Interactions as Culture: Shaping Relationships That Influence How Work Gets Done

In this installment, we're focusing on Interactions—the everyday exchanges that shape how work is experienced, how trust is built, and how relationships develop over time. From team discussions and one-on-one conversations to the way that feedback is shared and decisions are made, interactions reinforce what is encouraged, reinforced, and valued, and set the tone for how people work together.

Do our interactions support respectful, productive relationships?

Does the way we engage with one another (individually and as teams) strengthen our unit's climate?

Let's explore how intentional interactions can reinforce connection, trust, and shared responsibility, one conversation at a time.

Quick Wins for Your Unit

Practical, high-impact ways to strengthen daily interactions

Strong cultures are built through consistent behavior, not big gestures. Small, repeatable interaction choices signal what matters and shape how people experience working together. The most effective way to build trust is to make everyday interactions reliable, respectful, and human, especially when the work is complex or the pressure is high.

Here are a few quick actions your team can take this week:

- **Be explicit about how you want to engage.** Identify two or three shared interaction commitments that describe what working well looks like in day-to-day interactions, whether in team settings or one-to-one conversations. These might include sharing expectations for participation early, addressing concerns directly, or following through on commitments. For each commitment, pair it with a simple way to adjust or recalibrate as you go, making small course corrections in the moment when necessary. Together, these practices reinforce trust, clarity, and reliability over time.
- **Create space for full participation.** Pay attention to who is contributing, who is not, and how ideas are acknowledged or built upon. Use simple moves such as inviting input from quieter voices 1:1, pausing in larger conversations before moving on, or validating individual contributions to ensure discussions reflect more than a few voices. This can be as simple as asking, "Do we have all the perspectives we need?" or paraphrasing someone's point to show it was heard.

- **Close the loop.** After meetings, conversations, or key discussions, summarize what was agreed on, what still needs input, and who is responsible for next steps. A brief recap, a short note, or a quick chat can reduce misunderstandings and reinforce clarity and reliability to help ensure everyone leaves with the same understanding of how things will move forward.

- **Be intentional in written communication.** Email and chat carry culture in a very visible way. How we write, respond, and follow up signals respect, reliability, and clarity. Simple practices such as being clear about purpose, confirming understanding, and responding in a timely way help interactions feel consistent and trustworthy.

- **Reset interactions in real time.** Teams built on trust don't avoid tension; they address it thoughtfully and respectfully. When conversations drift or become unclear, pause briefly to clarify or redirect. For example, in a group discussion, you might ask, “Can we pause and check in to see if everyone’s on the same page?” or say, “We should take a moment to clarify things before we move on.” In a one-on-one conversation, you could say, “I want to make sure I understand what you mean,” or ask, “Does this make sense from your perspective?” These small interventions maintain clarity, protect dignity, and reinforce shared expectations naturally.

Try This with Your Team

Simple practices that improve everyday interactions

Interactions don’t change through one-off conversations. They change through small, repeated choices built into how teams already work. These practices are designed to fit naturally into existing meetings and routines.

- **Connection cues.** Start a conversation, especially an important one, with a simple prompt that signals care and shared responsibility. Asking, “What should be our top priority at the moment?” or checking in with, “Is there anything we should clarify before we continue?” invites everyone to engage fully without adding extra time or formality. These gentle cues cultivate shared attention and trust from the outset.
- **Input Opportunities.** Make it safe to raise questions or alternative viewpoints. Ask things like, “What concerns should we keep in mind?” or “Is there an assumption we might want to check?” Encouraging different viewpoints helps build trust and leads to better decision-making.
- **Interaction resets**: Take 30 seconds to name how the conversation will work. For example, how input will be gathered and shared, how decisions will be made, or how time should be managed. This helps to keep conversations focused and productive.
- **Pause moments**: Before closing a topic, ask a simple question such as: “Is there anything we’re missing?” or “Does anyone see this differently?” Pausing in this way creates space for reflection without forcing participation.

- **Shared recaps:** Ask one person to summarize key takeaways, decisions, and next steps. Rotate this role so it's not always the same voice shaping the close.
- **Dynamic interventions:** If a conversation feels rushed, unclear, or one perspective is dominating, pause and adjust. In a group discussion, invite quieter voices to share or clarify next steps. In a one-on-one interaction, check in by asking if anything needs further explanation or if more time is needed to discuss certain points. These small adjustments help keep interactions respectful in the moment.

See It in Action: Research Analysis and Data Integration Office

In the Research Analysis and Data Integration Office (RADIO), interactions are intentionally structured to reinforce shared ownership and thoughtful engagement.

In one-on-one meetings, the director consistently begins by asking, "What's most important for us to focus on today?" That simple question sets the tone. It signals that preparation matters and that the staff member's perspective helps shape the conversation. Over time, this has become part of the unit's rhythm, setting the tone for focused, shared ownership in one-on-one meetings. Staff come prepared, knowing their priorities will guide the discussion.

One team member shared their perspective:

> *"Our team's one-on-one meetings begin by focusing on the emerging needs of the staff. Team members are invited to share their perspectives early, which sets the tone for the discussion, signals that their input is valued, and provides a sense of ownership in shaping the conversation. It's a way of working together that looks at the bigger picture, making sure we pay attention to individual needs, not just what each project requires."*

A similar approach carries into team meetings. Before closing out a topic, the group pauses to ask, "Is there anything we might be missing?" or "Does anyone else have thoughts or ideas on this?" That brief pause creates space for additional perspectives without adding formality. It reinforces the expectation that contributions are welcome and that decisions benefit from broader input.

Over time, this consistent practice has shaped how team members experience the meetings. As one team analyst shared:

> *"I appreciate the ability to share things I've been working on. In the meeting, it's easier to explain outcomes and caveats, get feedback, and discuss that feedback or ask follow-up questions if anything is unclear. I also value getting a view of what others are working on and how they're thinking about issues that overlap with my own work."*

Together, these consistent practices strengthen clarity, trust, and shared responsibility in both individual and team settings.

Share Your Practice

We'd love to feature examples from across our research community.

👉 ovpr.spie@umich.edu to tell us what your team is doing to shape environments that reflect what you value.

(Adapted from: Project Zero. (n.d.). Cultures of thinking. Harvard Graduate School of Education. http://www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/the-8-forces-that-shape-group-culture and Ritchhart, R. (2015). Creating Cultures of Thinking: The 8 Forces We Must Master to Truly Transform Our Schools. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.)