and I've been thoroughly disliked. Some people have brought out the best in me, while some have managed (temporarily, thank goodness) to crush my spirit, soul, resolve, and confidence. I've also done those things to others.

These successes and failures of mine are hard-won wisdom, and I've put what I've learned and what works in this book. If you'd like to build the Best Possible Relationships with your key people, read on.



Who's Your BPR Person?

It's helpful to have a person in mind as you work through the book. Do so, and you'll be better able to imagine how the Keystone Conversation will work in your life. On the next page I've included a “build your own” menu of sorts, so you can identify some of the characteristics that might nudge you towards one person or another who'd be useful as someone with whom you might like to build a BPR.

Identify Your BPR Person

RELATIONSHIP

- | | |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> A direct report | <input type="checkbox"/> Someone with resources |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Your boss | <input type="checkbox"/> A gatekeeper |
| <input type="checkbox"/> A peer | <input type="checkbox"/> A vendor |
| <input type="checkbox"/> A key colleague | <input type="checkbox"/> A prospect |
| <input type="checkbox"/> A senior player | <input type="checkbox"/> A client |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Someone with influence | |

RELATIONSHIP STAGE

RELATIONSHIP HEALTH

- | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Onboarding | <input type="checkbox"/> Untested |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Brand new | <input type="checkbox"/> A thing of beauty |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Early days | <input type="checkbox"/> Frustrating and broken |
| <input type="checkbox"/> In the middle of the journey | <input type="checkbox"/> Perfectly adequate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Coming to its end | <input type="checkbox"/> Going stale |

WHY DOES IT MATTER TO YOU?

- I'm committed to having my people flourish
- I want to set us up for success
- How we're currently working together is a source of unhappiness
- I want to keep a good thing going
- I feel like we've accepted mediocrity
- I want a relationship of trust and accountability
- 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?



Download a template to help you identify your BPR person (and get other resources) at BestPossibleRelationship.com, or follow the QR code.



PHOTO: SAMUEL ENGELKING

About Michael Bungay Stanier

Hi, I'm Michael, sometimes called MBS. This is my eighth book. If you know any of my others, most likely it's *The Coaching Habit*, which has sold more than a million copies and is the best-selling book on coaching this century. The one before this one was *How to Begin* (how to set a Worthy Goal as a way of unlocking

your own greatness), and back in 2011 I created and edited *End Malaria*, a book I did in partnership with Seth Godin that raised more than \$400k for Malaria No More.

I founded Box of Crayons, a learning and development company that's trained lots of people around the world to be more coach-like (BoxOfCrayons.com). Currently much of my attention is given to MBS.works, where we provide people with the resources and community to be better and be a force for change.

Still reading? OK. Other highlights include being happily married for nigh on thirty years, captaining my under-thirteen soccer team, presenting a [TEDx Talk](#) that's been seen by about 1.5 million people, being on Brené Brown's podcast, knowing how to make a fair number of great cocktails, being a Rhodes Scholar, being sued by a law professor for defamation, surviving more than twenty Toronto winters, performing in a "nude male modelling" skit in the law revue, playing small roles in inventing stuffed crust pizza and a whisky nominated as "the worst single malt ever invented," and liking my parents, two brothers, and their families.

The best place to get additional resources and information is MBS.works. I'm also on assorted socials: LinkedIn, and @mbs_works for Instagram and Twitter).

Also by Michael Bungay Stanier

How to Begin · 2022

Find your next big thing, something
thrilling, important, and daunting

The Advice Trap · 2020

Tame your Advice Monster so you
can be more coach-like

The Coaching Habit · 2016

The million+ seller that unweirds coaching,
so people can stay curious a little longer