

# Relationship Crucibles: Why Everyone Should Sail

By John Falconer



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As we can all attest, interpersonal relationships exist in environments that impact those relationships. In 1949, Reuben Hill published *Families Under Stress*, which considered how families responded to stressors such as the Great Depression and World War II. This led to the development of the ABC-X model of analysis, where A is a stressor, B is the resources available to the family, C represents the family’s perception of the stressor, and X is the resulting crisis (Rosino, 2016).

April Buck and Lisa Neff expanded our understanding about relationships by adding the concept of Stress Spillover, which considers how factors external to the relationship affect the relationship itself (Buck and Neff, 2012). For example, an issue with a colleague at work could affect one of the partners in the relationship, who comes home that evening and makes a snide remark that triggers an argument. Stress can diminish a person’s capacity for self-regulation of negative comments, or reduce a willingness to take actions that support the relationship.

Ellen Berscheid foreshadowed this vector in *The Greening of Relationship Science* (1999), where she argued that relationship scholars

cannot look only at the attributes of the individuals in a relationship to understand that relationship; the environmental context is essential.

Some fragile relationships survive forever because they never encounter a relationship-toxic environment and some very strong relationships dissolve—not because they weren’t close or committed or loving—but because fate [...] put their relationship in harm’s way. (Berscheid, 1999, p. 265, as quoted in Buck and Neff, 2012)

The two stressor events in Hill’s work—economic downturn and war—are both long-term, unrelenting forces. That is, they become “the new normal,” enduring rather than temporary, with correspondingly lasting effects. If we consider two partners in an interpersonal relationship, the impact from the environment might as likely lead to termination of the relationship as adaptation to it.

There is some agreement among scholars that the relationship’s context can impact the relationship itself, then, and the usual presumption is that those impacts are negative. Berscheid’s

metaphor is a good example:

...environment models of stability suggest that our predictions might be enhanced if we adopted the perspective of civil engineers who typically calculate a structure's durability relative to the environmental forces it can withstand without disintegrating. (Berscheid, 1999, p. 265)

That is, the relationship will endure if environmental influences do not weaken it. But what about the opposite? Can environmental influences *strengthen* a relationship? Some recent contributions to the literature have made the argument that they can (Neff and Broady, 2011).

In some cases, exposure to stress can create a resilience to future stressful situations. This may be from inoculation (Meichenbaum, 1985), or by developing the self-control necessary to avoid negative behaviors (Neff and Broady, 2011). However, these works do not discuss whether stress may contribute to building specific relationship skills—e.g., communication, coping, and trust—that can strengthen a relationship.

### **Paradigm of the Relationship Crucible**

The idea of a “relationship crucible” may be of use here. Consider a situation where pressure is put on a relationship, but only for a fixed and limited period of time. Rather than open-ended situations

like war, these are situations to which participants can see an end. This may change the perspective from “can we continue like this?” to “can we survive to the end of this?” The distinction is important. The ABC-X model underscores that the C factor, perception of the event, is powerful in defining the stressor. As participants view situations more or less negatively, their response changes; different responses come into play if a situation is seen as temporary.



Environments that stress a relationship may strengthen it (rather than weakening it, as in Berscheid's metaphor) as exercise strengthens the body through adaptation. If the stressor are delineated in time or location to give the partners a “finish line,” if the partners know that the stressor will dissipate at a specific point, they may be more able to practice behaviors that strengthen the relationship (such as trust, self-confidence, communication, coping, and roles) rather than harming it. A second factor may be goal setting, where the partners can work together to accomplish something specific. Finally, it may be that the activity needs to be repeated, so that the partners have opportunity to consider what happened in the past as they develop adaptations to improve

their functioning in the future.

We posit that small boat sailing serves well as a relationship crucible. With a crew of two to four people, everyone on board has at least some responsibility for a successful excursion. There are frequent—and sometimes considerable—threats to the vessel and occupants that create periods of stress. Understanding one's role on the boat, trusting the other people involved, communicating clearly, and having self-confidence are all important to collective well-being.

### **On Sailing**

Boats pose operating and safety challenges that are not familiar to automobile operators. First, a boat cannot stop and remain still like a car. Wind and current constantly move a boat, and even when motion is desired, the direction cannot be controlled as easily as one can when steering a car. A helmsman may be trying to steer into a slip, but while they are going forward, the current may be pushing the boat left and the wind may be rotating the vessel. (A simple internet search will reveal hundreds of examples of the stress associated with docking a boat.) Second, a breakdown can be a serious event. Boaters cannot get out and walk if their vessel fails them. Accidents can easily put people in the water, which carries a risk of death. Further, without marked traffic lanes, boat movements are not organized, so every crew member must be alert for vessels on crossing courses.

Sailboats have additional challenges. Maneuvers demand

planning and coordination within the crew, not only to be effective, but also to avoid problems. Consider a boat pointed at 3 o'clock on a watch face, with wind coming from 12 o'clock. While the wind is creating the lift that moves the boat forward, it is also pushing the boat over. This creates the heel—leaning—that is often seen in a sailboat. Sailboats are designed with “righting moment,” which is the force trying to stand the boat up straight.<sup>1</sup> On a small sailboat, the people on board are an important part of the righting moment. Sitting on the high side of the boat, their weight is pushing the boat upright while the pressure on the sail is pushing the boat over. This is a normal state of affairs, but a gust or change in direction can put the wind out of tune with the sails, and the boat heels more. The crew must be ready to respond to the wind and other environmental factors at any given moment.

Because the dependence on wind makes sailboats more difficult to maneuver than powerboats, navigation rules provide that sailboats (generally) have a right of way over powerboats. This restricted ability to navigate also means that sailboats have to plan their courses and anticipate problems. Not only can they not maneuver as easily, sailboats cannot really stop. Maneuvering requires communication and coordination among the crew. Lapses can have serious consequences.

In short, what better opportunity to see what short-term stress can bring out in a relationship?

### **An Informal Case Study from Close to Home**

The author and his wife—John and Tracy—began sailing some seven years ago. John had limited sailing experience, and Tracy had only powerboating experience. Interestingly, their respective boating backgrounds gave John undue confidence and Tracy considerable trepidation.

On their first sail, John put Tracy at the helm because that is how he was taught to sail. She was nervous, as her prior powerboating experience had conditioned her to want the boat to be flat on the water. As Tracy was feeling this tension, the boat was hit by a big gust and heeled over to 20 degrees or more. Tracy panicked, thinking that they were going over, and did not know what to do. This development terrified her so much that for several minutes afterwards she was not able to communicate verbally. John took the helm and they recovered, but the event fostered a fear in Tracy, and it was more than a year before she would take the helm again. She assigned herself to managing the foresail.

Tracy's mantra was “Tell me what to do and I will do it. I trust you.” Whether or not this was good judgement early in their sailing experience, that trust allowed them to continue. Tracy took important roles, but did not want responsibility for the well-being of the boat and crew. The two of them sailed a lot together and got coordinated enough to sail away from and into the dock (including working around oblivious

powerboats). But there was tension every time they went out, as Tracy feared capsizing and John was realizing how undeveloped his sailing skills really were.

Another incident brought home the reality of the threat of danger. John and Tracy's first boat, a 17-foot O'Day Daysailer, could “plane” in the right conditions, a capability that would let the boat exceed its normal “speed limit,” which could be very exciting.<sup>2</sup> One Sunday afternoon, John and his daughter (without Tracy) were sailing in a good breeze and taking advantage of the craft's ability to plane. Then, almost before they could notice, the wind and waves were getting to be a bit much. They prepared to tack—a turning maneuver—but had two problems. The foresail did not move to the correct position, and John, a sizeable fraction of the righting moment, also did not move in time. The boat “broached”—it flipped on its side. The crew had been properly trained to exit on the high side of the boat so as not to get caught under the sail, but John went in on the low side. Fortunately, the two reconnected, and eventually a good Samaritan pulled them to shore.

While broaching is not uncommon on smaller boats, people have lost their lives this way in getting caught under the sails in the water, or getting hit by part of the boat and losing consciousness. Sailing, it turns out, is as dangerous as alpine skiing: There are 1.19 deaths per million person sailing days (Ryan, Nathanson, Baird, and Wheelhouse, 2016). Preparation, communication, and teamwork are essential to minimize risk.

## Adaptations

In these and other experiences, John and Tracy learned several things about boating together and working together. With decades of relationship history, John and Tracy had certain habits of interaction, but the stresses of sailing forced reconsideration of their roles, their communication, and their coordination. The shared goal of safety led to some purposeful adaptations.

In their personal relationship, John and Tracy tended toward equality and collaboration, but experience and reading taught them that, when it came to sailing, each vessel needs to have one person who is unquestionably in charge, a principle entrenched in maritime law. This principle focuses responsibility and authority and prevents indecision. (For a full discussion of this, the reader might consult *The Seaman's Friend: A Treatise on Practical Seamanship* by Richard Henry Dana, Jr., author of the maritime classic *Two Years Before the Mast*.) It was an adjustment to put aside their habit of shared decision-making when on the boat, but the practical advantages were real.

Having one person be “in-charge” does not equate to an authoritarian system. The U.S. Coast Guard *Boat Crew Seamanship Manual* explains that a skipper must not only listen to crew input, but should solicit input. An environment that does not encourage input can result in an information barrier that threatens ship and crew well-

being. For example, when a crew member points out an approaching boat, John says, “Thank you.” He does not say “I saw it,” because that undermines the contribution of the crew, implying they did not do anything meaningful. This could give pause to crew pointing out obstacles in the future. “Thank you” acknowledges the contribution without assessing its value. This adjustment has influenced John and Tracy’s non-boating communication, because it became obvious that the same theory would apply when driving a car or doing any other activity. The spotter is intending to help, and they should be encouraged, not marginalized.

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Because of the need to coordinate actions, John has learned to talk through plans before activity begins. If you’ve moved enough furniture, you know there are people who intuitively understand the plan (rotate it this way, you go first, etc.), and people who do not. While the consequences of misunderstanding in moving furniture can be promptly addressed by putting down a sofa to talk, on a boat they

can be more serious. Thus, before setting out, John and Tracy discuss the big plan, and then each person’s specific tasks. The more people know, the better they are able to contribute to an effort.

The act of communicating itself—talking—took a little adaptation. When two people are at opposite ends of a 26-foot boat, the speaker really needs to look at the other person for the voice to carry. It also helps for the hearers to confirm what they have heard. If the person at the front of the vessel says “put the motor in forward,” the person at the helm should repeat “shifting to forward.” This is a bit of a redundancy, but it assures the speaker that they have been heard. On a related note, John and Tracy have adopted the aviation concept of a “sterile cockpit.” When a situation is complicated or dangerous, a sterile cockpit limits conversation to the work at hand and does not allow discussion of work issues, home life, or other topics unrelated to what is happening on the boat. This helps everyone concentrate on the situation at hand.

Finally, just as Tracy expressed trust in John at the helm, he learned to trust Tracy in her role. As Tracy learned the skills for managing the foresail, steering the boat, or tying dock lines, John stopped coaching her actions so she could perform tasks with some freedom and confidence. Trust helps both people do their part better.

## Conclusion

Veteran sailors reading this may not recall the uncertainty



they felt as they began sailing, but trepidation is not uncommon in new sailors. Having responsibility for the safety of people and equipment is a serious matter, and it does not take much time to realize that there are potential problems all around. John and Tracy took sailing as an adventure and a challenge, and both wanted to get better at it (as a team) so they worked at it. This goal may have made them amenable to change, to acknowledging and addressing errors, and to suspending individual priorities for collective priorities. The result was that they learned the sport together, and got better at it together.

John and Tracy made specific changes in how they communicate on the boat, such as discussing plans, supporting each other's actions (expressing trust or thinking about the impact of various responses), and increasing communication to reduce misunderstanding. As their sailing skills improved, they felt an increased sense of accomplishment as a team.

A "relationship crucible" has to do with the people in the relationship experiencing stress (which, the reader will recall, depends to a significant degree on how individuals perceive the situation). John and Tracy were well aware of the dangers associated with sailing, but they also felt agency in their ability to manage the boat and mitigate the dangers (the source of the stress). Through learning and practice, they were able to increase their boating skills and reduce the stress. But the relationship crucible is not about boating; it is about the interpersonal relationship. Some

of the learning or adaptation has to be about the people, and not just the situation. Stress spillover has to be turned on its head. We saw this as John and Tracy learned to appreciate each other's roles in everyday situations, became better communicators, collaborated to accomplish goals, and learned to cope with stressful situations.

Sailing is but one example. There are likely other situations that cause positive changes in a relationship. The paradigm proposed here is that the concept of a relationship as a structure that must endure the elements is not complete. A relationship is a living thing, and can grow weaker or stronger. If the environment leads the participants to make changes to improve their interaction, certainly that can in turn transform the broader relationship.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A good example of this is a weighted keel: as the boat leans more to one side, the weight underwater is raised upwards in the opposite direction and tries to return to its position straight under the hull.

<sup>2</sup> Boats either have displacement hulls or planing hulls. A displacement hull stays on top of the water because it floats; it displaces a volume of water equaling the weight of the vessel. A planing hull can sit on top of the water with the moving water pressure holding it up. Picture a powerboat skimming along the top of the water. Most sailboats are the displacement style, which limits their speed, because the hull cannot get on top of the bow wave.

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