Make Your Enemies Your Allies

Key Concept
Has an antagonistic relationship at work ever cast a cloud over you and your team? It happens to us all. Rivalries at work are natural. But they can be so destructive for the organization as a whole; sapping energy and blocking progress. Here’s a three-step method to help turn your rivalries into productive relationships, and turn your enemies into allies.

Idea Summary
Rivalries in the workplace can be destructive to both personal career growth and group success. Many attempts to reverse rivalries fail because of the complex way emotion and reason operate in the building of trust. Using a method called the 3Rs, an effective leader can turn a rival into a collaborator, setting the stage for a healthy work life while driving fresh thinking within an organization. Step 1 of the method is redirection, shifting a rival’s negative emotions away from the adversarial relationship. This creates an opening for Step 2, reciprocity, through which a relationship can be established. Here, the essential principle is to give before you ask - offering a rival something of clear benefit and “priming the pump” for a future return that requires little effort on the rival’s part. Step 3, rationality, sets expectations of the new relationship so that efforts made using the previous steps don’t come off as disingenuous. A rival is encouraged to see collaborative opportunities from a reasoned standpoint. A key advantage of the 3Rs is that the method can work to reverse all kinds of rivalries, including those with subordinates, peers, and superiors.

Business Application
The 3Rs are as follows:

1. **Redirection**: Redirect your rival’s negative emotions so that they are channelled away from you. One common redirection tactic is to introduce a discussion of things you and your rival have in common, or casually portray a source of tension in a more favourable light.

2. **Reciprocity**: Give before you ask. Undoing a negative tie begins with giving up something of value rather than asking for a ‘fair trade.’ If you give and then ask for something right away in return, you don’t establish a relationship; you carry out a transaction.

3. **Rationality**: Establish the expectations of the fledgling relationship you’ve built using the previous steps so that your efforts don’t come off as dishonest or as ineffective pandering. When rationality follows redirection and reciprocity, it should push your adversary into considering the situation from a reasoned standpoint, fully comprehending the expectations and benefits, and recognizing that he/she is looking at a valued opportunity that could be lost.

With regards to the second R in particular - reciprocity- ‘giving before asking’ also sets a foundation for reciprocity with third parties, whose buy-in can

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Source
Harvard Business Review

Idea conceived
2012

Idea posted
January 2013

DOI number
10.13007/056

Subject
Conflict Management
Interpersonal Skills
Team Building and Teamwork
Emotional Intelligence
Negotiations
positively assist in reshaping the adversarial relationship.

Even when a leader executes the 3Rs flawlessly to end a rivalry, your work isn’t necessarily done. That is because the relationship is often about more than just the two individuals. Some third parties might view a blossoming partnership with trepidation or envy, triggering new negative emotions and rivalries. But this can be headed off by framing work as beneficial not just to you and your adversary but to the whole organization, which makes the reversal of rivalry in everyone’s interest.

The 3Rs are effective, but nothing is a guarantee. In the event they don’t work, the research suggests the following:

- **Strive for collaboration indirectly**: for example, by working well with a third party whom your rival trusts. A common ally can highlight to him the benefits of working with you;
- **Remember that timing matters**: people in power need a reason to interact; and
- **Recognize when to look elsewhere**: sometimes the effort needed to reverse a rivalry is so great, and the returns so low, for you and your company that you’re better off deploying the same resources in another relationship.

**Further Reading**


**Further Relevant Resources**

Brian Uzzi’s profile at Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern Universitz
Brian Uzzi’s personal website
Kellogg School of Management’s profile at IEDP