

The motivational magic of workplace pairings

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Much to the chagrin of most managers, the complexity of human psychology does not cease when employees enter the office or log onto Zoom. In fact, complexity seems to be baked into our personality

structure. In a widely cited paper, social psychologists Marilyn Brewer & Wendy Gardner theorized not one but three dimensions of identity: individual (who we innately feel we are), relational (how we perceive ourselves as part of a dyad, i.e., in relation to a specific person) and collective (the sense of self we derive from being part of a larger group).

Shora Moteabbed, an assistant professor in the business foundations area at George Mason University School of Business, argues that academics and management thinkers alike have put most of their attention on the individual and collective levels, neglecting the centrality of dyadic partnerships as a motivating force in [organizations](#). Her interest in relational identity runs throughout her work to date as an educator and scholar.

As a Ph.D. candidate at ESSEC Business School in France, Moteabbed saw that many organizations were adding [women](#) directors to their board, in order to display commitment to gender equality, thereby attracting and retaining highly valuable women talent. However, research by Moteabbed and Junko Takagi of ESSEC (published as a [book chapter](#) by Routledge in 2012) suggests that the mere presence of more women directors is not an effective enough motivator, in and of itself. The imaginative relationship lower-ranking women will form with a newly added female director makes a big difference.

The researchers concluded that executive women directors, i.e., those that rise from the ranks to gain admittance to the corporate boardroom, make a stronger symbolic impression on the rest of the organization than non-executive directors. Lower-ranking women are more likely to adopt executive directors as [role models](#) because they have more in common with those directors and encounter them more frequently. Therefore, the appointment of a female executive director conceivably would affect beliefs and behavior more than that of a non-executive director, and would be more conducive to the development of a talent pipeline of

women leaders.

"These topics—corporate governance, diversity and leadership, etc.—are highly relevant to courses taught in the business foundations area," Moteabbed says. "The knowledge informed by research can enrich class discussions and learning outcomes of the courses."

In and out of the classroom, Moteabbed's work explores how relational identity can help motivate a mutually supportive team culture. When we strongly identify with a colleague, we are more likely to want to help them. But the reasons we identify with others, as well as whom we choose to latch onto, are rooted in the aforementioned tripartite model of the self.

In an ongoing research project (co-authored by Danielle Cooper and Sherry M.B. Thatcher), Moteabbed finds that people with a more individualistic orientation bond with others whom they feel can help them achieve their instrumental goals; i.e., experts and high achievers. Relationally-oriented people seek out close connections with others, thus are more likely to identify and help others with whom they feel most connected. Those with a strong collective orientation will identify based on perceived similarity with another individual, so they can lessen any anxieties about not fitting in.

The lesson for managers is that while identity partnerships are essential to team coherence and resilience, a common team affiliation is not enough to prompt a partnership. In order to foster helping behavior on the team, managers need to know the orientation of each member of their team and identify potentially compatible partners based on that.

Moteabbed says, "Managers should start dialogues and conversation, understand employees' views and how they think about things. If they have the luxury of putting certain people together, they can ask them

what they care about. To motivate people, you should find out what their motivations are based on."

When assembling student teams to tackle in-class projects, she sometimes applies her own research insights, trying to achieve a balance of skill levels and orientations so that each team can be a breeding ground for relational bonds.

Prior to joining the business foundations area at the School of Business, Moteabbed completed post-doctoral work at Mason. She worked closely with Kevin Rockmann, a professor of management at the School of Business who has published extensively on relational identity. Rockmann and Moteabbed (along with co-authors were Danielle Cooper of University of North Texas, and Sherry M.B. Thatcher of University of South Carolina) collaborated on a 2020 theoretical paper in *Academy of Management Review* that looked deeper into how identity formation within dyads can be a mutually reinforcing process with major implications for collective cultures. Soon after joining a team, the paper theorizes, an employee will find an "identity partner" based on their individual need for a sense of belonging. Their choice of partner will play a role in shaping their social integration (or lack thereof) on the team.

As an illustration, imagine a new kid in school desperate to find a social foothold. Whether the kid ends up joining a clique of straight-A students or the badly behaved misfits in the back row may have major implications for their future college prospects. In the moment, however, either social affiliation will do, as long as it satisfies the pressing need for belonging. That is why conscientious parents will be curious about their children's friends. Managers, too, should take an interest in whether new team members are bonding with "integrators" or "gremlins" (to use the researchers' terms). Further, managers who are attentive to relational identity will accurately perceive the dangers of harboring gremlins on the

team in the first place. Every dyadic relationship is an opportunity for gremlins to spread their disaffection. Therefore, [managers](#) should make extra efforts to ensure every member of the team is as well-integrated as possible.

Across critical dimensions of organizational activity, relational [identity](#) is a major motivational force. Yet it is low on the list of managerial concerns. "Managers are mainly focused on other things, the wrong things," Moteabbed says. "They tell their teams, 'We have these values; we should share these [values](#).' But individuals are more influenced by other team members about what's going on in the team. Look at what's happening on the dyadic level; that's where so much of the action is."

More information: Danielle Cooper et al, Integrator or Gremlin? Identity Partnerships and Team Newcomer Socialization, *Academy of Management Review* (2021). [DOI: 10.5465/amr.2018.0014](https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2018.0014)

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