

leadership instalments

Power in Relationships

By Dan Gaynor

LEADERSHIP IS HIGHLY RELATIONAL WORK. GREAT TEAMS are not built in a weekend retreat, they are built one relationship, one situation at a time. They are the product of an entire leadership team working together to surface and resolve the issues that arise with people and the work they do. The best leaders know how and when to build relationships, and how and when to end them. The best build relationships that inspire others to do their best work, they lead enthusiastic participants. Poor leaders create relationships that are disheartening, they lead teams of reluctant survivors. Leaders are lifted or limited by the people they lead. They are defined by their relational abilities.

At their most elemental level, all organizations are formed of relationships. Nothing truly significant is ever accomplished alone. Relationships are the source of our greatest satisfactions, and our greatest frustrations, yet so many leaders act as though they don't matter at all. The most effective leaders know they are in the relationship business.

So how do effective leaders build relationships? They start with the right foundation, by cultivating humility. Author Jim Collins recognized this when he named humility as a key distinguishing factor between level four and level five leaders in his iconic book Good To Great. We can learn humility by practicing it. Because great leadership often attracts attention, all great leaders have to work at humility, lest pride begin to turn the leader's head. To practice humility, we must understand it. So often we equate humility with weakness, but this is not the case. Think of humility as an issue of focus: humility is not thinking less of ourselves, it is thinking of ourselves less. Proud leaders like to be the centre of attention, the organization exists to meet their needs. Humble leaders meet the needs of the organizations they serve. Pride stands in the way of healthy relationships.

Here we find one of the more intriguing aspects of the leader follower relationship: followers lift up humble leaders and they bring down prideful leaders. While prideful leaders seek attention, they often attract all the wrong kind.

With humility at the foundation, strong relational leaders invest time in relationships. They take an interest in people. They provide

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lots of feedback, they coach and they communicate. You just can't build strong relationships from the confines of your office, you've got to get out on the shop floor and spend time with the people you lead. You've got to be curious about them. When I'm interviewing for a leadership position I ask candidates to describe the people they currently lead. If they can't do it well it is a warning sign.

There are so many things strong leaders do to build relationships - too many to name in one article - but I want to draw our attention to one more, they admit mistakes. Once again, this is a product of humility. Proud leaders see mistakes as weakness, but followers see the willingness to admit them as a sign of strength. Acknowledging mistakes makes the leader a little more human, it draws others closer.

Relationships are at the heart of leadership. While it is true that followers must earn the confidence of their leaders, leaders must also earn the confidence of the men and women they lead. Without it, they cannot generate the support they need to implement change or pursue the new initiatives that are at the heart of transformational leadership.

Discussion Questions:

1. How much time do you spend on relationships?
2. When you make a mistake, how are you likely to treat it?
2. How might you change your habits, even a little, to get more time with the people you lead?

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