

Part One

Working on Me

Find Your Inspiration

As my wife and I walked into a restaurant in Mt. Hope, Ohio, with our three young children, a horse and buggy dashed past us in the parking lot. Stopping in surprise, we glimpsed an empty buggy seat—no one was inside!

The runaway horse and buggy crossed the parking lot, careened through a neighbor's lawn, and bumped across the sidewalk into the street on the other side. Hightailing recklessly through an intersection with head held high, it disappeared from our view.

I never found out what happened to the runaway, but I hope both the horse and all pedestrians and vehicles in the area escaped injury.

I had to think how people can be a little like the runaway horse. People who can't get along with others careen through life, wreaking havoc and leaving a trail of trouble behind them.

I have certainly done my share of bumping over the feelings of coworkers and recklessly causing them unnecessary distress. If you are like me, you could use a little help and inspiration in getting along with others at work. This is nothing to be ashamed of. Even the Apostle Paul once seemed to falter in this area.

Paul and Barnabas had been through a lot together, and had likely forged a close relationship. During the planning stage for another trip to visit churches they had helped start, they disagreed over which assistant to invite to go along. They each felt so strongly about it that they felt they could no longer work together. Paul and Barnabas got their way by going their separate ways, each with the assistant of his choice.

Inspiration makes the difference. Sometimes we have the inspiration to do something, but we aren't sure how to accomplish it. Other times we know how to accomplish something, but we don't have the inspiration.

When it comes to improving our “getting along skills,” the inspiration, or the “why,” comes first. Otherwise, we will never improve or learn what we should. Inspiration is why I can juggle (albeit awkwardly), but I cannot play the piano.

My mom wanted me to learn to play the piano. She enjoys playing hymns, and my siblings all learned to play. I didn't have the will or the “want to” to invest time and effort into piano practice, so I eventually gave up. I never advanced beyond pecking out a tune one or two notes at a time.

One skill I was inspired to learn was juggling. Someone showed me the basics of getting started (the best way is to learn how to correctly toss *one* object). Learning to juggle wasn't easy. At first I used tennis balls. They worked well except that they rolled away when I dropped them, which was often.

Soon I learned to practice beside my bed, so the balls wouldn't fall all the way to the floor. The only problem was that the bed got in the way as I lunged for wayward airborne balls. In the beginning balls usually headed away from me instead of sailing gracefully into my other hand like they were supposed to. When I did manage to throw them in the right direction, they collided in midair.

In spite of these difficulties, I persevered through each clumsy stage and finally mastered the simplest form of juggling. I'm not good at it, but years later, I can still juggle three objects. I am pleased with my achievement, but it only happened because I didn't give up. I had a “why.”

Why we need inspiration. Improvement usually brings resistance. It's not easy to improve something. As grown-ups, we may forget how hard

it is to learn something new. I recently helped my four-year-old learn to ride a bicycle without any training wheels. Balancing on two wheels isn't easy for a youngster accustomed to rolling along on four!

Improving our skills, whether it is business expertise, cooking abilities, or social graces, involves learning and doing something new. At some point, we are probably going to feel like giving up. We can get bogged down when things don't go like we wish or when we face skepticism from others.

Have you ever stopped in the middle of a project that wasn't going well and complained, "Why did I ever tackle this thing? This is crazy—I can't do it!" While writing this book, I sometimes thought, *Why am I doing this? Will this even help anyone? What right do I have to tell others what to do?*

Anytime we feel bogged down, it helps to remember our reason for tackling the project. Usually at the start we have an enthusiastic vision of what we want to accomplish. We are excited and optimistic. We can almost feel the satisfaction of successfully completing the project and achieving our goal. This is our "why"—the reason we began in the first place.

This initial enthusiasm often doesn't last long. However, at the core of that enthusiasm is the inspiration and vision for our efforts. Keeping sight of this "why" reminds us how essential it is to accomplish our goals and reinforces how important success is to us. It reminds us what we will lose if we give up.

Maintaining relationships at work is hard work, at least for me. I don't find it easy to consistently get along well with my coworkers, to smile and say "good morning," to graciously respond in difficult situations, or to sympathize with their difficulties. How do you find it?

If we aren't inspired to get along with others, we will not care enough about our relationships to work on improving them. We won't have a compelling vision or driving force.

At one time I didn't have enthusiasm for getting along well with my coworkers. I didn't have a "why" to remind me. I didn't have a vision that motivated me to work harder at handling conflict peacefully. So I didn't bother.

My employer said this about that stage in my life: “Sometimes you came across as boastful and with a spirit of superiority. Other times there was a lack of meekness and a desire to get along with others. You were confrontational and difficult-to-get-along-with with those you didn’t mind having a poor relationship with.” I didn’t trouble myself with learning how to relate well to others, and therefore I brought trouble into my life.

As you consider your own situation at work, do you have a compelling vision that inspires you to get along with your coworkers? What are reasons we should work to improve our ability to get along with our coworkers, even though it is difficult? Here I’ll offer you four:

1. Getting along well honors God. God did not make us to fight with each other. He made us to live in peace, as Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. Adam and Eve not only had a unique relationship with God, but they also had a wonderful relationship with each other. That was God’s intention for all people. That Adam and Eve’s oldest son became the world’s first murderer is a powerful reminder that sin not only affected mankind’s relationship with God, but it also affected our relationships with each other.

Seeking to get along well with others pleases God. The Bible urges Christians to avoid taking part in strife, but to “follow peace with all men” (Hebrews 12:14). God is honored when we display the fruit of the Spirit, including love, peace, longsuffering, and meekness. These qualities enable us to get along well with others.

First Peter 2:17 says, “Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.” When practiced with a sincere heart, each of these actions helps us follow Jesus’ command to “love one another” and even to “love your enemies” (John 13:35; Matthew 5:44).

2. Getting along well blesses others. Did you know you have a big impact on how much your coworkers enjoy their jobs? Politics and conflict with coworkers or the boss are major reasons people quit their jobs. We have the ability to really ruin someone’s day at work. More than once a coworker has gone home stressed out and frustrated with me.

Our coworkers appreciate when we make an effort to get along with them. The relationships we build with them enable us to serve them and

be a blessing instead of a frustration.

We all know that customer service is important to any business, but so is “coworker service.” Even if we work in operations far from the front lines of customer service, we have in-house customers. These could include the next person in the assembly line, our supervisor, or the people in the next department. All of these people are affected by our work, and they are blessed when we serve them well.

Doing our work well and keeping our attitude pleasant while going the extra mile to make our coworkers’ work easier will help them have a much better day at work.

3. Getting along well blesses ourselves. God knew that Adam, though he lived in a perfect place, needed a “coworker.” So God made Eve. We may not like to admit it, but we need other people. We couldn’t have a relationship-free existence at work even if we wanted to. Learning to relate well to our coworkers not only blesses them, it also improves our own experiences at work.

I don’t go to work to socialize, but relating to coworkers is an inherent part of my job. Not being able to get along with others will hinder my effectiveness and in the long run could jeopardize my job.

Good relationships at work enrich our lives. Even the perfect job would not be satisfying if we had no one with whom to share the load with, to depend on, to balance out our weaknesses, to help us solve problems, and to help us celebrate our successes and learn from our failures.

I hate stress. Conflict with others is frustrating and stressful, and it complicates our work and our lives. It can turn a good day into a bad day for people on both sides, and even third parties are affected. Collateral damage touches uninvolved coworkers, superiors, and even family at home.

If all of our work relationships were tense and frayed, we would dread going to work each day. By learning to enjoy being with our coworkers, we will make our work more enjoyable. This is a huge blessing.

4. Getting along well opens new doors of opportunity. To think about it another way, getting along well with others is good for our job security and improves our job prospects in the future. No boss is pleased when his people can’t get along.

Employers prefer not to hire people who have a history of creating conflict. They know enthusiasm and mental energy that should be invested in important priorities are wasted in hostilities between coworkers. They value workers whose well-honed social skills enable them to get along with others.

One businessman said, “In addition to speaking to a prospective employee’s supervisor, I always attempt to speak to individuals who worked with the applicant. I also attempt to contact neighbors who lived near the applicant. One bad apple can spoil the work environment for everyone. A bad report automatically rejects an applicant.”

Another employer told me, “Getting along is a very basic skill that tells so much about a person. If he does not get along well with others, that is just the tip of the iceberg. This is a big reason not to hire. That is usually not a primary problem, but a symptom, and this will show up in their effectiveness in many other areas. In the interview, we subtly probe to figure out how well this person gets along with others.”

Stanley Allyn observed, “The most useful person in the world today is the man or woman who knows how to get along with other people.” The ability to build good working relationships with others makes us more valuable to our employers.

What would better relationships at work make possible for you? Consider these possibilities:

- Less stress and frustration
- More productivity and efficiency
- New friends
- More opportunities
- More fulfillment and enjoyment
- A promotion
- More trust and respect
- A pay raise

Like me, you may not consider yourself a people person, but people are a part of life. You and I are people. Our coworkers are people. Whether they are customers, a coworkers, or superiors, we will always need to deal with people, so we serve ourselves well by making it a priority to get better at it. The effort we put into relationships at work will be worth it.

If I can improve my relationships and become a better coworker, so can you. First, let's establish a clear "why" that we can come back to when we fail, lose focus, or get discouraged. This vision will inspire us in tough times and help give us determination to keep going when we feel like giving up.

TAKE IT TO WORK

1. Evaluate yourself. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being very poor and 10 being excellent, how well do you relate with your coworkers?
2. Name your inhouse "customers" and describe how you serve each one. In what ways could you improve your service?
3. Imagine what it would be like to get along exceptionally well with each coworker. How would this change your experience at work? Does this picture excite and motivate you?

Have Realistic Expectations

One summer before I was married, I traveled throughout the western states with three friends. On our list of things to do was a hike to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. Arriving at the canyon one afternoon, we made plans to start the next morning around five o'clock.

It was our first big hike of the trip, and I wasn't sure I could keep up with the others. We planned a grueling day—a hike down to the river in the bottom of the canyon and back to the rim the same day.

If we had any doubts about how exhausting our plan was, a sign near the canyon rim emphatically laid out the facts: "WARNING. Danger! Do not attempt to hike from the canyon rim to the river and back in one day. Each year hikers suffer serious illness or death from exhaustion."

At early dawn we passed the sign on the way down the trail. That afternoon, the four of us grouped around it again while a passerby snapped a celebratory picture. We were exhausted, but elated with our achievement.

Though we ignored its advice, the sign served an important purpose. It helped set our expectations and prepare us for reality. We knew in advance that the hike was grueling and tough, so we planned accordingly. With

realistic expectations, we could prepare both physically and mentally to ensure we had the strength and fortitude to keep slogging on even when we were nearly worn out.

Realistic expectations are important when we set out to improve our relationships at work. Though we may have the vision for getting along better with our coworkers, rosy idealism won't get us far. It won't be long until we will run into a difficult situation we didn't expect—a coworker gives us a cold shoulder, or someone mocks our efforts or doubts our motives.

We will be far more likely to persevere and succeed in our new endeavor if we have realistic expectations up front. Here are some ideas that will help us stay firmly grounded in reality.

We shouldn't expect to get along well with everyone all the time. Even people who love each other dearly have occasional spats. Relationship problems are a part of life, so we can't expect anything otherwise from our relationships at work. We can expect to get along with certain people better than others, but even our closest friends at work will get on our nerves occasionally.

When a relationship with one of our coworkers starts to go south, there's no need to panic. Most likely it is part of the normal up-and-down pattern that relationships tend to follow. We should simply do what it takes to get things back on even keel again: make an apology, give a compliment, or allow a little time and space. Mistakes, misunderstandings, or moodiness are all temporary things that can be worked through.

We shouldn't expect to master all relationships by mastering one. Life would be easier if after building one successful relationship we would know exactly how to succeed in the next one. People being people, relationships will always be more complicated than that. Each person is complex, and their individual needs, habits, and background make them different from anyone else. Understanding how to relate to people means taking this into account and responding accordingly.

Successfully improving one relationship doesn't necessarily mean we'll be able to use the same approach in other relationships. Each person in our lives is unique, so when it comes to relationships, one size does not fit all. While strong relationships have many things in common—trust, respect, kindness—our approach to each relationship will need to be unique.

Be alert to how people respond to you, and adapt accordingly. For example, some people like to relate in a breezy, casual manner, but this approach may feel disrespectful if you approach them the same way. If you seem to be rubbing someone the wrong way, try to discern what you are doing wrong or how you may be misunderstanding them.

We shouldn't expect to get along with people the same way other people do. Sometimes I envy my friend Weston, who is sociable by nature. I marvel at how he seems to relate effortlessly to people. It would be useless for me to try to copy Weston's style or ways—it wouldn't be "me." My attempts would be forced and unnatural, and others would notice my pretense.

God made each of us different, and the way we connect with other people is different. A person can have a very reserved personality and still get along with people quite well even though he does not relate easily with others the way a more gregarious person might.

People's ways of relating to other people vary; that is normal. While we can learn a lot by watching other people, we shouldn't try to mimic them or judge ourselves by them. We should be genuinely ourselves.

We shouldn't expect everyone to like us all the time. In a perfect world, everyone would like us and respect us all the time. That is an unrealistic expectation. It is a selfish assumption to think that everyone needs to always understand and like us because we are reasonable, nice, or trying so hard.

If we try too hard to make someone like us, we risk coming across like an overexcited puppy that jumps up and puts his dirty paws on their clean clothes. It's impossible to force someone to like us, especially if they don't want to like us.

Not only should we not expect everyone to like us all the time, we should understand that we don't even have to be "friends" with everyone. Yes, our goal is to get along with everyone, but that doesn't mean we bring them to the same level of closeness that our good friends enjoy.

Some coworkers are simply acquaintances, and for them, a basic working relationship that gets the job done is sufficient. Of course, the more we like and enjoy our coworkers and vice versa, the more everyone benefits.

We shouldn't expect to have equally close relationships with all of our coworkers. We put a lot of effort into getting along with everyone, but does that mean we have to develop a close relationship with everyone equally? Do we have to enjoy being around one person as much as another? These are important questions.

In a situation where we find ourselves struggling to get along with someone, let me offer two strategies. First, we can ask God for a love like His for that person. The Bible asserts that “love is of God” (1 John 4:7) so it follows that He can place a divine love in my heart for a person who (to me, at least) seems unlovable. This kind of love enables us to be kind to others even when we don't particularly feel like it.

Second, we can begin noticing positive attributes about the person. When we do this, it helps move our focus away from the things that irritate us and helps improve our attitude toward the person. Taking this a step farther, we can mention the positive things we have noticed. For example, I could say things like, “I noticed how you handled that difficult situation with our boss yesterday,” or “You helped me understand how to do my job better when I watched you do yours.”

Different levels of relationship are to be expected, but we should treat each person fairly and respectfully whether we feel fond of them or not. When we actively dislike a coworker, our chances of being able to get along with him are doomed. Dislike tends to foster disrespect and distrust, which lead to open conflict.

We shouldn't expect to improve our relationships at work if our heart isn't in it. I once had a coworker I really disliked. He rubbed me the wrong way. Because my heart toward him was hard, for a while I wasn't really sure if I even wanted to improve my relationship with him.

When we find ourselves uncertain if we even *want* to get along with our coworkers, we won't be able to improve our relationships with them. Our hearts won't be in it; we won't have the commitment we need for the long haul.

This can cause other complications too. A coworker told me, “I once had a relationship I dropped because I didn't care about it until I realized that this was affecting others as well. I was creating a pattern of broken bridges.”

Checking our attitude can be a diagnostic tool during times we aren't

getting along well. Ask yourself, “Do I really want to get along better with this person, or am I half-hearted?” and, “Why do I feel this way?” When we waver, there is a reason for it, and we should examine our hearts to find the reason.

We shouldn't expect disagreements to automatically hurt our relationships. Getting along with our coworkers doesn't mean we never disagree with them, but it means we know how to handle disagreements.

I remember a committee meeting where disagreements resulted in some heated discussion. An observer stepping into the room may have been alarmed, but each committee member knew we were all on the same team, and we shared strong working relationships and commitment to a common goal. This enabled us to clearly express our positions and put the issue behind us when a decision was made.

Expecting to agree with someone all the time is unreasonable and unhealthy. As one person said, “If two men on the same job agree all the time, then one of them is useless. If they disagree all the time, then both are useless.”

When coworkers know and understand each other well, their strong working relationship allows them to continue to get along even when they disagree. When we purpose to get along with a coworker, we can find common ground to agree on, and we can agree to peaceably disagree on other issues when necessary.

We shouldn't expect as much from others as we expect from ourselves. Generally, we expect our efforts in life to be rewarded. We expect a paycheck for our work, we expect juicy tomatoes as a result of tending our gardens, and we expect people to be nice to us if we are nice to them.

It can be depressing when we put a lot of effort into getting along better with a coworker and she acts as disinterested or uncaring as ever. We cannot do much about this except to consistently treat her as respectfully and carefully as we can.

This might not trouble us as much if we don't expect others to put as much effort into getting along as we do. We shouldn't expect others to always go the second mile, to always understand and encourage us, and to always sympathize with us. We should require more from ourselves than we expect from our coworkers. Their response may surprise us.

TAKE IT TO WORK

1. What are three things strong relationships have in common? Do you see them in your relationships at work?
2. Prioritize your relationships at work. Which ones are the most important as it relates to fulfilling your responsibilities well? Which ones need the most work?
3. Consider one relationship at work that you find disappointing. Why are you disappointed? Do you need to adjust your expectations? Can you change the way you treat the person?

Understand the Effort and Sacrifices

One of my coworkers once saw a worker in a hospital cafeteria spill a three-gallon container of fresh coffee just before lunch. As the woman started to clean up the spill, she berated herself, calling herself a clumsy idiot.

This woman's coworker came calmly to her aid with a mop, saying, "This isn't so bad; we'll have it cleaned up in a jiffy." The smiling gentleness and prompt assistance of the second person soon quieted the frustration of the one who had spilled the coffee.

This helpful coworker is an outstanding example of the kind of person described in this poem found on an office wall:

Certain People Are a Joy to Know

People who know how to brighten a day
With heartwarming smiles and with kind words they say,
People who know how to gently impart
The comfort it takes to cheer someone's heart,

People who know how to always come through
When there's anything they can possibly do,
People who know how to willingly share,
Who know how to give and who know how to care,
Who know how to let all their warm feelings show . . .
Are people that others feel lucky to know.
- Amanda Bradley

This is not a simple to-do list. We can't become this kind of person automatically. This kind of person is a giver—the poem is really a list of things certain people give—and giving takes effort and sacrifice.

Getting along with people is the same as any other skill we want to learn: it takes work. Whether it is mountain-biking or flower-arranging or skeet-shooting, we will not excel in anything without investing time and effort.

Be willing to value relationships that work. How much effort are we willing to put into getting along with our coworkers? It depends on how much we prize strong working relationships.

If we want it to be, each relationship we have at work can be valuable in some way. If we understand the value of relationships, we'll be more willing to commit ourselves to creating and maintaining them.

Here are four ways relationships with coworkers can be valuable:

These relationships help us to grow personally and professionally. We learn a lot in both practical work skills and relational skills simply from interacting with and observing other people.

These relationships enable us to use our gifts and talents. Our abilities are gifts from God, and He expects us to use them to serve others.

These relationships allow us to find fulfillment as we help others. Connections with other people create opportunities for us to make a contribution to their lives while bringing meaning to our own.

These relationships help make our lives worthwhile. A self-centered life doesn't bring satisfaction, but an outward-looking focus that blesses other people brings meaning and purpose to life.

Yes, sometimes other people slow us down or complicate our lives. In times like these, we can remember this African proverb, a favorite quote

of one of my coworkers: “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

Be willing to invest in maintenance. One of my acquaintances ended up marrying one of her coworkers. Jennifer told me later that when her engagement was announced, an older coworker congratulated her and told her what a good man she was getting—that he was “nicer than you; he always has time to stop and talk.”

Though the coworker felt bad and tried to explain herself, Jennifer knew what she meant, because it was true. Her future husband always took time to listen, while Jennifer usually avoided getting drawn into a conversation with this particular coworker who was known for talking on and on.

Getting along well with others requires sacrifice and investment. For example, it takes time—time to listen, time to care, time to encourage. Like the surface of my desk tends toward disorder, relationships tend to deteriorate unless they are maintained.

Samuel Butler once wrote, “Friendship is like money, easier made than kept.” Relationships don’t happen suddenly. They’re a work in progress. Once started, they must be strengthened and maintained. They are always a work in progress.

Of course, at work, we can’t spend all our time maintaining relationships, but if we dedicate every minute of the workday to our own projects without taking time to attend to our coworkers, our relationships will eventually disintegrate.

Be willing to put off selfish habits. Getting along with others requires us to rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15). It requires us to prefer each other in honor and to “mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate” (Romans 12:10, 16). It requires us to bless those who hurt us (Romans 12:14).

How does this work out in real life? Here are some things we will need to root out of our lives:

Pride. Proud people don’t recognize their own glaring faults. They don’t want to see other people get credit or recognition. If we have a spirit of humility, we will be able to apologize more genuinely, speak kinder words to others, and get along with people much more easily.

A critical spirit. It's not unusual for us to make small mistakes at work, and usually we catch and correct them right away without any problem. If we are in the habit of pointing out every little thing we think our coworkers did wrong, we make it hard for them to get along with us.

Wrong communication habits. Shouting. Interrupting. Sarcasm. Gossip. Backbiting. Communication is an essential part of every workplace, but it is easy to communicate in ways that tear down and discourage others.

Grudges and jealousy. Perhaps a coworker's action causes us extra work or he gets a promotion we wanted. Holding a grudge against that person is a sure way to hurt the relationship. Instead we need to give up grudges, forgive, and move on.

Demanding perfection. We cannot demand perfection from our coworkers. Every person has faults and flaws, so expecting perfect performance at work is unrealistic. If we are so demanding of others that they always feel like a failure, they will find it impossible to get along with us.

Getting offended. The opportunities to get offended at work are endless. Someone forgets to clue me in to an important piece of information. I wasn't invited to a meeting. I suspect someone doesn't like me. People who get along well with other people refuse to get offended easily.

Be willing to deal with the heart. If we consistently find ourselves doing the things on this list, we have a heart problem. I know from experience how conflict in my heart can hurt my relationships at work. When I am unsettled or torn different ways, I relate more poorly to others.

In *Getting Along with People God's Way*, John Coblentz writes, "Often when we grouch at others, when we are easily offended, when we reject one another, when we strike out and hurt, the person we really don't like is our sinful self. The people around us who peel away the layers of our masks and remind us of ourselves unfortunately get the brunt of our self-loathing."

Coblentz goes on to say, "If Christians are not nice (that is, if they are rude, selfish, proud, unfaithful, disloyal, judgmental, greedy, hurtful, and hard to get along with), they need to come to God along with everyone else. God changes people. Love for God produces love for people—real love, sacrificial, caring, and committed. God shatters our pride and

selfishness, our ‘me first’ tendencies, and our down-the-nose arrogance.”¹

We will not grow without change in our lives. Change comes hard, but if we are serious about getting along with our coworkers, we must also be serious about coming to God and asking Him to change our hearts.

TAKE IT TO WORK

1. List four reasons good relationships are valuable.
2. Identify one thing you need to sacrifice to improve a specific relationship at work.
3. Examine your heart. What is one selfish habit you need to deal with?