



Managing Relational Space in a Diverse Workplace

BY JOHN HISKI RIDGE

Business journals and online forums are filled with leadership advice nowadays, and much of it is good advice. We are living in an era rich in leadership studies.

On the other hand, much of the literature is simply “pop culture” advice, filled with one-sentence aphorisms and truncated precepts that ring well on social media but do not apply in functional workplaces. Moreover, much of the advice is presented as if a single theory is relevant to all workplaces, which is not true. There are many different types of workplaces, with many different types of employees having many different types of working styles, and no single leadership theory can apply to all of them.

But there is one thing that permeates all workplaces: employee relationships. Leaders

need to know how to manage these relationships for both the good of their companies and the success of their employees. This article discusses a new theory about managing relational space in our workplaces. This theory applies to many workplaces, but particularly to workplaces striving for full and complete diversity.

A Thought Experiment

Let’s borrow from high school physics for a minute and think about our workplaces in terms of space.

A basic law of physics states that two objects cannot occupy the same location at the same time.¹ A consequence of this law is that, in any given volume of space, there is a limited amount of matter that can occupy that volume. If one piece of matter expands in that limited space,

then another has to recede to provide room. And if one shrinks or disappears, then another has room to increase its size.

This is analogous to our workplaces. On any given team, there is a limited amount of space that can be occupied. When one employee takes up space, that is space another cannot occupy. As a result, when one employee grows, another must shrink. And when one employee shrinks, there is room for others to grow.

The Space Employees Occupy

Most teams have some employees who occupy a disproportionate amount of available space. There are many valid reasons for this. Some employees take up space by virtue of being in a leadership role. Others do so because they have extensive experience and the willingness to equally and equitably share their expertise. And some take up space because they are especially creative or intelligent.

On the other hand, some employees take up more space than they actually need, perhaps because they have dominating characteristics or the need to feed egos driven by the exercise of authority. We even see this spatial grab in junior employees who think that capturing space is a successful tactic in climbing the corporate ladder. These employees grow their space by speaking loudly, controlling discussions,

asserting their views, exercising their wills, and speaking poorly of other team members. In doing so, they decrease the space that others occupy, sometimes significantly so.

In contrast, there are those employees who take up very little space on a team. Some may not have a leadership role and therefore do not require a lot of space. Some may be experiencing family crises or health struggles and therefore seek less space in their workplaces for a period of time. Others may not need a lot of space to be successful at their jobs, or they may have personalities that do not want large amounts of space. We all work with employees who simply go about their tasks without self-promotion, and without seeking fanfare and accolades.

But there are also those who take up less space as a way of escaping responsibilities. Because out-of-sight and out-of-mind is often their operating principle, these employees may need encouragement to get involved.

Evolving Leadership Theory

A leader's role is to manage the limited space given to a team by managing the space occupied by any given employee, both for the good of the employees and the good of the team. But this is an evolution in leadership theory.

Under the conventional leadership theory (some would say the bad old practices), only those who occupy large amounts of space are considered successful. In other words, only extroverted, loud-talking, dominating personalities are promoted, make partner, or become CEOs. This practice has engendered a generation of overbearing business leaders, lawyers, doctors, and union workers who dominate, bully, and step on each other on their way to the top. Even worse, this behavior is often rewarded, especially with short-term success, which explains why this leadership model continues to be applied. We need only look around our companies, firms, and practices to see this theory in action.

The problem with this approach is that it takes many different kinds of people, with many different backgrounds and many different personalities, for businesses to thrive in the long-term. This is especially true for businesses seeking long-term success in a global and diverse market.

As a result, companies, firms, and practices need to abandon the old management theory. The amount of space an employee occupies should no longer be considered qualitatively good or bad, nor should it be a sign of success or failure. Given that each team only has a finite amount of space, space should be recognized simply for what it is: a resource. And just like time, space should be recognized as a limited resource that needs to be successfully managed.

This raises a question: how do we successfully manage relational space?

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Applying a Relational Space Theory

In globally focused and diverse workplaces, employees come in multiple and far-reaching varieties, including experienced and inexperienced, extroverted and introverted, disciplined and developing, intelligent and capable, and emotional and logical. Hopefully this list includes employees of all ages, races, and gender identities, as well as genetically diverse employees. But we must also remember that no employee has only one of these characteristics. No employee, for example, is just a millennial or just a Boomer or just any other generalized conclusion that has become prevalent in pop culture. Each employee is made up of a distinct combination of characteristics.

Applying our new theory of relational space, a supervisor must first understand her team

members, including their unique personalities, strengths, limitations, and goals. This is not always easy. Getting to know employees is an ongoing process that requires proactive measures. A good supervisor, for example, will get out of her office and meet her team members where they work. Too often, supervisors sit in their offices waiting for employees to come to them, or when they do walk the halls, they visit only their favorite employees. Spending one-on-one time with each team member is key to getting to know each employee as an individual.

Having spent enough time getting to know her employees, the supervisor is then ready to make reasoned judgments about the amount of space each employee needs to successfully contribute to the team; in other words, she is ready to manage the relational space between the members of her team to promote the success of each team member and the team as a whole. For example, she may pair an older partner who takes up a lot of space with a younger associate who needs to learn, but she judiciously watches the pairing to ensure that the space the younger associate occupies is respected and preserved. She may assign extroverts to large teams where they can thrive in group thinking and assign introverts to smaller teams and solo projects where they can apply critical and detailed thought. She preserves time in meetings for inexperienced employees to speak, encourages those who turn from the spotlight, and pushes back on those who occupy space through bullying tactics or through the sheer force of personality. In short, a good supervisor works to maintain the balance of space, pushing back here and encouraging there, but always recognizing the value of each team member to the team as a whole.

Moreover, in contradistinction to the older theory of leadership, a good leader doesn't always take up a lot of space. She understands that she needs to flex the size of her own space for the good of the team. When the team needs her to take up a lot of space, she does. But she also understands that she may need to decrease the size of her space to promote the success of team members. Her ability to flex her own space for the good of the team often promotes the success of the company.

An Example of the New Leader

Let me illustrate this with an anecdote: I spent many months observing a supervising lawyer who intuitively understood the concept of relational space. He worked with a diverse group of employees whom he managed accordingly.

One of his employees occupied an inordinately small amount of space in the office, despite having extensive experience. He was rather introverted and simply didn't need a large amount of space to feel successful. While respecting the employee's personal characteristics, the manager took advantage of the employee's experience and assigned him difficult and challenging projects to tackle by himself or with one other person. When questions arose about these projects, the manager consistently deferred to the employee and always gave the employee credit for his work. He did so to help the employee grow and succeed at the company, even when the manager could have taken the credit for himself.

Applying the language of the relational space theory, the manager understood the employee and respected the employee's unique characteristics. Based on this understanding, the manager assigned the employee appropriate projects that fit his characteristics (important projects that didn't require the employee to work in large teams) and encouraged the employee to occupy more space in relation to those projects. Furthermore, the manager diminished the amount of space he himself occupied in these instances, solely to allow the employee to take up more space.

In one instance a difficult project ran south on the employee. In response, the manager grew his own space by taking responsibility for the project. In other words, he flexed his space to allow his employee to grow, but grew his own space to protect his employee when needed.

As a result of his leadership style, the manager's team was very successful, leading to additional projects, assignments, and pay. Also as a result, his employees were very loyal to him and remain so even today.

Moving toward Full Diversity

But this new theory does more than help supervisors manage employees. It promotes globally

focused and diverse workplaces that harness the unique strengths and perspectives of employees from all backgrounds. It shouldn't need to be said, but this should also include genetically diverse employees, such as employees with 22q11 deletion syndrome, Down syndrome, or autism spectrum disorder. But we are not there yet, and some would say we are far from it. This is in part because the conventional leadership model has discouraged hiring such employees.

But thinking about employees as individuals who fill various amounts of space can help us overcome this cultural hurdle. By applying the concept of relational space, we quickly come to understand that companies and firms need many different types of employees to thrive. Let's again employ the concept of physical space.

With a limited amount of space, we can only fit a limited amount of matter. If we have a circle, for example, and place a square within its border, it becomes evident that not every other piece can likewise be a square if we want to fill the space; we are going to need different shapes and sizes of matter in addition to the square.


This is just like our workplaces. In globally focused and diverse workplaces, it takes many types of people, with different experiences and alternative approaches to solving problems, to work on the many different projects and issues that arise. In other words, to be successful a team cannot have all squares; it also needs circles and triangles and trapezoids. Genetically diverse employees can help fill these needs, especially if we remember that

- genetically diverse employees have a multitude of different and diverging characteristics, just like all other employees. They should not be typified by characteristics stereotypically associated with a specific genetic diversity any more than we would typify an employee based on gender or race.
- genetically diverse employees each take up a different amount of space based on their individual characteristics. Employees with autism spectrum disorder, for example, can be introverted or extroverted, disciplined or developing, and experienced or inexperienced, just like all other employees.

- just like all other employees, supervisors have to work with genetically diverse employees, encouraging some to take up more space and instructing others to take up less.

In other words, genetically diverse employees are just like all other employees: they have distinct and unique characteristics. And with the right manager who understands relational space, these employees can be valuable members of any team.

Conclusion

Relational space, like time, is simply a tool to help managers navigate the winding paths of employee relationships. But it is a particularly good tool for helping us think differently about such relationships, and for building successful teams, specifically in genuinely diverse workplaces. 

#geneticdiversity

#22qawareness



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NOTE

1. The laws of basic physics have been applied, in part because this is a simple thought experiment and in part because a long discussion of bosons and virtual particles, which may indeed occupy the same positions in space, is rather out of place in a short article on leadership.