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MBS (00:00)

Hey, it's Michael here, and my new book is on the near, near horizon. It's called *How to Work with (Almost) Anyone*. And if you interact with other human beings in your life, this might be a helpful book for you. It goes live on June 27 and I've got some terrific pre order bonuses. You'll find those at bestpossiblerelationship.com. I do hope you'll check those out. The audiobook is ready to go as well. I've actually recorded it myself. I did it sitting in this office where I'm recording this voiceover now. And so that it's not just a monologue from me, I've invited some of my friends to share a short story of what they've learned from their best or their worst working relationships.

(00:48)

So in this episode, you'll hear the opening chapter of the book, and then you'll hear a great story from Pamay Bassey, who also happens to be the Chief



Learning Officer at Kraft Heinz.

(01:00)

Introduction: The Best Possible Relationship - Working relationships that are safe, vital, and repairable. Esther Perel says “Love is a verb.” *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.

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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. And no wonder. What needs doing is urgent, demanding, and right there. So, you roll up your sleeves and you 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, it's half-decent. Actually, you just hope they don't turn out to be a nightmare. Many of us have been disappointed enough times to have significantly lowered expectations

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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.



(02:58)

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*. And apologies for my French accent there. *C'est la vie, c'est la guerre*. Carry on. But it doesn't have to be like this.

(03:32)

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 building the Best Possible Relationship. Or as I will sometimes say, the 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.

MBS (04:30)

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 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). Now, we're not erecting a temple to the goddess 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.



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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.

(06:47)

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 his book, *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.

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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 that 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.

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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 more engagement. And fewer required HR interventions from arbitrating through to firing. Or to put it another way, people join an organization but leave a manager. You don't want to be that manager. You don't want to have that manager.

(08:41)

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. And without the keystone, the arch collapses.

(09:06)

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 gray wolves were reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park in 1995 after a seventy-year 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.

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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.

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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?

And 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 chapters that follow, I'll be giving you prompts and space for you to answer each of the five questions. When you do, you'll be surprised by what you discover about yourself.

(11:30)

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 the conversation, 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.

(12:30)

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 your 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.

(14:16)

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 does draw 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.

(14:42)

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. And she's right. And if you've been listening to this so far with just a hint of skepticism about whether this is possible, you're not alone. It's a common first reaction.

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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 and 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 it 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.

(16:29)

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 others have managed (temporarily, thank goodness) to crush my spirit, my soul, my resolve and my 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, keep listening.

(17:35)

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. I'm about to include 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.

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First, what type of relationship is this? A direct report? Your boss? A peer? A key colleague? A senior player? Someone with influence? Someone with resources? A gatekeeper? A vendor? A prospect? A client?



Second, what stage is the relationship at? Onboarding? Brand new? Early days? In the middle of the journey? Coming to its end?

Finally, what is the health of the relationship? Untested? A thing of beauty? Frustrating and broken? Perfectly adequate. Going stale?

Finally, why does this relationship 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.

(19:27)

Now, I know that's a bit overwhelming to hear all those checklists. You can download a template to help you identify your BPR person and get other resources as well at bestpossiblerelationship.com. So as you think about that checklist and you think about building a BPR, who's your person?

Pamay (19:51)

My name is Pamay Bassey. I am the Chief Learning and Diversity Officer at the Kraft Heinz Company. My best working relationship, frankly, is one of the ones that I have right now with my boss, who's a global Chief People Officer here at Kraft Heinz. What she has done that is so powerful is that clearly, I respect that she's my boss. I respect that she's senior to me, but she calls me "Partner." She respects and solicits my advice. The things that she knows, I have expertise in. She knows my strengths, and she celebrates them.



(20:25)

She gives me support so that I'm able to do the things that I know I can do that are unique to me. And I have never, ever felt any friction from her. And I'll tell you what that means. I have, in the past, had colleagues and or those senior to me where I felt like, "Okay, just a little bit of competition," which I never understand because I respect hierarchy. I know organizations are flattening things out, and it's not about hierarchies per se, but I think that one thing that someone senior or a manager or a boss can do that's so empowering is to say, "I see you. I see what you're good at. I see what excites you. I support you to go out there and innovate, to be a pioneer."

(21:08)

And that is one of the things that I really appreciate about my boss now, and we've become friends. But again, it's all within the sphere of respect. And so the impact that all of this has had on me is it made me feel like I was valued like I'm being heard, that I'm contributing. And it allows me to act in the most powerful way to bring my skills to the table and to the benefit of my team, to amplify the work my boss is doing and to contribute to the organization. And what I learned was you should just make sure you know your team members and do the best you can to get out of their way. I have to say that I am still learning how to do that every day, but it is something that I think is really, really unique and lovely about the organization that I am in currently and the relationship I have with my boss.

MBS (22:03)

I'm so delighted you've had a taste of *How to Work with (Almost) Anyone*. For more information and bonus resources, go to bestpossiblerelationship.com. If you've got a chance to pick up the book and read it, a review on Amazon or an online source would be fantastic. Thank you for your support of the podcast and



of the books. You're awesome and you're doing great.