Effective working relationships are critical to your success as a PR professional. There are many different working relationships that take place within each individual PR campaign you will work on, from colleagues to clients and journalists and suppliers.

In this part of the unit we will explore how establishing good working relationships relies on a culture of cooperation where each person within the relationship is working towards the achievement of common goals, how to best set and communicate these goals, and how to manage conflicts of interest.
1 Benefits of good working relationships

The main benefits of building good working relationships with your colleagues are as follows.

- It helps to develop your working practices to understand the points of view of your colleagues and to understand why they do things a certain way.
- It spreads good practice throughout an organisation.
- It improves your networking skills, which are vital for career development.
- You are able to improve your decision making by having a wider access to information about all aspects of your PR campaign.

The main benefits of building good relationships with your stakeholders are:

- informed decision making for your strategic plans
- cooperative solutions to an organisation’s goals
- increased organisational effectiveness
- improved corporate reputation
- avoidance of negative press.

2 Agreeing a common purpose

To develop good working relationships with colleagues and stakeholders, and to avoid conflict, it is essential to share a common purpose. This may relate to a single project goal or it may be the overall aim of a whole organisation. Communicating with colleagues and stakeholders is the only way of identifying and agreeing a common sense of purpose.

Link
For more information about communication, look at Unit 7: Communicating effectively in public relations.

Identifying a common purpose

Having identified your key internal stakeholders, you need to engage them in discussion about your project or campaign plans. By doing this early on in your project, you will be able to set SMART goals about how you would like each part of your project to proceed. SMART goals are:

- **S**pecific
- **M**easurable
- **A**chievable and agreed on
- **R**ealistic and relevant
- **T**ime-bound.

In order to identify and agree a common purpose, you must discuss:

- each stakeholder’s goals
- the objectives they see as needed to meet the goals
- how individuals and teams will work together
- explicitly what your goals are, and the objectives you must meet to achieve them.

Be **specific** and state how you would like your colleagues and (if relevant) external stakeholders to assist you with these goals. Once you have done this you can **agree on achievable** team and individual roles within the project. It is important
that everyone within the project agrees on how they will measure the success of their output. This could be, for example, in pieces of coverage achieved for a campaign. However, you must also ensure that these targets are realistic – for example, are you really going to be able to secure 100 pieces of national coverage, and if you are working on a campaign for a local shopping centre, would that even be relevant? Finally your campaign milestones need to be identified and time-bound. You need to give yourself and your colleagues enough time realistically to complete tasks. If you are working with external stakeholders, they may have other important dates you need to consider.

Once you have discussed your SMART objectives with your colleagues, you must clearly agree on roles and deadline dates. It is often assumed that people understand what they need to do or what is being asked of them, and this is where stakeholder conflict can arise. It is better to create a short report agreeing on the common purpose and actionable points, and to ensure each stakeholder is aware of it. You may need to explain what your areas of expertise are and how these can be best used in your role.

**Communicating with stakeholders**

Once you have identified stakeholders and their importance, then you must start to think about how to communicate with them, and what your message is for them. When working with internal stakeholders, you must make sure that each person within a team is clear about their roles and responsibilities. Within PR this is often the point of weekly team meetings. These can be small and about specific accounts and campaigns; they are used to make sure that everyone is on track and on time with their agreed objectives. Larger team meetings (often whole-agency meetings) are used to see how all internal stakeholders are meeting broader aims and so that you can gain an understanding of how shared resources are being utilised on a campaign.

You need to think clearly about what you want to say at meetings. This in turn will help give you the confidence to make your point clearly.

You can also think of communication with stakeholders as negotiations, since you are each trying to reach the best possible outcome. This includes communicating with your colleagues. While this is not necessarily a negotiation as such, each time you communicate with a colleague you are interacting with them and building a (good or bad) relationship with them. Each interaction contributes to a pattern of behaviour (see Figure 13.2.1 on page 4), or perceived behaviour, between you and your colleague; this builds the basis of your relationship.

You either build trust in your reliability and consistency to behave in a professional way, or undermine this trust. If you have lost the trust of your colleagues you will be unable to persuade them of your point of view or to do something for you. As a result you will have lost the ability to agree on or negotiate a common sense of purpose.

**Positive working relationships**

Developing a positive relationship with all of your stakeholders is vital. If the stakeholder trusts you or your organisation, they will be more likely to compromise and work towards joint goals. By listening to and building strong
relationships with your stakeholders, you can use them to help identify potential opportunities and threats for your organisation. Developing strong relationships with internal stakeholders also builds on your professional network, which will help you throughout your career.

Your communications strategy should always be clear and easy to understand for everyone involved. You may have different communications plans for different stakeholders within the same group. For example, your overarching strategy for communicating with the local community could be ‘Help increase participation in sport for 10–15-year-olds in the local community by 20 per cent over the coming year’. Your communications plan will set out the details of how, when, what and to whom you will communicate. You will have different communications plans for working with local sports clubs, councils and young people.

To help external stakeholders and an organisation work together and to create a common sense of purpose, the organisation must have the following.

1. Good strong leadership – leaders should have a clear set of priorities and create a shared vision of how to achieve these. They should communicate these priorities directly and indirectly to stakeholders via their employees.

2. Staff – good stakeholder relationships are built up over many day-to-day interactions. Staff at all levels need to be credible and consistent, and share their organisation’s objectives.

3. Communication – organisations need to communicate their objectives well both internally and externally. They should conduct real, two-way conversations with their stakeholders, listening to them and providing feedback.

Conflicts of interest with stakeholders

One of the key issues when trying to agree on a common purpose with stakeholders is dealing with the inevitable conflicts of interest. There are three main strategies for dealing with these.

1. Early intervention: if you identify the conflict early, you can prevent it from becoming an entrenched view and the situation growing out of control. By using issues management skills, you should be able to identify what these conflicts might be before entering into the communication process with your stakeholder, which would then give you the opportunity to intervene early.
2 **Clear communication:** as noted above, if there is clear communication then you have the building blocks in place for a positive relationship with your stakeholder. If you have this positive relationship then you should be able to talk through your conflicts of interest and find a common purpose to agree on.

3 **Manage difficult behaviour:** if one of your stakeholders exhibits difficult behaviour, it is your job to keep calm and avoid behaving in an unprofessional way, such as shouting or using insults. You should attempt to be assertive but use neutral language to defuse aggression.

**Activity**
Using the example of participation in sport above, imagine that your organisation/client is a fast food retailer who wishes to engage the local community’s youth in sport. List who your stakeholders are and what each one wants to achieve.
- What is their common purpose?
- What conflicts might they have?

If as a part of the above campaign you wanted to run a competition in a local newspaper to give away sports equipment, who might your internal stakeholders be? What objectives should you agree with them to create an internal common sense of purpose?

**Communicating a common sense of purpose to colleagues**

**Sharing objectives**
As mentioned in the previous section, it is common practice in PR agencies to have formal and informal team meetings to assess how a campaign is progressing. This is where teams feed back to senior management what actions they are taking and planning to take to meet previously agreed objectives. Senior management are interested in this not only to monitor your progress as a junior member of a team, but also to see how the overall campaign is progressing within the strategic direction of the agency. Some agencies may be happy to share their client billing totals (the amount of money the agency bills the various clients annually) with their staff. This is a very useful piece of information to communicate as it helps you to see your work in relation to the agency’s **bottom line**. However, billing is not the only measure of success within an agency. If the agency is trying to win more clients in a specific sector, it is helpful to know if and how your campaign is contributing to these new-business wins.

Agency meetings also serve the purpose of allowing you to understand what your colleagues are working on and the time constraints and resource issues they are dealing with. It is important to listen at agency meetings to what every team member has to say. By having a clear understanding of each person’s roles and responsibilities, you will be able to have a greater respect for what they are trying to achieve, and understand how they fit into the bigger picture.

In internal PR offices this is just as important, if not more so. With internal communications you must have a clear idea of who is working on which project within the organisation and what they are trying to achieve in terms of the

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**Key term**

**Bottom line** – the net income that a company makes.
strategic direction of the organisation. Once you understand this, you will be able to communicate your role and how you are each trying to achieve a common purpose.

If you do not clearly understand your role within a campaign and what your actions will do to help make it successful, ask your line manager to explain to you. It is only by understanding this that you can be truly motivated.

**Understanding competencies**

A useful tool utilised in many PR agencies is a competency-based framework. This is used to link the individual performance of an employee directly to the goals of the business. In fact this form of communication and measurement is deemed so valuable that the PRCA (Public Relations Consultants Association) have included it in their Consultancy Management Standard (CMS) as a mark of consultancy and in-house PR excellence.

The competencies outline the behaviours that the organisation values and requires in order to meet their strategic objectives. By looking at these competencies, which outline the knowledge, skills and attributes that employees need to perform their job properly, you can identify what impact your own work is having on the overall strategic direction of the organisation. Additionally team members can work more effectively and achieve their potential by recognising and respecting the input of the whole team.

**Clear communication**

As well as having a clear communication message within your organisation, it is important to communicate clearly with your colleagues. For a team to work well, everyone in the team needs to have their needs met. For example, you might become stuck on an aspect of a campaign and require your colleague’s help to finish it, but find your colleague is also busy. In this situation, you need to communicate your time frame, and to find out if you can help them in return. Alternatively you could ask them to recommend someone else who could help you.

So in order to communicate clearly with your colleagues you should:

- clearly state what it is you are asking for
- try to keep your communication as short as possible while including all of the information required
- ask for further information/feedback if you have not received enough to move forward with your project
- use formal (e.g. a meeting) and informal (e.g. talking to someone at their desk) communication channels
- listen and act on any information/feedback you are given.

Problems that may appear when you are communicating with colleagues include the following.

- Overload – you may be given too much information and therefore not be able to process it. In this instance you need to give feedback to that person and explain that you need to hear the information again.
- Lack of clarity – the message may not be clear, it may be ambiguous and be seen to mean different things to different people.
• Distance – if you are communicating with colleagues in different departments or at different sites, you might not know them and their personalities and how they may react to different situations as you would if you worked in close proximity with them. It would also be difficult to have face-to-face communication, and this can cut down on understanding.
• Immediacy – telephone conversations may interrupt other business and you may not get your colleague’s full attention, or they may lead to non-verbal responses such as showing irritation that they have been disturbed.
• Non-verbal issues take over – emotions may override the information. This is often particularly true if you are receiving negative feedback about work you have produced.

Conflicts of interest with colleagues

There will be times in your working life that you will disagree with colleagues. These may be due to the communication issues noted above or they may be because of other issues noted below. Whatever the reasons, it is important to recognise these conflicts of interest and how to resolve them.
• Conflicts of interest – these do arise and it is important to deal with them quickly and effectively.
• Limited resources – there are often limited resources within organisations and there may be competition for them that leads to conflict of interest.
• Departmentalisation – as seen earlier, your colleagues may include people in other departments. In larger organisations conflicts can sometimes occur when departments become insular and do not like to communicate with other departments.
• Individual differences – sometimes two people just do not get along, for reasons such as differing views or clashing personalities. It is important to recognise these problems exist and address them in your working life. You need to act professionally in order to get the work done.

Key questions to ask in PR campaign planning

Putting all of the above information together, you can create a plan to ensure that you and your stakeholders are able to agree on a common purpose. You should begin each PR campaign or project by asking yourself the following questions.
• Who do I want to get my message to?
• What is my message?
• How does my work integrate with other departments or organisations?
• Who is paying for the project and who signs off budgets?
• How might I and others judge the success of a project, message or campaign?
• Which teams, suppliers or materials might I need to communicate with, and how can I engage or source them?
• Who might disagree with the project or message?

Once you have answered these questions, made them into SMART objectives and created a stakeholder map, you should be able to proceed with your campaign/project with the help and support of your stakeholders.
You must make sure that part way through your campaign/project you revisit these questions and ensure that you are on track, and that you have clearly communicated with all relevant stakeholders what is happening and how it may affect them.

**Portfolio activity**  
Clarify how you agree a common sense of purpose with colleagues and stakeholders. Where possible, include examples from the workplace. You may want to record how you have established working relationships with colleagues and stakeholders by producing a relationship-building plan.

**Further reading**

