

Building Relationships

The Four I's: Initiate, Inquire, Invest, and Influence

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Creating, developing, and maintaining relationships are key to success in an organization. Relationships never just happen. They require intentional actions by at least one of the parties to get started and by both to maintain and develop the relationship. One approach to having strong relationships is called The Four I's: Initiate, Inquire, Invest, and Influence.

» Initiate

Relationships begin with communication. For communication to take place at all, someone has to take the initiative to approach the other individual. For an introverted person who may prefer to talk with someone s/he knows rather than start a conversation with someone s/he doesn't know approaching someone you do not know can be daunting.

People also choose not to initiate a conversation based on judgments made from their first impressions or what they have heard others say. There are a multitude of reasons for not initiating a conversation all of which result in limited relationship building opportunities:

- » I don't have the time.
- » They're never around.
- » I don't feel comfortable.
- » They never talk to me.
- » I'm too busy with my real work for this "relationship stuff."
- » I don't know them.

But, these are not options for a leader. Initiating a conversation does not have to be painful or time-consuming. Each of us encounters many individuals over the course of a typical day, and having stronger relationships with some of these would be a real plus. Build on these encounters.

Be opportunistic. When you are in a meeting with someone you'd like to develop a relationship with, start a conversation. Introduce yourself, if you don't know the individual, and ask a question: Have you been to this meeting before? How does this meeting relate to your work? Sometimes you can use time before or after a meeting to create a connection. If the meeting ends right before lunch, ask a person sitting next to you if they have time for lunch; you'd like to talk with them about how your organization might collaborate/interact better with theirs.

If you don't know the person introduce yourself, drop by their office and see if they would have time for a conversation, or send an email asking the individual to lunch.

You'll be surprised at the conversation you can create and have in just a few minutes.

Once you have taken the step to initiate, you must proceed to inquire.

» Inquire

Inquiry involves expressing a genuine interest in learning about the other person. It's about making the other individual the center of your attention for the duration of the interaction. You begin by asking questions that will engage the other person. Usually, it is more fruitful to ask open-ended questions as they require a more elaborate response than a simple yes or no. Beginning questions with what, where, why or how are good lead-ins to open-ended questions. It can be as simple as a genuine "How are you?", or "What are you working on today?", or "I hear you got a new project, how is it going?"

Notice that these sentences are about the other person. You are expressing an interest to learn what's happening for the other person. One of the habits highlighted in The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Steven Covey was entitled, "seek to understand before you are understood." As the person begins to share his/her thoughts, actively listen and you will find openings to respond.

Active listening requires:

- » Focusing your attention on the other person, not on what you think.
- » Not interrupting with your own stories.
- » Indicate you are listening by nodding, paraphrasing, or asking questions for understanding.

» Invest

You have now taken the first two steps needed to develop a relationship. Relationship means a connection or association, and we relate to people in many ways whether it is conscious, subconscious, positive, or negative. We relate as family, friends, lovers, co-workers, business partners but one thing is certain: We do relate. The objective is to be intentional and use the many opportunities you have to broaden and to strengthen your network of relationships.

What kind of relationship do you want with this person? How can you connect with him or her and vice versa? What do I need to do to build, maintain or repair this relationship? Most strong relationships have an element of "doing" in them; you work together on a project, you work together to advance a cause, you exercise together, etc. And, as you do things together, you develop a strong bond of trust, essential to productive relationships.

Once you establish a relationship you must maintain it. This requires you to make an investment in either building on the initial rapport or in maintaining the connection. Even as our lives get busy with work, family and other commitments, it is valuable to stay in touch with those in our network and even to broaden this network. For some people, this is easy as they find opportunities to stay in touch naturally. This might involve providing support or advice, sharing an article of interest, a recognition of something good that has happened to the person, or introducing someone else with shared common interests or skills. Other people though find it takes some effort to pick up the phone or stop by the other person's workplace or create the opportunity to have a cup of coffee. Effective

business relationships must be nurtured, and periodic communication is essential. Make it a habit to invest in the relationships you have built.

» Influence

Leadership is not a solo activity. Leadership involves influencing others. Success will be limited if you have not invested time in building relationships. It is much easier to have these relationships in good stead so should you need to ask someone for help or need to partner with another individual the connection is already in place.

The purpose for building these relationships is to broaden your network and strengthen your connection with the people with whom you interact.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- » Where would I like to build my relationships or extend my network?
- » Who are the people I'd like to get to know (and know better) whether they be clients or colleagues?
- » Who are the individuals that have considerable influence with other people in our organization?

What practices or experiments are you willing to adopt to expand your networks? Make it a habit to extend yourself by readily initiating and expressing an interest in the other person. You'll be a better leader for having done so.

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