



Leadership Tips and Tools

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Relationships are at the center of all that we do as leaders. “Leadership is about relationships. It’s about working with and guiding people in new directions. It’s about achieving positive interactions.” Jim Kouzes, co-author of *The Leadership Challenge*, reports that “if there is one thing I’ve learned in over three decades of studying and teaching leadership, and in working with numerous outstanding leaders, it’s this: leadership is a relationship.”

How do we develop and maintain meaningful relationships with our colleagues, students, and communities? Just as leadership is complex and cannot be reduced to a simple set of skills, so too are relationships. Every relationship is unique and special with its own set of possibilities.

Relationships take time, energy, and commitment. Too often we take them for granted. We assume that once established they will take care of themselves. Not so. We must be mindful of monitoring and mentoring our relationships on a daily basis if we are to meet the leadership challenge.

The following Tips and Tools for Nurturing Leadership Relationships are offered as ideas and suggestions for helping us remember that leadership is all about human relationships.

Tips and Tools for Nurturing Leadership Relationships

Live Outside Yourself! When it comes to nurturing leadership relationships, everything begins with the ability to think about people other than ourselves. This is the most basic principle of building and maintaining relationships. A favorite *Peanuts* comic strip by Charles Schulz shows Lucy swinging on the playground as Charlie Brown reads to her, “It says here that the world revolves around the sun once a year.” Lucy stops abruptly and responds, “The world revolves around the sun? Are you sure? I thought it revolved around me.” As leaders, we have learned not to be as self-centered as Lucy! *Peanuts* reminds us, however, to check our egos at the door and live outside of ourselves. Nurturing our leadership relationships requires us to think of others first, manage our relationships with care, and remember that leadership is not about us!

Change Perspectives! We don't look at ourselves and others in the same way. We see ourselves in light of our intentions and see others according to their actions. We judge ourselves by what we feel capable of doing, while we generally see and judge others by what they have already done. As leaders nurturing our relationships, it is critical to engage in perspective-taking. We need to adjust our lenses to see others for what they are capable of doing—just like we see ourselves. This generally provides a much more positive frame and a hopeful way of seeing the promise in others. Sure actions are important! If we give ourselves the benefit of our intentions, why shouldn't we do the same for those with whom we work and live? We nurture our leadership relationships by changing our perspectives!

Reverse the Golden Rule! *"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"* may not nurture leadership relationships. Reverse the Golden Rule and *"Do unto others as they would have you do unto them."* We need to understand and appreciate others for who they are! We need to provide opportunities for them to be successful in THEIR way! One of the greatest benefits of the Gallup Organization's research reported in *First, Break All the Rules* and *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, is that we each have unique strengths. We are at our best for our organizations and our relationships when we are encouraged to develop our strengths and provided opportunities to work from our strengths.

Checkers or Chess? What is the key difference between checkers and chess? Don't read on. Just think about it for a moment. What is the key difference? The key difference between checkers and chess is that in checkers the pieces all move in the same way; whereas, in chess all the pieces move differently. To be good at chess you have to learn how each piece moves and then incorporate these unique moves into your strategic plan for playing the game. Marcus Buckingham extends this metaphor in his latest book when discussing *The One Thing You Need to Know* about good leading and managing. The metaphor works for relationships. Each one is unique. Each person with whom we have the opportunity of interacting is unique—they don't all "move" in the same way! Discover what is unique about each person with whom you work and nurture the relationship by adjusting your communication and leadership to meet the unique strengths of others!

Nurture Communication Channels! Most research into what makes a good leader stresses that good leaders communicate . . . and communicate all the time. In fact, they over-communicate. They create a vision of where the department, college, or organization is going and they communicate clearly and often. They communicate both verbally and nonverbally. They communicate in words AND deeds. They "walk the talk." Research indicates that about 97% of the meaning that is communicated in any communication transaction is communicated nonverbally. As leaders nurturing our relationships, we need to be clear that WHAT we DO may be far more important than WHAT we SAY. We need to be mindful of the nonverbal messages we are communicating.

Good leaders LISTEN! Good leaders remember that communication channels are two-way. They listen to others—regardless of position or title. Research indicates that we spend far more time listening during a day than talking. Are we really listening? Or are we just waiting our turn to talk, crafting our next statement, or developing an argument? Are we listening to the thoughts and feelings beneath the words? Kouzes and Posner remind us in *Encouraging the Heart* that "Paying Attention" is critical if we are to meet the leadership challenge. When we pay attention we help others FEEL HEARD. Nurture two-way communication channels! Make others feel heard! No other act tells a colleague or student that you care about them more than authentically listening to what they have to say.

Trust-building Actions! Trust is a significant factor in relationships. We must demonstrate our trust *in* others before asking for trust *from* them. Self-disclosure is one of the ways we make ourselves vulnerable to others in relationships. Our willingness to disclose appropriate information about ourselves AND our willingness to receive feedback from others are the two key components of self-disclosure. When we connect with others, share, and listen—we build trust. We find common values, issues, cares, and concerns in our lives. We discover that we have children, grandchildren, lawns, gardens, cars, and hobbies. We discover interesting things about each other. We come to fill important places in each other’s lives. We learn to trust and be trusted! Bennis and Nanus call trust “the glue that binds followers and leaders together.” The trust-building actions of making ourselves vulnerable to others and engaging in self-disclosure nurture our relationships.

Bank Accounts! Relationships are like bank accounts! You have to keep making deposits if you want your account to grow. As leaders, we will have to make withdrawals from our relationship accounts. Organizational demands, limited resources, competing values, leading change—often require relationship withdrawals. Sometimes the bank account becomes a savings account—we have relationship capital in the bank earning interest. Sometimes we are overdrawn. Maybe we have the relational equivalent of overdraft protection or a line of credit. If not, our account gets closed. This metaphor for social exchange theory may seem over-simplistic and somewhat transactional; however, it does provide helpful insights into the nature of our relationships. We must invest in them! We must work to keep a good balance!

Affirm! “Affirm” is one of the most powerful words in our language. It means looking for and finding good in people. It means building others up and encouraging them. It means finding reasons for praise and applause. It means nurturing and being supportive. It means reinforcing what others do well. Most of all, it means giving people reasons to celebrate. As leaders, we need to affirm others and our relationship with them everyday. When we affirm others we provide personal and professional confidence. When we affirm our relationships, we nurture them. Nurture relationships by engaging in relationship reminders—brief positive expressions about the other person and their importance to students, the team, the department, and college. Affirmation is critical to relationships.

How Full is Your Bucket? In their best-seller, Rath and Clifton stress that everyone has an invisible bucket. “We are at our best when our buckets are overflowing-and at our worst when they are empty. Everyone also has an invisible dipper. In each interaction, we can use our dipper either to fill or to dip from others’ buckets. Whenever we choose to fill others’ buckets, we in turn fill our own.” The Theory of the Dipper and the Bucket speaks to our relationships. Are we filling others’ Buckets on a regular bases? Do we encourage Bucket Filling in our departments and colleges? Rath and Clifton report that 65% of Americans received no recognition in the work place last year. If leadership is a relationship, we need to be Bucket Fillers!

The BEST! Our leadership relationships are at their “best” when we are able to achieve great things for our students, colleagues, and communities. John Maxwell uses the BEST acronym as a reminder of what people need from others in relationships.

Believe in them.

Encourage them.

Share with them.

Trust them.

Leadership IS a relationship! Focus on others, build trust, listen, affirm, and celebrate!