

# Building better relationships: Turning Theory into Practice

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In ResoLex's previous article, we explored why successful projects depend not just on technical expertise or commercial strategy, but on the **strength of relationships between individuals** and, importantly, **between organisations**. The focus was on how we can apply relationship theory to improve project delivery. Schein & Schein's "Level 2" relationships, where partners are open, aligned on needs, and view each other's success as intertwined, represent the theoretical "sweet spot" for effective delivery.

These relationships can be foundational to the delivery of a project or programme, and so it is vital that they are developed in the right way. This is not just about building an environment where everyone is nice and friendly, but where they have an aligned vision, are able and willing to constructively challenge, are comfortable raising issues and know what is expected of them. These relationships will not materialise just because we'd like them to. We cannot assume that because everyone in an environment is experienced and professional, that they will also seek to understand the need for and value the relationships needed for successful delivery.

The desired relationships, therefore, need to be intentionally built into the way a project or programme is set up from day one. As Professor Bent Flyvbjerg references a project leader observing: *Projects don't go wrong. They **start** wrong.* So moving beyond the theory to the practical, how can we set up to ensure we start in the right way?

Here are some principles to project setup that we've developed over time at ResoLex to begin building the relationships, teams and environments needed to deliver successfully:

1. **Don't assume good will 'just happen'**

As touched upon above, good relationships require space and structure to grow, and if you do not take the time to proactively drive this aspect of your delivery approach, it will languish. In the early stages, you may get away with this, but when complexity grows and challenges hit, the lack of adaptable or resilient relationships will undermine every aspect of delivery.

## **2. Understand and align values and goals**

This is especially relevant for complex programmes that comprise multiple interconnected projects, but is applicable to any environment comprised of multiple teams or organisations. Each group comes in with its own culture, language, and definition of success. Bringing these into alignment – and creating a shared vision – is essential if you want a “best for project” mindset. *As we discussed last time*, fundamental to this is taking the time to properly understand and appreciate one another’s needs and wants, and where those differ.

## **3. Value difference**

While it’s important to ensure you understand and align values, it is equally important to ensure you don’t stifle innovation. Alignment should provide a ‘north star’ to work to, not set a single way of working or thinking. It is the differences between people that drive change and improvement, and the key in project setup is creating a proactive management framework that identifies and uses these differences to drive positive behaviours rather than conflict.

## **4. Make it a leadership priority**

If leaders are measured on elements of team development and relationship quality, they will make time for it. If they’re not, it will always slip down the agenda. The social aspect of delivery is, unsurprisingly, a cultural item. If it is not driven from the top and given priority, it will be forgotten. This leadership then also grants permission for others to invest the time and effort needed to build effective working relationships across the project and programme.

## **5. Build psychological safety into how your project operates**

Psychological safety is a cornerstone of effective working relationships. If the people in your project feel unable to openly constructively challenge, they cannot build the trust needed to achieve true Level 2 relationships. Embedding a culture that values this supports an environment where issues can be openly raised and addressed as early as possible, driving effective project delivery.

### **The look ahead...**

Setting up relationships is only half of the job, because too often, great starts are undermined by complacency and erosion over time. These relationships need managing, maintaining, and developing as

the project evolves. We've explored some of the initial steps you can take and questions to ask yourself [here](#), however, we will look at the longer-term approach, including how we can ensure that what we've built is embedded, enduring and adaptable, in a follow-up article.

Relationships are foundational to delivery. And like any foundation, they have to be deliberately laid.

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