Relational Thinking

Idea In Short

Most organizational analysis starts with entities such as people, departments, products, and budgets. Relational thinking starts instead with the connections among them, on the view that the quality of those links shapes results as much as the quality of the parts. Jody Hoffer Gittell built a research program on this idea in airlines and hospitals, showing that shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect support better coordination. Mary Uhl-Bien reframed leadership as a social process, and Mark Granovetter showed that loose acquaintances can carry the most useful information. This article explains what relational thinking is and how to use it to diagnose and improve the way work gets done.

When a project fails, the first reaction is to look for a faulty part. Someone missed a deadline, a department lacked skill, or a tool did not work as planned. Relational thinking asks a different question: how did the people and groups involved connect to each other, and what happened in those connections? This article explains the idea, draws on three bodies of research, and offers a practical way to apply it to work that crosses boundaries.

From parts to links

Traditional analysis treats an organization as a set of entities. It describes each person by skills, each team by headcount, and each system by features. That approach works when the parts operate independently, and it fails when the work depends on handoffs. In a hospital, an airline, or a software team, results depend on how well the parts exchange information and adjust to each other.

Relational thinking moves the unit of analysis to the link. The questions change accordingly. Who needs to know what, and by when? Which groups talk often, and which barely talk at all? Where do status differences stop information from moving? Each question points to a specific relationship that a leader can inspect and improve.

The shift also changes what counts as a problem. A weak performer in an effective network may do fine, and a strong performer in a broken network may fail. Leaders who think relationally look first at the structure that surrounds the person.

Relational coordination

The most developed research on relational thinking in business comes from Jody Hoffer Gittell. Her theory of relational coordination proposes that relationships of shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect support frequent, timely, accurate, and problem-solving communication, and the communication in turn supports the relationships.1 Together these dimensions form a measurable construct that researchers have studied across many industries.

The three relationship qualities each do specific work. An overview of the theory describes shared goals as goals that transcend the specific functional goals of participants, shared knowledge as an understanding of how each task fits the whole process, and mutual respect as the quality that lets people overcome status barriers.2 Without shared goals, each function protects its own metrics. Without shared knowledge, people send information late or in the wrong form. Without mutual respect, people ignore the work of others they consider beneath them.

Her book High Performance Healthcare presents findings from ten years of research in the healthcare industry, which shows that the theory travels beyond airlines.3 Gittell's research gives managers a diagnostic. If a hospital discharge process stalls, ask whether nurses, physicians, case managers, and pharmacists share a goal for the patient's timely and safe departure. Ask whether each group knows what the others need. Ask whether the groups treat each other as equals in practice. Each answer points to an intervention, such as joint goals, shared rounds, or changes in how the organization assigns status.

Leadership as a relationship

Relational thinking also changes how we understand leaders. In a 2006 review, Mary Uhl-Bien offered Relational Leadership Theory as an overarching framework for studying leadership as a social influence process through which coordination and change emerge.4 On this view, leadership is not a property that some individuals carry. It arises in the interaction among people, and it depends on the quality of those interactions.

A practical implication follows. Appointing a charismatic executive does not guarantee leadership if the relationships around that person remain poor. A leader's real task includes building trust, clarifying shared aims, and creating routines in which people can influence each other. Many organizations already know this in their best teams, where influence moves in several directions and titles matter less than credibility.

Consider a hypothetical product launch that spans marketing, engineering, and support. The vice president of marketing is a strong individual leader, and yet the launch stumbles because engineering learns of customer promises only after they appear in advertising. A relational leader would repair the link by inviting engineering into the campaign review and by sharing the customer feedback that support collects. The fix costs little and acts on the connection, not the people.

The strength of weak ties

Not every valuable relationship is close. In 1973, sociologist Mark Granovetter showed how casual acquaintances can matter more than friends. In a survey of how 282 men in the United States got their jobs, he found that weak ties, the casual connections and loose acquaintances, were more helpful than strong ones in securing employment.5

The reasoning is structural. Close friends tend to know the same people and the same facts, so they circulate the same information. A weak tie links you to a different circle, and that circle holds information you do not have. Organizations that rely only on tight teams may become efficient and blind at the same time.

For leaders, the lesson is to preserve both kinds of links. Build strong ties inside teams where trust and speed matter, and cultivate weak ties across teams, offices, and industries where fresh information lives. Practical steps include rotating assignments, holding open forums across functions, and encouraging staff to maintain a few contacts outside the company.

Mapping relationships

Relational thinking becomes useful when you make the invisible visible. Begin with one process that matters, such as onboarding a client, resolving a defect, or discharging a patient. List every group involved, then draw a line between each pair that must exchange

information. Rate each line on frequency, timeliness, accuracy, and willingness to solve problems together, using a simple scale from one to five.

The map will show patterns quickly. Some lines will be thick and healthy, some will be thin, and some will be missing altogether. Look especially for pairs with high interdependence and low relationship quality, since these pairs cause most delays. Then talk with each side about what the other side does not understand about their work, because shared knowledge is the cheapest relationship quality to build.

Repeat the exercise after you make changes. Track a few outcome measures such as cycle time, error rates, and rework alongside your ratings. Gittell's research links relationship quality to performance outcomes, and your own data will show whether the same pattern holds in your setting.

Building better links

Interventions for relationships fall into three groups. The first group builds shared goals, for example by measuring teams on joint outcomes and not only on separate functional metrics. The second group builds shared knowledge, for example through job shadowing, cross-training, and joint reviews of failures. The third group builds respect, for example by ending practices that signal rank, such as who speaks first or who receives credit.

Structure matters as much as attitude. A meeting that brings together the right people at the right moment, with a clear agenda for the shared task, creates more coordination than a company retreat. Make the links part of the process design, so that the interaction happens by default and does not depend on goodwill. A weekly fifteen minute call between the two groups that depend on each other most often costs little and pays back quickly. Over time, the habit of contact builds the shared knowledge and the respect that no policy can order into being.

Cautions

Relational thinking can be misused. Friendliness is not coordination, and a team of warm colleagues may still fail to share the right information at the right time. Measure the quality of communication and the results it produces, not only the mood.

The approach can also understate individual differences. Skills, judgment, and effort still matter, and a good relationship cannot replace competence. Treat the relational view as an addition to analysis of individuals, and use both.

Finally, remember that relationships need maintenance. People move, goals change, and old habits return when attention fades. Review your maps on a regular schedule, and treat each reorganization as a moment to check which links the change has cut.

- 1Revisiting relational coordination: a systematic review
- 2An overview of relational coordination
- 3Jody Hoffer Gittell
- 4Relational leadership theory: exploring the social processes of leadership and organizing
- 550 years on, Mark Granovetter's 'The Strength of Weak Ties' is stronger than ever

Summary

Relational thinking shifts attention from the parts of an organization to the links among them. Gittell's relational coordination gives leaders three measurable qualities to build, which are shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect. Uhl-Bien's relational leadership theory treats leadership as something that emerges between people, and Granovetter's research shows that weak ties carry fresh information across groups. Map the relationships that your most important process depends on, rate their quality honestly, and repair the weakest one first. Revisit the map each quarter, because relationships shift as people and priorities change. Share the ratings with the groups involved, and ask them to propose the first repair themselves.