



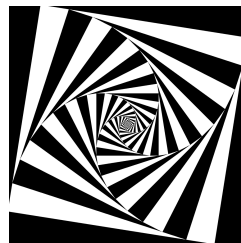
Relationship Spirals

Have you ever had a colleague that you consistently find challenging? Perhaps you finish a call with them and think **“what was that?”** Or you find yourself just **working around them** because they don’t seem to respect you or your team’s work?

Enter the Relationship Spiral Toolkit—a transformative resource designed to decode such dynamics so you can move to a place that feels **“yay”** rather than **“yuck!”** . Dive in and discover the keys to fostering positive connections in your leadership journey.

Relationships can spiral in the workplace

Relationship spirals happen when we make inferences about people’s actions without sharing our experience of the situation with them and checking the stories we are telling ourselves about the person, relationship or situation. Each time this happens, the ladder of inference - or assumptions we make about one another - grow, as do the spirals. When left unchecked, our relationships, work, team and organizational culture are negatively impacted.



How Relationship Spirals Show Up.

Relationship spirals generally unfold as follows:

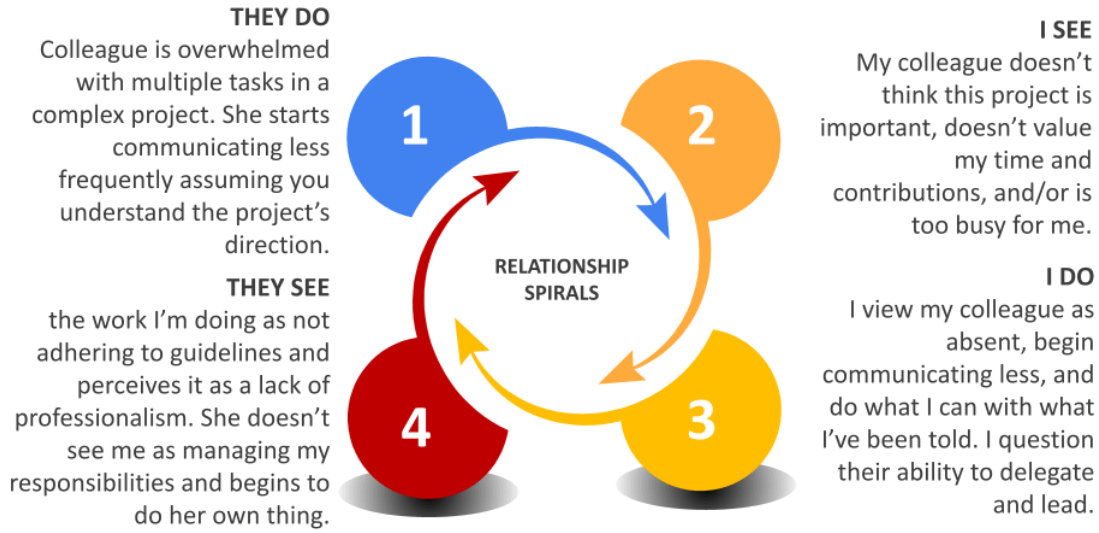
1. Your colleague, boss or direct report says or does a thing that unbeknownst to them strikes you as “ouch”, “yuck”, or off-putting.
2. You begin to think things like “this person doesn’t care,” “this person doesn’t understand,” or “this person doesn’t respect me and/or my team.”
3. You begin to act differently toward this person.
4. They notice and think “wow - this is off!” and, unbeknownst to you, begin to think things like “you don’t care,” “you don’t understand” or “you don’t respect me and/or my team.”

And the cycle goes on and on.

Relationship Spirals

Let's look at some examples:

Relationship spirals can manifest while collaborating with a colleague on a project...

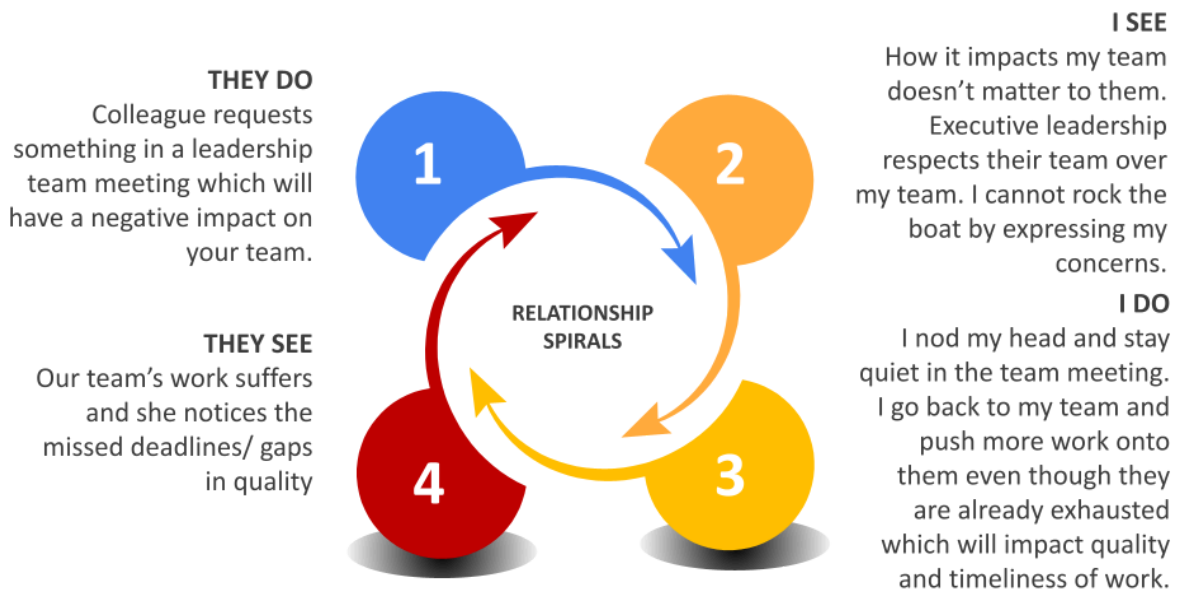


Left unchecked spirals continue to grow.

Imagine how the spiral continues to grow as we each perceive and react to one another.

For instance, we blame each other if the quality of the project suffers. Or we avoid reaching out to collaborate on future projects and work in our own silos.

Relationship spirals can impact not just you but also, your team...



Spirals grow to impact entire teams or cultures.

Perceptions can broaden from an experience with a single person to a narrative I share with others and extrapolate to entire teams. Soon, our team starts to talk about “that team” and how they “always do X.” Sales and product teams, for instance, begin polarizing against one another rather than working together toward a better customer and team experience.

Want to Break the Spiral? Try This.

If you want to break free of the spiral, step into conversation with colleagues early before the spiral grows. Ask for time to connect with the goal of sharing your experience, hearing from them, and building your working relationship. This way your colleague doesn't go into the conversation unaware. [Click here for a template script you can use to start the conversation!](#)

About this Resource:

1. Thank you to The Arbinger Institute, whose book [The Anatomy of Peace](#) (2022) inspired our thinking on relationship spirals.
2. For further information on Chris Argyris' ladder of inference, read [The Fifth Discipline](#) (2006).

The book links above support [Marcus Books](#), the nation's oldest Black-owned independent bookstore located in Oakland, California.

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