

Leading Ways: BUILDING AND USING RELATIONSHIPS

Recently a person fairly new to a leadership role asked me the most disarming question. I had shared my formula for leadership, that equals Vision times Task times Relationship ($L=V*T*R$), and he asked how to build relationships. My first thought was, “really?”, but the question made perfect sense. He is trained in a highly technical scientific field and has been very successful paying attention to the big picture and vision, while working hard on the details to accomplish them.. He is new to the organization and has not spent any time meeting people in person, due to this period of agency-wide telework. How then, do you start building relationships in such a situation?

Here are six things to do, particularly when the options for a cup of coffee or a drink after work have been limited.

O.U.T

An acronym for **Open Using Trust**. A lot of our social interactions are derived from stuff we learned on the savannah when we wore loincloths. We are very focused upon meeting someone on the question of whether or not they will see us as dinner. If you don't make eye contact, don't have an open face and smile, don't take a minute or two to exchange pleasantries, and have defensive body language; they will, without being aware of it, decide that maybe you are not trustworthy and they should be careful and start unconsciously sending the same rejecting signals. In turn, you will build good will if you affirm when you can, nod positively at their good suggestions and compliment when it is deserved. Not everyone will turn out to be trustworthy and, by the way, you won't either, but the risks of opening with trust are minimal, you won't be dinner, and you will soon know if your entreaty to trust is being accepted and reciprocated by your new partner. This is hard in the Age of COVID, because you can't extend a hand to shake, but a wave and a smile over Zoom is just as important, maybe more so now.

BE AUTHENTIC BUT ALSO CONNECT

This is tough, particularly when we are **connecting via screens and technology**. Some folks are quite comfortable in themselves and inviting others in. Many of us are not. Of course, those overly extroverted kinds do tend to overshare, which can be just as harmful to a new relationship. So think about balance if you are a big-time personality, leave some space for others, but still be yourself. If you are on the quieter side, take the chance to listen carefully (you will anyway), then instead of nodding, push yourself to ask a question about what was just said. It gets easy with practice. These things are very hard now, but one thing that seems to be working is dedicated “social” time or, better, an activity like office trivia or “share your pet”, which can create space for letting the personal connection grow and that can boost the authenticity of the connection.

ACT TO BUILD

For most of us relationships do not grow on their own. They **need a little care and feeding**. After you have met someone and feel as if you would like to build the relationship, take two minutes to think about what you know about them and jot down a few notes on a page that you will continue to update. Read a paper they have recently written and send them a question or read more about a part of the agency they run and send along an inquiry about something they do that is of interest to you. Make the notes and comments brief and to the point. If they mentioned something they are interested in and you run across a person or resource that might be of interest, introduce them. In another time in this early stage we might have asked them to lunch. You can still do it, but by Zoom and it might even be better at the end of the day with a glass of something. Do this only with real questions that you have about their work or discussion points that might help you in your work. Make sure it has some time to connect socially.

BE POSITIVE

It is hard to take this stance these days, but if you are building relationships and reputation in an organization it is essential to be **positive in a realistic and informed manner**. Be happy with the success of others. Give out more credit than may be deserved. Always talk about “our” work, not “mine.” Be genuinely curious, not judgmental. You should have opinions and ones that are good and strong, but your job is to bring everyone into alignment toward a positive goal. These small things are important, but in a more general way, you want to be seen as a person that proactively solves problems in a positive and collaborative manner, not one that pushes over people leaving a trail of collateral damage.

ASK QUESTIONS AND LISTEN ATTENTIVELY

One of the most effective ways to build a professional relationship is to let your natural curiosity have a fuller range, asking questions about them and their work. Very few of us can resist the opportunity to talk about these two topics. But use some judgment. Is your partner here really focused on work and a little standoffish about non-work topics? Fine, focus on their work and what part of it they find exciting. If they seem more open to getting to know you and sharing more on the personal side, go with that. Regardless, make sure you focus on what they are saying, ask more questions and share parts, professional and personal, about yourself.

BE A SERVANT LEADER

Developing the qualities of Robert Greenleaf’s great concept of the servant leader builds stronger, deeper relationships at work. If I see my role as a leader to be a servant to the interest of my colleague, I will strike a **powerful basis for our relationship**. Adam Grant has made a convincing case that in the long run, giving builds leadership and success more than taking. Another deep-seated human quality is to be understood or seen by the other. We encourage this by approaching the development of reciprocal relationships with understanding of the other and a willingness to give our share, perhaps more, and in return we and they benefit from connections that grow and serve both interests. In these challenging times all of this can be enhanced by strengthening your [listening skills](#). Beyond listening, the challenges today demand that we act on what we are hearing and follow up with deeper questions and concerns.

Just now there are a lot of things that might distract us from connecting. Don’t let them.