

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript
Lynn Thoman
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Ep. 141: Getting Along: How to Work with Anyone (Even Difficult People) with Harvard Business Review Contributing Editor

INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now, your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi, everyone, it's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another 3 Takeaways episode. Today I'm excited to be with Amy Gallo. Amy is the author of *Getting Along: How to Work with Anyone, Even Difficult People*, and is a contributing editor at Harvard Business Review. Let's say you disagree with someone more powerful than you. Should you say something? If so, what should you say and how should you say it? I'm looking forward to finding out how to work with difficult people and disagree more constructively. I'm also looking forward to learning how to build better relationships and have better meetings over Zoom. Welcome, Amy, and thanks so much for our conversation today.

Amy Gallo: Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here.

LT: It is my pleasure. Our jobs are where we spend our days, and they're also where we have some of our most intense and complicated relationships. How important are relationships at work, both to performance of teams as well as to our personal well-being?

AG: There is a ton and ton of research that shows how important relationships are, whether they're good or bad. They have a strong influence on how well we perform, whether we're productive, how engaged we are at work, whether we stay at a job, whether we're willing to put in extra effort, and even connection between our relationships and our ability to be creative or innovative. I think we've done a disservice to relationships at work with this very 20th century idea that you show up at work and you leave your emotions and you leave your need to connect and you leave your humanness behind, when in fact what we're learning more and more is that that's not true. I think a lot of people would hear that now and think, well, of course that makes no sense. Of course, we show up with our emotions and our relationships and thinking about our families when we're at work and thinking about work when we're with our families. Of course, that makes sense to us, but that's not the way we thought about work for a very long time.

AG: So we need relationships with the people we work with in order to do our jobs, in order to feel good about doing our jobs. And those relationships that aren't good really have an outsized impact on not only our productivity, our creativity, but also on our well-being. And so it pays to pay attention to your relationships, to tend to the ones that are good and continue to make them positive, but also to address the negative ones so that they're not impairing your ability to show up as your full and best self every day.

LT: And how important are relationships to the actual performance of teams?

AG: There's actually really interesting data about this. So one of my favorite pieces of research that I came across in working on the book is a team of researchers at Rutgers found that people who report being friends at work actually have higher performance reviews, indicating that they're not only performing better, but the perception of their work is stronger if they have friends at work. There's years and years of data from Gallup as well that show that people who report having a best friend at work tend to perform better.

AG: And there's another study, which wasn't specifically about work, but I think it really demonstrates the way that relationships can benefit us in taking on tasks. There was a research that looked at people who were at the bottom of a hill or a mountain and had a backpack on. They had to estimate how heavy the backpack was. Those who were about to climb the hill alone estimated it was much heavier than those who were about to do it with someone else, and those who were about to do it with someone else estimated it was heavier than those who were about to do it with a friend. So that relationship makes us even see challenges as less daunting than we would if we were doing them alone or doing them with people we don't have a relationship with.

LT: So interesting. We're all spending more time these days in virtual meetings over Zoom. Many people are hybrid. It's hard to build relationships over Zoom. What tips do you have for Zoom meetings and Zoom interactions, personal as well?

AG: I'm really focused on two things. One of how do we form relationships, which is what your question is getting to, but also how do we resolve conflicts or disagreements or slights or points of friction? And I think that goes to how do we form relationships or how do those relationships fracture? And one of the things about being in these Zoom meetings is we feel less human ourselves, and we certainly see others as less human when we see them as little squares on a box that we can easily shut off. We don't have to think about their feelings, their reactions, what the context is, where they are, whether they're stressed out, whether something's going on at home for them. We can just sort of have these very transactional relationships, and for some people, that's a real relief, to be honest, because they find the emotional load of having to interact and form relationships difficult, but ultimately, we really do need to find ways to connect, especially when we're not seeing someone in their full self and we're not having the benefit of in-person interaction. So there's a couple of things I will say about making those meetings better. Number one, it is very difficult to raise disagreements and conflicts or even just simple differences of opinion in a Zoom context because interrupting the flow of the conversation, not knowing how you're going to be received, not knowing what's going to happen when everyone shuts off the camera.

AG: When I'm in-person in a meeting and people walk out, I can tell from their body language. I can tell by who they're talking to, whether they go back to their desk or start chatting amongst themselves, how things I said were received. You don't have that in a Zoom context.

AG: So one, I would say as a leader on a team, and you don't even have to be the most senior person on a team to do this, but is to make sure that you don't interpret silence as agreement. So if there's an important question or if you suspect people might actually have a difference of opinion but aren't saying it, is to build in time and maybe even a moment or a process like a round robin of like, we're going to go around and I want everyone to say where they are on a scale of 1-10, on agreeing with this or a scale of 1-5. Or I want to make sure silence is not agreement. So can people either use the thumbs up or the thumbs down symbol in Zoom to indicate whether they're on the

same page. The other thing I would say for us as individuals, one of the things that often gets lost or misinterpreted in these mediums of interacting is our intention.

LT: That's very helpful. Nobody wants to disagree, or at least most people don't want to disagree and most people don't want confrontation. Let's start with what happens if you don't speak up. Let's say someone gives you an unrealistic timeline or a senior person wants your buy-in in a doomed-to-fail idea. What if you don't speak up?

AG: I love the way you phrased this question, Lynn, because I think what often we focus on, because we are hardwired for likability, it's how we've survived in communities over the history of human existence.

AG: It's we want to be likable, we want people to be in connection with us or in relationship with us. So disagreeing feels like a rupture to that. And what we most often focus on is what happens when I disagree. We don't focus on what you just asked, which is what if I don't speak up? What if I don't voice this disagreement? And there are often very large risks to doing that. So in your example of this doomed-to-fail project, if you don't speak up and people knew that you had a reason to believe that that project was going to fail, it may be on you at the end of the day for its failure. I mean, you also have to work now in a team or a unit or even an organization where this failure is looming large. When there's something that the team sets out to do and doesn't achieve, that has an impact, not only on the psyche of everyone on the team, but also on the team's goals, maybe the team's revenue, maybe the success of the company. So there's a lot riding on whether you speak up or not. And unfortunately, most of us focus on the risks of action and not the risks of inaction.

LT: So when is sharing your opinion the right thing to do?

AG: So I think you have to do that risk assessment that we were just talking about of thinking about what are the risks of not speaking up? What are the risks of speaking up? Most often the right thing to do will be to say something. It's just a matter of finding the right venue, the right way to say it. But there will be times where the risk is too great. You work for a boss who you know is absolutely not receptive to differences of opinion, who will retaliate. Maybe the culture is one where there's not much psychological safety. So speaking up will incur damage for you, either your reputation or maybe the opportunity to get a raise or a bonus or a promotion, or you might even be fired. That's a rare occurrence. But certainly if you develop a reputation as being someone who is disagreeable, hard to get along with, that's not out of the realm of possibility. So you have to be realistic, though, about what those risks are. And as I said, more often than not speaking up will be the right thing to do.

LT: Does where you meet matter, whether it's in person or via Zoom? And what do you do differently if you meet virtually rather than in person?

AG: I think for disagreement, especially one that you think might be a sensitive conversation, meeting in person is ideal. You'll get a lot more information from the other person in terms of their body language, just how they respond, both verbally but nonverbally as well. There's interesting research that shows we tend to have more empathy when we can look someone in the eyes.

AG: So you will incur their empathy as well as have more empathy for them if you do that. Now, of course, that's not always possible in today's world. So you want to try to find a medium that's as rich

as possible. So Zoom would be better than obviously anything involving just text, like email or Slack. And I think one of the things you have to remember is that in those lower, less rich mediums or lower fidelity mediums, one of the risks is miscommunication or misunderstanding.

AG: So you have to really try to compensate for that. Again, stating your intention up front can be clear. Making clear what you're saying and what you're not saying. "I'm not trying to say this. What I'm really trying to say is this." Using communication tools that really emphasize clarity, asking at the end of the conversation, "Was it clear what I said? Do you have any questions about that?" Things that we might shortcut when we're in person because we can tell by how they've responded, we have to be more intentional about doing that. And the same holds true for meetings in general. I've had many very productive meetings over Zoom or Teams, over the phone.

AG: I actually have worked remotely for a long time, long before the pandemic. And I was never averse to any of these media ways of communicating. But I also understand for some people, it's not an easy medium. And so you have to also consider who you're interacting with, what their comfort level is as well. I'm certainly not advocating that we all need to go back to the office just so that we can meet in person. I'm just saying when you have something that's going to be a tricky conversation, where you need people to really be able to see one another's responses to things. If you can choose to have those meetings in person, you're going to be much better off.

LT: For those tricky conversations, how do you recommend starting them?

AG: There's three things I really believe we should do when we start off a tricky conversation. Number one is emphasize a shared goal. And that might be something like, we both want to get this project done by the deadline next week. Or it might be something even higher level. We both care about what's best for the team. Or it might be something even self-serving that you know the other person cares about.

AG: We both know we want to look good to our boss. Something that you know you and the other person align on starting there puts you on the same side of the table. The second thing is to clarify what you believe the disagreement or the tricky part of the conversation is about. So many conversations go off the rails because someone just starts in saying, well, here's what we're disagreeing about. And just starts to take over the conversation while the other person's like, I don't think that's what... I think we're disagreeing about something else entirely. So you might clarify and say, "I think we're disagreeing about the goal of the project, or I think we're disagreeing about the pace at which we need to do this, or I think we have different working styles and we've hit a moment of tension because of that." And then ask, "Is that how you see it?" So you can clarify, are we at least on the same page? If they agree, "Yeah, that's how I see it," now you've looked, you have a point of agreement. That helps pave the way for further agreements. If they don't, then you have an opportunity to negotiate, "Okay, well, how are we seeing this differently? Why is that?"

AG: And it begins that sort of collaborative conversation. And then the third thing I think you should do anytime you're expressing a disagreement or about to have a tricky conversation is to really make clear that you intend to be collaborative in that conversation. So you might even say, success here will depend on us collaborating. It might be explicit like that. It might be asking a question, what am I missing? How are you seeing this? That indicates that you're not there to bulldoze and just explain your points and be done with it, but that you're actually interested in what they have to say and that you are willing to listen.

LT: Those are great tips.

AG: Thank you.

LT: I really like your advice about staying humble. Can you give some examples of what to say?

AG: The point of staying humble is really to demonstrate and model open-mindedness. You only know what you know. And there's this concept in psychology called naive realism, which is that we think we're seeing things very clearly, we're seeing the truth. And if someone disagrees or sees it differently, they're misinformed or just simply wrong. And that can't be the case. The reality is there are many different ways to see a situation or see a conversation or even to interpret data. There's just so many different ways we can see something. And so being humble is really about expressing that, making that clear. And it's not about undermining you. And I think this is one of the misconceptions about humble leadership in general and certainly humble communication is that it's somehow weak. And it's not. You can be very clear in your convictions.

AG: "So here's how I'm seeing the quarterly budget shortfall that we're experiencing right now. Here's my ideas on how to fix it. I'm basing these on the data we have available. If there's any different perspective based on alternative data, I'd like to hear it." There's nothing weak about that. That's just demonstrating that you're willing to change your mind. Likewise, you might say, "Here's my perspective from where I stand. I know there are various other perspectives. I'd like to hear them. Can we go around the room and share perspectives?" Also being humble is not leaning into your credibility all the time.

AG: Certainly, there's times, especially if you come from an underestimated group, where you need to make clear why you have credibility in this area. But if you go to that every time, "I went to this school, I've worked decades in this industry," it starts to erode that humility and people just start to see you as a know-it-all, which is really counterproductive for you.

LT: You suggest sharing only facts, not judgments, and that people should state their case without adjectives. Can you give an example?

AG: This is especially important in a disagreement, especially someone who's more senior than you. If you say, for example, "I just think this is risky, we'd be making a big mistake if we did this, it seems really rash." What people hear is judgment. They just hear, you don't like the idea. "You think what I've put forward is rash. I'm not being logical, but I am very..." They just immediately feel defensive, which is understandable. But if you can say, "Here's what we have stated we're going to try. We've tried something similar in the past. This is what the result was. Here's what I think we should try instead." Just being very clear about what the facts are and not trying to layer that with your judgment or with your opinion. I think sometimes we think we have to put in these adjectives to make clear what we're thinking, but the facts can speak for themselves and they're also less disputable.

AG: Just making it based in reality and things that are less disputable or at least are disputable on their claims, not because of someone's judgment.

LT: You have such very practical tips. In your opinion, why does saying something like, and I'm

quoting from your book, "I know you'll make the right decision," why does that work well?

AG: It appeals to someone's best self. And so it both states that you have trust in them, that you really believe in their judgment, and you believe in their integrity. And so then it sort of sets a bar for them to live up to that. It's actually a technique that I've picked up from books about parenting teenagers. I have a 15-year-old daughter, and it's very easy to criticize the choices she makes. But by telling her, when she tells me, "I don't want to study for this test, I'm never going to be able to pass," for me to say, "I believe in you. I know you're going to make the right decision," is much better than, well, "You should do this, and you should do this," because I immediately turn that off. And same goes, I don't like the parenting, managing analogies, because I don't want to make people feel like if they're a manager, they have to parent.

AG: And I don't want people to make it feel like they're children if they're being managed. But I think the same is true, which is that you're just asking people to live up to your expectations. And it demonstrates a trust that's really core to having positive interactions and positive relationships at work.

LT: Stepping back, what are the best ways in general to improve our interactions with other people? What are the key things for us to remember and to do?

AG: That's a great question to come after your last one, because it is really a lot about trust. And I think we often decide whether to trust someone based on their competence and based on their warmth. And so thinking about, how do I demonstrate my competence? And I don't mean by saying, bragging about your credentials again, but I mean by saying you're going to do something and then following through and doing it. That's competence, is that I've told you I can do this, and I actually do it. And then warmth is really about connecting with people on a personal level. And again, you don't have to share all of your family details. If you're an introvert, you don't have to be out there with all of your emotions.

AG: But even asking someone, "How was your weekend?" Engaging in something that they find interesting, engaging in a conversation about that is a way to form a connection. It could be a book. It can be a sports team. It can even be about the work of, "How did you think that project went? What do you wish we had done differently?" Just engaging in a way that allows them to express themselves, show a little bit of themselves, and then you can do that in return, is a great way to build the foundation for that warmth, in addition to the competence.

LT: Amy, what are the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

AG: The first one I will say is that when we are dealing with someone that challenges us, pushes our buttons, is that we have to really keep in mind the issue of bias, in particular, affinity bias, which is the propensity for us to like people who are similar to us in how they look, how they sound, and their background, where they're from. The second, any time you're trying to transform a relationship, whether it's one that's really challenging or really difficult, really negative, or even if it's something that's just not quite right in a relationship that's normally positive, is that I wish I could tell you there's like a five-step process to making your passive-aggressive peer less passive-aggressive or turning your pessimistic colleague into an optimistic colleague. But more often than not, really what you have to do is experiment and try out different tactics and see what works. And the third thing I will say is, whether you're having disagreements with your colleagues or your boss

or you're, again, in one of these challenging relationships, is that ultimately you need to take care of yourself. A lot of the advice I give in my books is about being, "the adult in the room." And that takes a lot of emotional labor, a lot of work. And I only encourage you to do that because I think ultimately I think it'll help you and it'll benefit the relationship. But you are your first priority. And you need to take steps to make sure that you're protecting yourself, your well-being, you're doing the appropriate self-care, but that you're also protecting your career so that ultimately you get what you want out of these relationships. Not just what the other person needs.

LT: Thank you, Amy. This has been great. I really enjoyed your book, *Getting Along*.

AG: Thank you so much, Lynn. This has been a really great conversation. I appreciate it.

LT: For anyone who's interested, we have several great related episodes.

- Ask For More: 2 Questions to Negotiate Almost Anything with Columbia Law School Mediation Clinic Director Alex Carter. That's [episode 106](#).
- How to Get People to Say Yes with The Godfather of Influence Dr. Robert Cialdini. Dr. Robert Cialdini's book *Influence*, has sold over 5 million copies, and Warren Buffett recommends it as one of the best business books of all time. Dr. Cialdini is [episode 42](#).
- Start with Understanding: Change People's Minds Under Impossible Conditions with Best Selling Author and Wharton School Professor Jonah Berger, that's [episode 66](#).

Hope you're enjoying 3 Takeaways! See you soon!

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