

# TOGETHER, EVERYONE ACHIEVES MORE

Give teams the tools to repair broken connections resulting from conflict.

BY LOLA GERSHFELD











# T

alent retention stands as a critical challenge in today's workplaces. Employee turnover not only reflects negatively on organizational effectiveness but also poses significant disruptions to productivity, morale, and teamwork dynamics. Thus, comprehending the root causes of turnover becomes pivotal in fostering a culture that values and retains talent.

The Myers-Briggs Company's 2022 *Conflict at Work* report reveals that employees spend an average of 4.34 hours per week grappling with workplace conflicts. Further, Yilmaz Palanci and colleagues established in *Health Psychology Report* a clear correlation between turnover intentions and such conflicts.

By embracing principles of attachment theory, managers and their teams gain a profound understanding of how to recognize moments of disconnection and proactively mend relationships before they spiral into detrimental cycles of conflict. Doing so not only fosters stronger bonds within teams but also can lead to notable improvements in retention rates.

## The process of emotional connection

My journey of dealing with workplace conflict led me to develop the Emotional Connection (EmC) process, which draws upon the principles of attachment science. EmC is an effective, short-term approach to team conflict, and it is based on the past 50 years of research in creating secure relationships, powerfully associated with physical and emotional health and well-being.

Talent development professionals can create meaningful change in a brief and efficient manner by

teaching the EmC process to managers and their teams. During EmC training, TD professionals serve as process consultants who work with a team rather than just providing instructions. The alliance is collaborative, with TD inviting team members to actively participate in the EmC process. The approach attempts to tap the power of compelling emotional responses and basic attachment needs and processes to create a difference in team interactions.

The EmC process comprises three distinct stages—de-escalation, restructuring, and integration—each of which plays a crucial role in helping employees clarify their emotional experiences so that they can repair and strengthen their connections within the team and with their manager.

## De-escalation

This first stage is all about creating a safe and supportive alliance. To guide participants in this phase, you (as the TD professional) teach a team's members how to identify their triggers, automatic thoughts, and protective behaviors. Triggers may include certain words or an individual's tone of voice, facial expressions, or behaviors. The automatic thoughts in response to the



## PRINCIPLES OF ATTACHMENT

1. Human beings are hardwired to seek emotional connection with people on which they depend.
2. Emotional connection calms the nervous system and shapes people's mental sense of security and safety.
3. When a connection breaks, the brain goes into a panic called "separation distress."
4. If not repaired, the disconnection causes emotional isolation, which is traumatizing for human beings, bringing a heightened sense of vulnerability and helplessness.
5. Continued disconnections get people stuck in a perpetual cycle of negative interactions, which create toxic environments.
6. Emotional responsiveness helps restore the emotional balance and change the negative cycle into a positive one where people can repair the disconnection and restore the relationship.
7. Secure team relationships are key to creating thriving cultures.

## RAW SPOTS

Clarifying the behavior that sparked a conflict helps team members to address their negative cycle.

- Excluding or rejecting you
- Not valuing or appreciating you for your work, skills, or performance
- Showing no interest in or doubting your ability in achieving your ambition or dream
- Not acknowledging the point you're making
- Turning away from you
- Criticizing or making jokes about something that's fundamental to who you are
- Telling you that your feelings aren't valid or reasonable
- Showing disapproval or disgust
- Disliking you or viewing you negatively
- Ignoring, minimizing, or criticizing you after you communicate your needs
- Judging you as not good enough or not as good as someone else
- Trying to change you or make you into something you're not
- Telling you that you don't deserve something
- Making demeaning comments about you
- Being aggressive or intimidating toward you
- Ignoring your questions or comments or the importance of your questions

triggers may include "I have to get away," "I have to stop you," or "I give up." Protective behaviors may include complaining, judging, blaming, withdrawing, distancing, or avoiding.

Teach learners the skill of reframing to shift the blame from an individual to focus on the negative cycle. For instance, they can use phrases such as "You are caught in a terrible negative cycle" or "The cycle has taken over your interactions." Such a newfound understanding transforms individuals' perspectives from battling each other to collectively addressing the negative cycle that is causing the conflict.

Further, train individuals to communicate the importance of each team member through attachment reframing with statements such as "I can see how much you care about this project" or "I can see how important you are to each other." Doing so helps managers and their direct reports to recognize the value of each individual.

Emotions are pivotal to changing negative cycles because emotions are the driving force behind actions and reactions. Further, research shows that the more specific and granular people can describe their emotional experiences, the less overwhelmed they are when communicating with others. To help team mem-

bers learn to clarify their emotional experiences, work through a list of "raw spots" (see sidebar) and negative emotions with them. Emotions can range from frustrated, annoyed, or confused to worried, hurt, fear, or shame—and anything in between.

Slowing down interactions during stressful situations is also beneficial for participants. Demonstrate and teach managers how to be emotionally responsive via the use of six responses that help everyone feel heard and understood:

- I can hear that this was really difficult for you.
- This can be very stressful.
- Your feelings are valid.
- I hear you.
- I feel honored that you would share this with me.
- I can see how much this matters to you.

Such phrases provide messages of care, support, and validation, which foster moments of safety and alliance.

Note that some people may take time to feel safe to discuss their emotions openly, but humans' innate need for connection encourages them to take risks. With enough safety, individuals start to grasp their experiences vividly, which creates clarity in their communication and intentions with their colleagues.

## Restructuring

In this part of the process, individuals seek to create bonding moments with the person with whom they are having conflict. Bonding conversations are the heart of the EmC process and are essential to rebuilding a secure attachment. They entail individuals sharing their vulnerabilities, fears, and needs to feel safe and connected. That creates a positive experience of repairing the disconnection and strengthens the relationship.

Bonding conversations possess several notable strengths:

- Efficiently address the core issues underlying conflicts
- Firmly grounded in a well-established model of human development (attachment theory)
- Intentionally place emotions—a primary organizing element in relationships—at the forefront of the conversation

The conversations revolve around A.R.E. interactions—being accessible, responsive, and engaged—a concept Susan M. Johnson, a researcher of attachment relationships, introduced.

One of the key questions in a secure relationship is “Are you there for me?” That translates into:

- Are you emotionally accessible to me?
- Do I matter to you?
- Are you emotionally responsive to me?
- Will you understand my pain?
- Are you emotionally engaged with me?
- Can you stay in the conversation even though you are feeling stressed?

As team members engage in a bonding conversation, the answers to those questions become clear in a positive and affirming way.

To have a bonding conversation, individuals must share their triggers with one another, along with their raw spots, emotions, automatic thoughts, and protective behaviors. (Participants can use a “reconnection form,” which lists the various possibilities for each category, as a resource.) While teaching the process during training exercises, validate the participants’ courage to open up. Also offer support with affirmation statements such as “I was amazed by your courage and strength to be able to work through the struggle,” “I was moved by what you were able to do,” or “I can see how much this matters to you.”

During the exercise, participants should experience the A.R.E. interaction where each team member learns how to be accessible, responsive, and engaged by sharing their feelings, fears, and needs in a way that creates bonding and repairs the connection.

Focus on guiding participants through the process safely without judgment, using essential skills such as empathy, collaboration, openness, and compassion.

After much practice, individuals will be able to initiate their own bonding conversations. For example, one would start by someone recognizing the negative cycle that has transpired:

*Mary:* “I feel like we are getting stuck in a negative cycle. I am trying to talk to you, but maybe it is coming out as blaming because I notice that you are shutting down.”

*Tomás:* “I am shutting down because I feel attacked. You’re right, we are getting into a negative cycle. Let’s use the reconnection form to slow things down and help each other feel safe.”

Or, an employee could approach a colleague and say something such as: “In our conversation during [specific event or incident], I felt a disconnect, and I want to use our reconnection form to have a conversation so that we can feel safe and connected.”

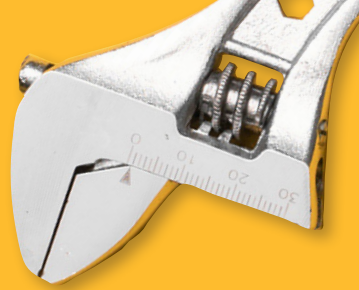
TD professionals who have used the reconnection process and bonding conversations experienced heightened enthusiasm and a greater sense of fulfillment for helping teams reconnect, seeing an increase in productivity, collaboration, and motivation. Workplace cultures require a profound transformation, and TD professionals, as role models, can help organizations evolve into an environment that nurtures growth and resilience.

## Integration

In the integration stage, managers and leaders model the principles of creating secure relationships. As they embody the A.R.E. principles, they can better tune in to their team members and catch moments of disconnection early to create a repair. That starts to transform their relationships into a culture of connection where staff begin to feel more confident, valued, and cared for, which fosters a sense of belonging and security.

It seems logical to assume that managers and leaders who have experienced safe attachment and can depend on others will find it easier to be a role model to others. At minimum, the ability to use the attachment lens requires a willingness to accept people’s needs to connect with and lean on others in moments of vulnerability and stress.

One powerful example from one of the teams I worked with involved a newly hired manager at a biotechnology company. During a virtual leadership retreat, she bravely conveyed her emotions about a delayed project for a trade show. She expressed her fear of letting the CEO down and her sense of shame regarding the delay. I asked everyone to turn off their cameras (but remain in the meeting) except her and the CEO, and then asked the manager to share her experience with the CEO. Their conversation went something like this:



## STRONG AND SECURE RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE FOUNDATION OF A THRIVING CULTURE.

*Manager:* “When I was delayed with the poster, I felt worried and ashamed. I sensed a distance from you, and I had a fear that I disappointed you and let you down. I guess I need to know that my feelings are valid and that you care about me.”

*CEO:* “Thank you for sharing. I didn’t feel disappointed. I felt helpless. In a way, I did shut down and was distant. I am glad that you’re bringing this up now. I want to be there for you. Your feelings are valid, and I care about you. You are important to me, and you’re important to the team.”

As the CEO spoke, tears welled up in the manager’s eyes. That vulnerable moment led to a profound shift in the team dynamics. The CEO’s accessibility and responsiveness acknowledged the stressful nature of the situation and affirmed the manager’s courage and importance to both the organization and the team.

When the other participants returned on-screen, many expressed that they were deeply moved by that moment of emotional connection. Not only did it strengthen the bond between the CEO and the new manager, but it also created a ripple effect throughout the leadership team.

The role modeling of being emotionally present helped everyone on the team learn how to create similar bonding moments using the EmC process. Integrating emotional connection principles into the team’s culture fostered a more cohesive and emotionally supportive environment.

### **A culture of emotional connection**

I have witnessed the transformative power of attachment science in creating cohesive and effective teams. Embracing emotional connection as a fundamental principle can lead organizations to create nurturing cultures where team members truly thrive.

Building a culture of emotional connection is akin to providing oxygen for growth. People will blossom and feel heard, understood, and supported in their professional journeys.

As you train groups on EmC, keep in mind the following best practices.

**Process the experience.** Using affirmation statements, highlight the steps of the reconnection process and help individuals to change their perception of one another from feeling stuck and disconnected to feeling empowered and connected.

**Share impact versus feedback.** Encourage individuals to share the impact of behavior on them rather than focusing on giving feedback that dictates how others should change. That helps to create safety and enables them to tune in to their own experience.

**Educate to empower.** Provide opportunities for team members to learn how they affect one another and how much they need each other to thrive.

**Focus on securing relationships.** Strong and secure relationships are the foundation of a thriving culture. Invest in nurturing such relationships because they enable free expression of ideas, risk-taking, and vulnerability sharing.

Emotional connection is not only a fundamental human need but also a powerful tool for transformation within organizations. By teaching the EmC process, you will equip managers and their teams with skills and strategies to address conflict at the root of the problem instead of solely dealing with symptoms. The process enables teams to move forward with confidence and resilience and helps managers feel competent in addressing and nurturing team relationships.

It is a journey on which every individual and every organization can embark, leading to a workplace culture where people not only work together but thrive together.

**Lola Gershfeld** is the founder of EmC Leaders, a training and consulting company focusing on helping managers master the art of relationships. She is also author of *Emotional Connection: The EmC Strategy*; [lola@emcleaders.com](mailto:lola@emcleaders.com).



# SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

## Interested in subscribing to *TD* magazine?

### Rates

**\$180** Individual Domestic (US)

**\$399** Institutional Domestic (US)

**\$289** Individual International

**\$508** Institutional International

To subscribe, go to [td.org/TDsub](http://td.org/TDsub).

### Get even more when you become an **ATD** member!

All ATD memberships include a monthly subscription\* to *TD* magazine, plus access to webinars, digital publications, research, discounts on conferences, and much more.

**For details about ATD membership, visit [td.org/membership](http://td.org/membership).**

\*International members outside the US, Canada, and Puerto Rico receive the digital *TD* magazine as part of their membership.