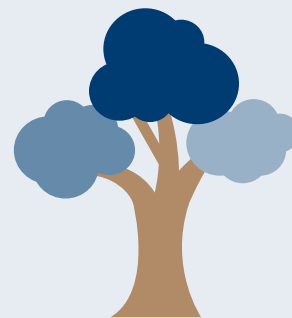# Using Establish-Maintain-Restore to Build Psychological Safety

Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR) is a research-supported system of strategies and tools used to build effective relationships with others. Critically, even though EMR itself is backed by research supporting its use, it includes elements that are all individually research-based as well. Many of these strategies and tools come from research into adult relationships and fostering safety and connection between friends, family, and life partners.

Given that, EMR can just as easily be used to build psychological safety. As a reminder, psychological safety can be understood as staff feeling that they have time and space to bring up concerns and praises, that they have the actual skills to communicate and receive feedback effectively, and that they have input into changes made within the system. This is achieved through normalizing challenges that all are facing, engaging in open feedback processes throughout the organization, demonstrating what actions are taken as a direct result of feedback, incorporating regular team-building time and activities, and encouraging staff to take risks (e.g., what they prioritize, what care practices they use and what solutions they offer to larger problems).

EMR helps build psychological safety through a concentrated effort on building, maintaining, and restoring relationships. It can be done systematically by anyone in an organization. Here is how it is done.

Understanding the Phases

EMR divides staff relationships into three stages: the Establish stage, the Maintain stage, and the Restore stage. The Establish stage is straightforward and involves using explicit strategies to build healthy relationships with staff members. A key point to remember is that we all naturally establish relationships all the time, but some are more successful than others, some never become established, and some take explicit work. Those that form naturally and those that form through work look no different behaviorally. But there might just be something that makes the work relationships require more focus. That is where the strategies discussed in the guide below help. The Banking Time concept that it highlights is especially useful.

Once a relationship is established, we slightly adjust the same strategies we naturally or intentionally use in order to **maintain** that relationship. It is here where psychological safety begins to develop. Within the bounds of an established relationship, staff can freely share their thoughts, provide and receive feedback and support, offer ideas and solutions knowing that some may like and some may not like their ideas and solutions, and yet the relationship will remain. This is particularly critical for leaders—both formal, such as directors, and informal, such as veteran staff members—as the power difference between leaders and the rest of staff can result in tension on the relationship. Ongoing, purposeful maintenance is important.

Eventually, though, all relationships face challenges and require **restoration**. Although this can be uncomfortable, this is actually a normal part of healthy relationship development. Once one or both parties in a relationship recognize the relationship has been damaged, they can use a variety of strategies to acknowledge and repair it. This process also builds psychological safety because it demonstrates being able to recognize boundaries and rebuild them without threatening the security of the relationship. Review the strategies in the accompanying article when a relationship enters the **restore** stage.

Monitoring the Stages

This can be done for any staff member. Identify all staff within your organization and write down their names. Next to each name, mark if you, personally, feel like you are in the E, M, or R phase of the relationship. If you think we have never really formed a solid relationship with someone, that is most likely an E. If there was a relationship at one point, and it feels less open or feels lacking, that might be an R-stage relationship. Value your own perspective on the relationship; two staff members may have different opinions on the stage of their relationship and psychological safety cannot be built until both agree on that perspective.

From there, identify your "low-hanging fruit." These are staff members you connect with easily and naturally, regardless of the stage (so, in regards to R, you are able to quickly recognize when the relationship needs to be repaired and can do so easily and successfully). Then identify which are the hard-to-reach fruit. See if you can notice a pattern. Are there gender identity differences between these two groups? What about racial/ethnic or religious beliefs? Do they not like your favorite sports team? Spend some time checking your personal biases and see which might be barriers to building a culture with psychological safety.

Action Steps

Once you have your low-hanging fruit and the hard-to-reach fruit, select one from the first group that is either in the E or R stage. Select three from the second group either in the E or R stage. And then select 1–2 strategies from the accompanying EMR document aligned with each stage that you will use with these staff members. Set an intention and goal to use these strategies and then do so. Watch the effects. Continue to connect with these individuals, even those that might naturally be difficult for you, until you perceive those relationships have moved to the M stage. Continue building them while also identifying new staff in the E or R stages to connect with and repeat the process.

If everyone is continually committed to building a strong, connected culture, then the other components of psychological safety can follow.

Establish-Maintain-Restore Guide

Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR) is a research-based system for building healthy relationships. It is built upon research investigating general healthy relationship qualities and practices. EMR is a complex system, and covering it in its entirety would require a full course-load of materials.
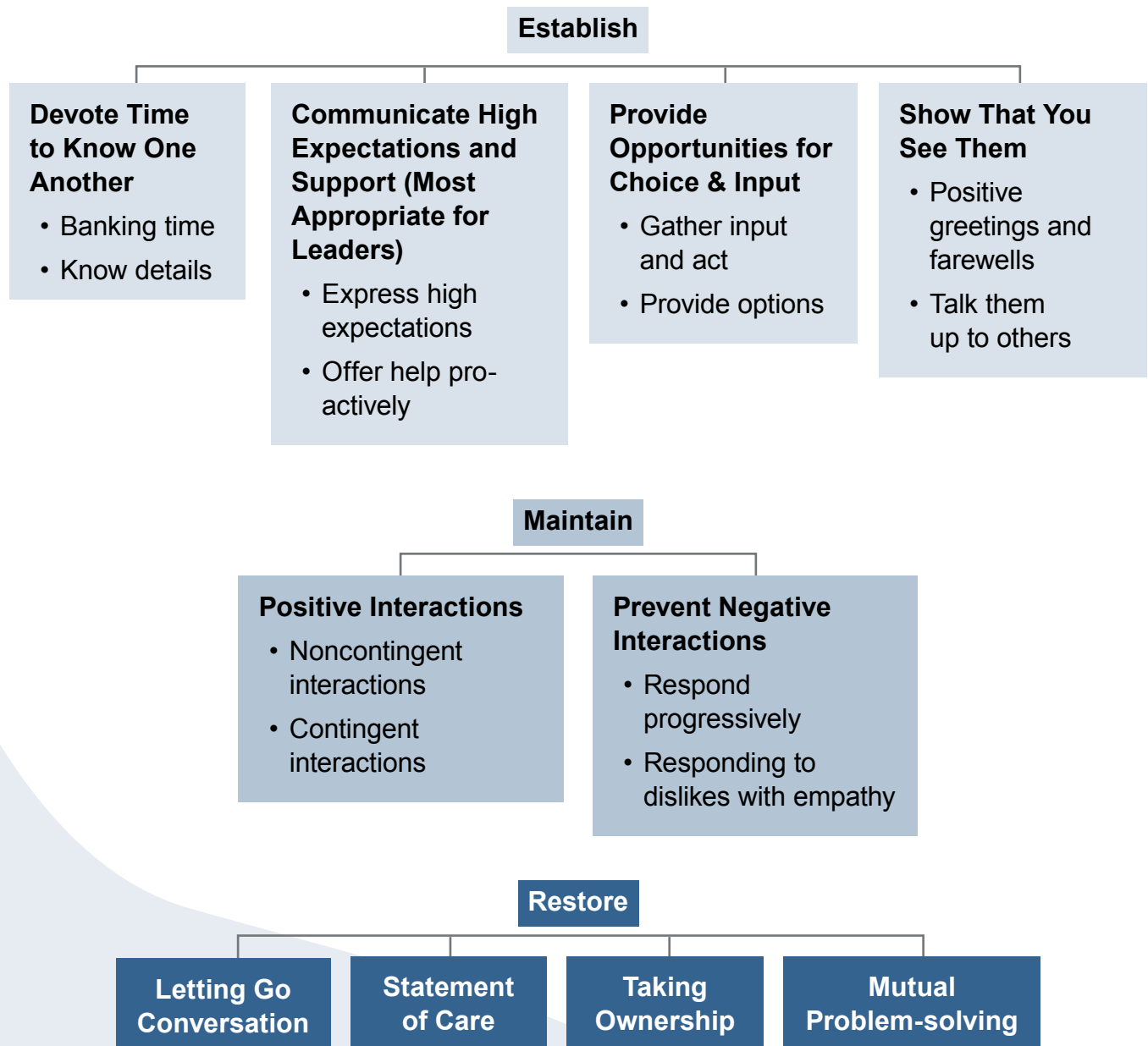
However, its practices can still be of use. This activity is meant to provide an introductory-level guide to implementing EMR as an individual. In other words, it is an ongoing activity.

Section 1: Knowing the Stages

As mentioned above, EMR divides relationships into three stages: an Establish stage, when the relationship begins, a Maintain stage, during which the relationship is a work in progress, and a Restore stage, in which the relationship is deemed damaged and in need of repairs so that it may return to the Maintain stage.

Each stage is accompanied by specific practices that can be implemented in person or remotely. See the figure below.

Bracket of EMR Practice

Establish

Devote Time to Know One Another
- Banking time
- Know details

Communicate High Expectations and Support (Most Appropriate for Leaders)
- Express high expectations
- Offer help pro-actively

Provide Opportunities for Choice & Input
- Gather input and act
- Provide options

Show That You See Them
- Positive greetings and farewells
- Talk them up to others

Maintain

Positive Interactions
- Noncontingent interactions
- Contingent interactions

Prevent Negative Interactions
- Respond progressively
- Responding to dislikes with empathy

Restore

| Letting Go Conversation | Statement of Care | Taking Ownership | Mutual Problem-solving |

Section 2: Identifying the Stages

Before learning the practices, we need to identify which staff members are in each stage relative to ourselves. If you followed the prompts above, you may have already completed this step. You can also do that now using the guide below to help be intentional with this practice.

STAFF MEMBER	ESTABLISH	MAINTAIN	RESTORE
NOTES			

Next, we need to figure out if there are any barriers that are preventing some relationships from being Established or Restored. Often, those barriers include some emotional reaction, a bias, a past event, lack of time, etc.

You may have already completed this step if following the prompts above. If not, you may use the Equity/Tree Reflection Tool on the next page to help with this. To use this tool:

1. Write down the names of staff members you connect with easily on the lowest apples. These are your "low-hanging fruit"—they take little effort to connect with.

2. Write down the names of staff members with whom you have struggled to Establish relationships or whose relationships you need to Restore. Put them in the middle and top apples. These are the co-workers for you who are difficult.

3. Draw a line that roughly divides the apples into those three sections so it is easier to see.

4. Adopt the mindset of a scientist and look for patterns. What is it about your "low-hanging" colleagues that requires less intentional effort to place them in Establish or Maintain? What about the middle and top ones? In what ways might race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, spiritual beliefs, parental background, and even your own personal history with the staff member explain their position?

Equity/Triage Tree Reflection Tool
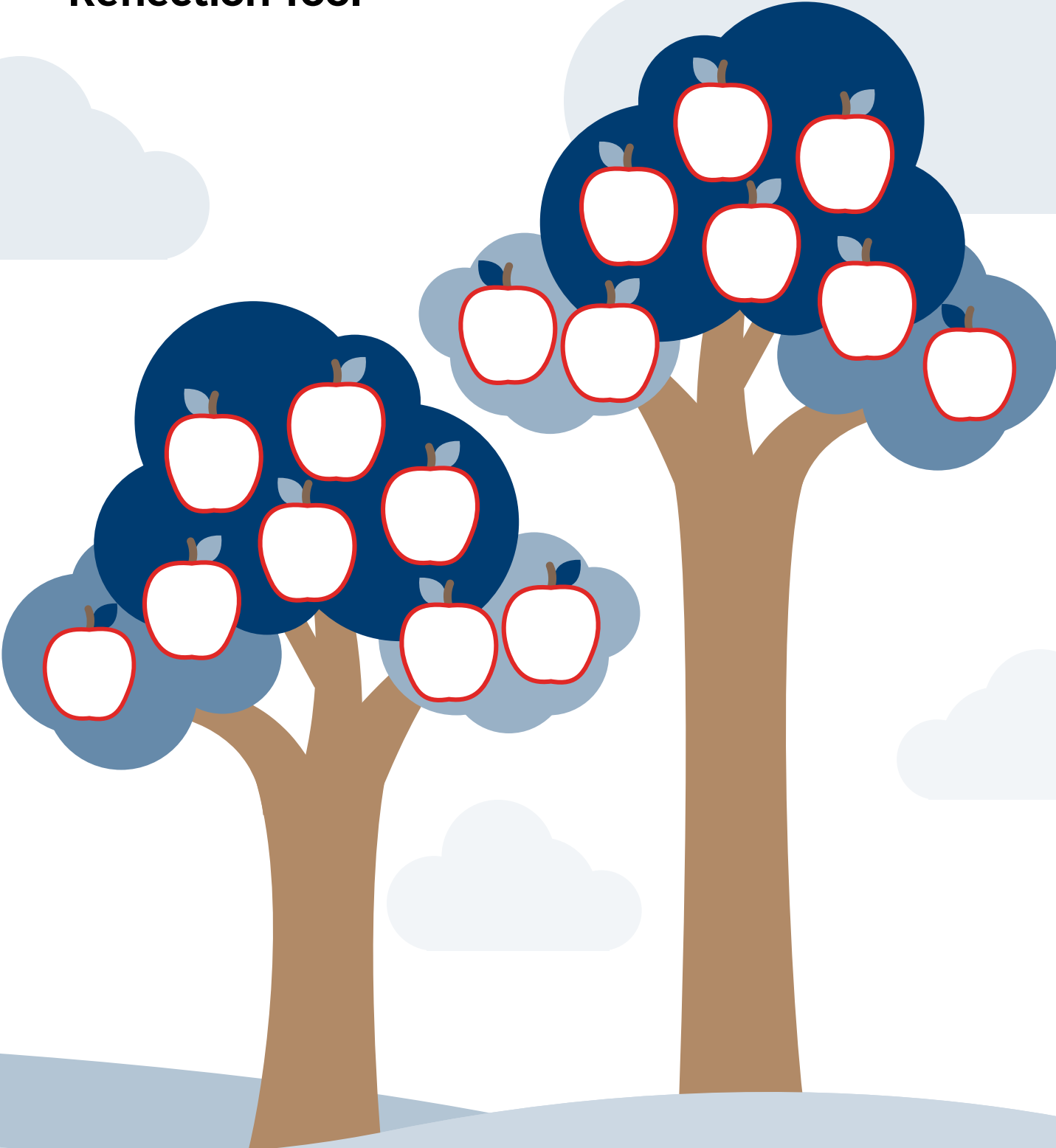
Section 3: Learning the Practices

Each stage has research-supported strategies for helping move the relationship through that stage. These practices are easy-to-implement, adaptable, and effective. There are also subtle nuances when considering personal and cultural barriers. Below we provide a brief review of select strategies (4 Establish, 2 Maintain, 2 Restore).

ESTABLISH: GETTING TO KNOW STAFF

Banking Time

Purpose

Intentionally carve out time to spend with staff and get to know them as people. Develop an understanding of the person's experiences in and outside of work. This helps everyone feel seen, safe, accepted, and respected. The key component is that by banking time into the relationship, thinking of it like a savings account, when it comes time to make a request, we can "withdraw" from that relationship without overdrawing and harming it.

How to Do

1. Find an existing window of time
   a. During work
      i. During slow periods
      ii. Arrive early to work on occasion to connect with them
      iii. During lunch
   b. Before/After
      i. During work events
      ii. Over breakfast/dinner
      iii. Play games before work
2. Ask open-ended questions that are not rote (e.g., not "how are you?")
3. Reflect you are listening
   a. Pay attention (put away distractions and rotate toward them)
   b. Reflect back what you hear (either through paraphrase or summary)
   c. Share information about you only when fitting and it doesn't hijack the attention
   d. Find similarities
   e. Ask follow up questions
   f. Consider suspending your view on something in order to better understand theirs

Express High Expectations

Purpose

We can hold ourselves accountable to high expectations and instill healthy beliefs about our ability to meet those expectations. Find natural opportunities to communicate expectations to others and the ability to meet them.

How to Do

1. Clearly express high-level expectations
   a. For example, "When you leave at night, it really helps me get things going in the morning if you make sure this machine is put on standby."
2. Express a specific belief in ability
   a. For example, "All practitioners at some point learn how to do this, and I know you will figure it out because I have seen you in action already."

Gather Input and Act on it

Purpose

When colleagues and those you supervise are provided control over what happens within their organization, they experience a deeper connection to their colleagues and their organization. Solicit feedback from colleagues about how work is going and any recommendations for improvement. This is an effective relationship-building practice. It also demonstrates that you truly value their input, no matter how big or small.

How to Do

1. Identify topics in the workplace that colleagues would find relevant
2. Determine the best way to get input
   a. One-on-one, in pairs, or as groups
   b. Electronically
   c. Paper
   d. Suggestion box
3. Review the input
   a. Look for themes
   b. Consider feasibility and relevance to the workplace
3. Develop a plan of action
4. Have fun with it!
   a. You can solicit feedback about anything. In one setting, one person decided to make a "Battle of the Oreos" event where Oreo flavors were tested and ranked and then they brought in those Oreos regularly for their colleagues.

Talk Them Up to Another Colleague

Purpose

Direct compliments can be off-putting for some people. Whether they are working through social anxiety or have cultural differences regarding giving and receiving compliments, the message may not always be well-received when a relationship is in its early stages.

Consider instead "tootling"—sharing a positive story or attribute about an employee to their colleagues. Tootling is a term used in education settings to differentiate from tattling, the act of reporting someone's wrongdoing. Tootling refers to reporting or sharing when someone does something good, kind, or helpful. Build in time to provide tootles at meetings or create a space where they may be posted and seen by other employees.

How to Do

1. Identify something the colleague did, said, or achieved

2. Identify another adult who could deliver the praise and have it be well-received

3. Communicate this praise to the adult and ask them to share it with the person

   a. They can use email, phone, text, in-person communication, etc.

   b. Emphasize that you want this person to convey the message to the colleague

Noncontingent Positive Interactions

Purpose

This is a basic relationship maintenance strategy that shows you care about your colleague regardless of what they have done or do. It validates their humanity and reinforces their sense of psychological safety: that they can make mistakes without them reflecting upon their personhood.

How to Do

1. Continue with greetings and farewells and personalize them when possible

2. Continue to check in about their personal and professional life and provide verbal recognition of their efforts, experiences, and perspectives

3. Find opportunities for laughter and fun

   a. Interspersing opportunities to joke and play with colleagues creates a positive experience

   b. Be careful with sarcasm, as it does not always translate well

Responding with Empathy

Purpose

Over the last 30 years, researchers have noted a phenomenon in American citizens called the "Empathy Gap." In short, we became a nation so focused on self-esteem that we began to overly attribute others' struggles and failures and behaviors to their own self-concept. After all, if we are so focused on our own self-esteem, everyone else must be too, right? What this has led to is a diminished ability to empathize with others—to see things from their perspective, feel the emotions they are feeling without taking responsibility for them, and to see the person behind the experience. In the event of a potentially negative occurrence in the workplace, start with empathy and work through the interaction to note whether the interaction remains neutral or even transforms into a positive one. This is key to relationship- and community-building

How to Do

1. Practice your **EOARS**

    b. **E = Empathy statements** (e.g., "This seems to be bothering you; it would bother me, too")

    c. **O = Open-ended questions** that elicit their perspective

    d. **A = Affirm** that their perspective or experience makes sense given the context, even if you do not agree

    e. **R = Reflect** on what you hear on occasion with slight changes to spur the other person to affirm or reject your understanding of their experience

    f. **S = Summarize** on occasion very clearly what you have heard (e.g., "So if I have this right, this happened and it made you think about …")

Letting Go Conversation

Purpose

If a colleague is frustrated or upset with you, or if you are with them, communication and partnership may break down. Check in with your colleague, and if they share that they feel something is unresolved, give them space. This is especially critical if you have personally resolved whatever conflict arose and they haven't. A lack of transparency can lead to further breakdowns.

How to Do

1. Internally find ways to let go of the conflict

    a. Ask yourself, "Am I holding onto something that could be let go?"

2. Consider how you want to convey the message of starting over with the colleague

3. Find a time to have a private conversation to begin the discussion

Mutual Problem-Solving

Purpose

Working with a colleague to fix a conflict is far more beneficial than demanding a solution, barring certain cases such as racially motivated slurs and actions. It also further creates an opportunity to build empathy. If a conflict cannot be resolved through "Letting Go Conversation," then mutually problem-solving the conflict may help.

How to Do

1. Start with an empathy statement
2. Express your perspective on the conflict while diffusing any potential struggle
3. Invite the person to identify potential solutions
4. Pick an idea, try it, then repeat until the conflict is resolved and your relationship can begin to rebuild