



DO YOU REALLY LIKE THE PEOPLE YOU WORK WITH?

BY SUE-ELLA PRODONOVICH

Last year I hosted a workshop when I asked the group of about eight assembled professionals to think of someone they liked working with or for. And by 'liked' I meant those fellow professionals or clients who they actually looked forward to speaking with during their working day.

The room fell silent. People started scratching their heads and staring blankly into the distance. Then the crickets began chirping and the tumbleweeds drifted in.

I waited a while for someone to offer just one name and break this uneasy state of affairs. But, eventually, I realised I wasn't going to get anywhere.

We spend such a lot of our lives at work - as many as 50 or 60 hours a week for a lot of professionals. So, if you honestly don't like the people you're surrounded by, I think it's time to work out how you can change it. After all, these people aren't just making you miserable, they're actively holding back your brain. As psychiatrist and Harvard Medical School instructor, Dr Edward Hallowell, puts it:

"When you comfortably connect with a colleague, even if you are dealing with an overwhelming problem, the deep centres of the brain sends messages through the pleasure centre to the area that assigns resources to the frontal lobes. Even when you're under extreme stress, this sense of human connection causes executive functioning to hum."

IT'S NOT ME, IT'S YOU (OR IS IT?)

I know being a lawyer or accountant or engineer or architect is a competitive profession and so it attracts a lot of competitive people. But even in the most competitive, killer-type workplace - those professional services firms that resemble [Axe Capital from Billions](#) - there should always be someone you can have a proper friendship with.

In fact, there are really six or seven different types of relationships you need in the workplace if you want to be fulfilled and happy. This includes workplace friends, a teacher, a supporter, a mentee, and an office spouse. (This last one is meant to be someone you go to for advice and venting, so don't read more into it than that.)

OK, I'm not here to talk about personal development but business development. But I believe this all relates to how you can grow your practice and your firm. Because just as you should have friends in your firm, you should also have friends among your client base too.

That said, it's worth noting that your clients will be looking for different types of relationships too and many of them won't expect or want anything other than for you to do their work as quickly and cost-effectively as possible. The 'trusted advisor' most professionals seem to want to be these days isn't for every client. It's much more nuanced than that. The relationship they're after could be master-servant or teacher-student or guru-protege or even professional buddies.

HOW THIS RELATES TO YOUR PRACTICE BUILDING

But I think that to have a truly successful business you at least need to enjoy the company of the people you work for. For most of us, that's impossible if you don't share their outlook or values. If they're looking to achieve something you don't believe in; if you think they're dodgy or deceitful; even if they don't respect you or your time, continuing the relationship with them will make you miserable.

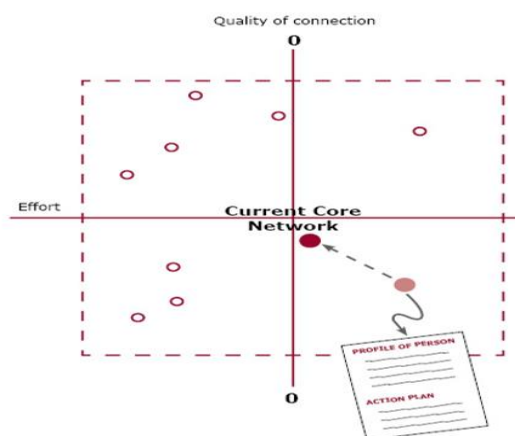
It's time to pull the plug and drain the bathwater they're taking up so that you can refill it with clients whose business you want. (If you need some help on how to do that, [read this](#)).

But before you go and start cutting everyone, I also think that if you really give some thought to it you'll probably find that 95% of your trouble will come from just 5% of your network. In other words, if you have 20 clients think long and hard about the one who is giving you grief and make a plan to manage them.

WHO'S IN YOUR FIRST XV?

Another, more powerful way to build a happy practice is to flip it around positively: to think about the people that make your practice a happy place to be and focus on them. For this exercise, I recommend using a rugby analogy and [picking your own First XV](#).

These people should include your clients and your referrers. These are the people who make work enjoyable and profitable. These are your low maintenance / high quality connections.



A QUICK CAVEAT

I know that we don't all have the power to cut as and when we like. Sometimes we need to keep servicing bad clients to pay the bills, sometimes the work we do attracts a certain number of people we hope not to share values with, and sometimes we have no say in the matter (eg being the local arm of a global firm servicing a global client).

But the reality is that you probably have more power than you realise to shake things up and focus on the work and clients you like best.

So, what are you waiting for? Think about who makes you happy and who makes you frustrated. Think about whose values you share and whose you don't. Think about who you actually like and who you don't. Then build your business planning around that.

The result will no doubt leave you happier, (mentally) healthier and, I think, a hell of a lot more profitable in the long run.

WANT MORE?

You can [sign up to receive my articles](#) or get personal advice on what to do next. [Check out BD45 and organise a 45-minute conversation with Sue-Ella today.](#)



Business Development in 45 minutes

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- Avery J; Fournier S and Wittenbraker J (2014) “[Unlock the Mysteries of Your Client Relationships](#)” Harvard Business Review, July Issue
- Brooks, A C (2021) “[What Introverts and Extroverts Can Learn From Each Other: Going against your instincts can help make you happier.](#)” The Atlantic, May 21
- Dutton J & Ragins B (Eds) (2007) “[Exploring positive relationships at work: Building a theoretical and research foundation.](#)” Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Hollowall E (2005) “[Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform](#)” Harvard Business Review
- Prodonovich (2018) “[The 6 Keys to Being a Happy Professional](#)”
- Prodonovich (2018) “[How Good Are Your Networks](#)”
- Sanderson C A (2019) “[The Positive Shift: Mastering Mindset to Improve Happiness, Health and Longevity](#)” Benbella Books



Sue-Ella is the Principal of [Prodonovich Advisory](#), a business dedicated to helping professional services firms sharpen their business development practices, and attract and retain good clients.

www.prodonovich.com
sueella@prodonovich.com

© Prodonovich Advisory. Please respect our copyright and the effort taken to produce the original material in this article. This article, and any portion of it, may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author.