The Heart of Productivity

Maximizing Value and Results through Authentic and Courageous Conversations

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INTRODUCTION

An essential focus for any executive is generating sustainable productivity and continually enhancing the organization/team value proposition to their clients, shareholders and key stakeholders. In order to accomplish these results leaders must be able to:

- Deeply understand the needs of their clients and the market they serve.
- Develop and maintain strong partnerships with peers, other senior executives and their board.
- Effectively communicate and create shared ownership of their vision with those in their organization.
- Bring out the best in their talent and model being a value creator through their relationships with direct reports.

While there are leaders who excel in all of these – many leaders and managers are challenged at various levels in at least some of these arenas. In many cases their skill challenges are reinforced by cultural norms that ultimately value technical brilliance over the ability to lead and engage the best in others. In organizations where some level of this exists there may not be drastic signs of an illness like plunging revenues, yet there are symptoms that cost an organization plenty. These symptoms include:

- Projects that are regularly over time and over budget.
- Lack of risk taking and innovation.
- An over reliance on the use of positional authority and micromanaging to get things done (from a leader's perspective this usually means a lack of trust their people will follow through).
- An "overly polite" approach that glosses over the real issues that must be addressed to produce results.
- A bleeding of talent – especially younger high potentials.
- The sense that you are constantly recreating the wheel. There is little sharing of information.
- There is a more tactical versus strategic approach to managing the business.

One of the keys to resolving these symptoms is to resolving these is to enhance the leader's skill and the cultures ability to engage in authentic and courageous conversations. In today's value driven business environment an executive's ability to have such conversations is critical to building high performing profitable ventures. Authentic and courageous conversations maintain focus on what is most important in a respectful and trust building way. The parties in such a conversation come to an alignment around the most important outcomes and then are willing to enter into conflict to determine the best approach to achieving them.

At the most fundamental level, business is driven through commitments and commitments are made between people. When we have a respectful and trusting relationship where there is focus on a mutually beneficial outcome – commitments tend to be fulfilled in a satisfying way. In addition, when a high level of trust is developed these commitments are accomplished much more productivity.

Yet it is also important to point out that relationships take work - If you are married or in a relationship with a significant other you know this. In business, it is no different and in fact takes more awareness and effort because unlike our friendships and spouses – we do not often chose who we work with.

In addition, while an executive can:

- Stretch the truth to get a sale with a big client.
- Use their political clout to get their way.
- Rely on their positional authority to get a direct report to do something

Relying on these approaches rarely, if ever, produces the long term result a leader wants. Therefore, a leader must come to peace with the fact that they must focus on constantly improving their ability to engage others in empowering ways. The good news is there are some fundamental principles that can help us innovate and improve our relationships. Understanding these principles will provide a context for you to both assess effectiveness and consistently improve your success. In this article we will highlight these core principles (see figure 1) and provide some examples of how they have assisted leaders we have worked with to improve their results through practical application of these principles.

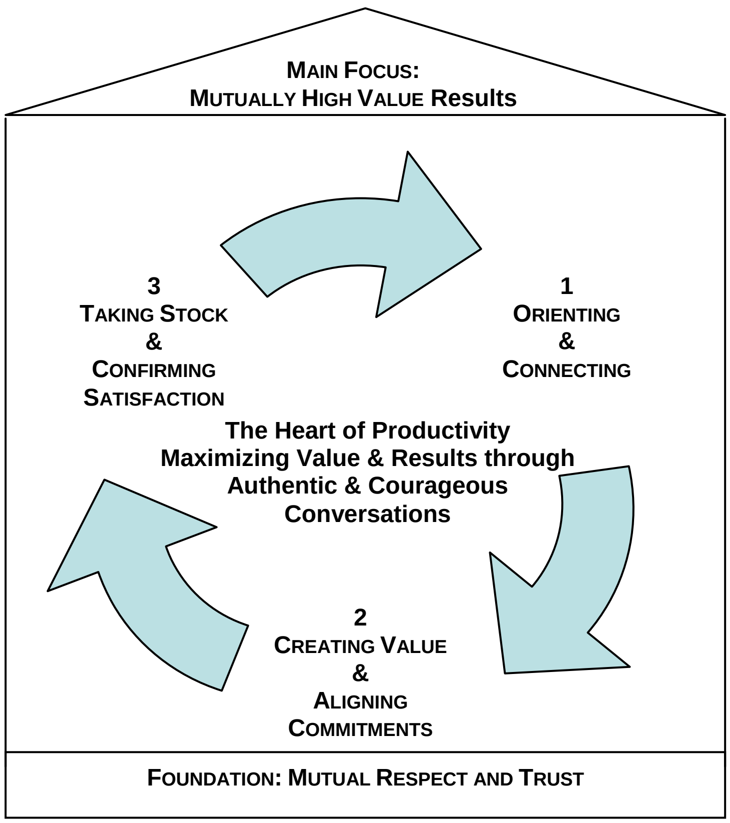


Figure 1 – Executive Skillworks Relationship Model

ENHANCING PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS STARTS WITH SELF-EXAMINATION

It is important to point out that committing to fully engaging this model requires an expanded self-awareness. The individual must be willing to look at their typical approach to business conversations and accept their responsibility for their more reactive habits such as:

- Wanting to take charge if things are not moving fast enough.
- Examining their own perfectionism.
- Looking at their belief that the world is made up of winners and losers.
- Embracing their opinions over all others (e.g. always wanting to be right).
- Feeling they have to overcompensate due to insecurities.
- Needing others to like them.
- Being overly cautious.

Once they acknowledge the key habits that get in the way of engaging others in conversations that forward what is most important they must then make a commitment to a mindset shift. This can be hard because most leaders have gotten to where they are by engaging their current patterns of behavior. The fact that a small percentage of it does not work very well does not matter – it is still hard to change. However, most individuals we have worked with begin to recognize the magnifying effect that a new mindset and set of skills will have for them. This makes them willing to go through the discomfort to shift what needs to be shifted in order to be more effective. When leaders are able to make the shift and approach relationships in a more conscious way they are always amazed by the results – these results include:

- Getting more done in less time
- The real problems being solved
- People around them taking more initiative.
- An overall more enjoyable experience engaging others.

This aspect of self exploration is the key element missing in most communication and influence training programs. All that really happens in these training programs is a new set of skills is layered over the existing habits – both the effective and ineffective. It is no wonder why some feel after the boss has come back from training they are being “manipulated” by the new skills. This is because there is no shift in mindset.

The model presented here was designed based on how strong relationships are built and how good conversations flow. Yet, we find it is much more powerfully used once leaders clarify their effective and ineffective habits and are able to shift their mindset in approaching conversations as true win-win dialogues. Once this happens the model seems to naturally make more sense. It is helpful for them to understand the flow, key principles and skills at each stage of the model. Yet, we also find that we don’t have to spend as much time as we normally would on teaching the skill content. It simply makes sense once the mindset shifts. From the combined experience of enhanced self-awareness, a shift in mindset and skill building they become excellent observers of their approach to interactions and the approach others are having. They facilitate engagements in very powerful ways and become consummate influencers. Their leadership takes a quantum leap – even if they are highly seasoned.

THE CONTEXT FOR ALL SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS – GENERATING MUTUALLY HIGH VALUE RESULTS

In its simplest terms business is an exchange of value. In all our business relationships – whether with clients, the board, other senior executives, direct reports or your manager – there must be some exchange of value for these relationships to work. The more one sided the value exchange is , the more likely it is that either someone will exit the partnership or there will be some degree of difficulty in forwarding action.

Think about it:

- The more transactional a client-vendor relationship becomes – the more likely a customer is going to leave due to price or service concerns. When the value is maximized – your clients will be more loyal and your margins will usually be bigger.
- Two of the top reasons a knowledge worker will leave the organization is due to a poor relationship with their manager and lack of attention on that individual's career growth. When a manager is attentive to an individual's career success it is far more likely that individual will work harder and make sacrifices for the business when necessary.
- Some of the toughest conflicts organizations face between key leaders is across functions (e.g. sales and operations) where there are cross purposes. When there is alignment around one mission and set of values – a true partnership is created that enhances productivity. While some natural conflicts will still occur they will usually have positive outcomes.

Success in business relationships and conversations starts with *an intention to create alignment and a willingness to do your part to make that happen*. The highest level of alignment comes when there is an alignment around mission and core values. When my mission serves yours and vice versa we have the best chance of generating a long term profitable partnership. When we align at the level of mission and values, there is a clarity of focus that allows for things to move along and conflicts to be resolved quickly.

However, while it is preferable to align at the highest possible level (e.g. vision, mission and values)it is not always practical, nor necessary. However, if you value the development of true partnership with your customers, board, peers, direct reports and/or other key stakeholders – clarity and alignment around the value exchange is an essential. In short, mutually high value is the destination of our model. However, to ensure this clarity and alignment you need to have regular dialogue that at times can be very heated. The goal is for all parties to remain open to differing views and to ultimately explore the best approach to achieving the results. This requires strong levels of trust and respect.

THE FOUNDATION OF SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS: MUTUAL TRUST AND RESPECT

Everyone knows the power of respect and trust in relationships. When they are present the productive energy is high and the experience of working together is positive. Let's start by examining respect. Without some level of respect establishing trust is very difficult.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines respect as "*A willingness to show consideration or appreciation*." This is an excellent definition for a business relationship. To engage in a business relationship with someone we do not necessarily have to like them or engage in intimate conversations with them but we do have to respect them – to show some level of consideration or appreciation for the value they bring to the table. Sometimes this takes some effort – a willingness to suspend our judgments. Research has actually shown that the opinion we hold of someone has an impact on their engagement with others. The research found that when we hold a positive opinion about someone's intentions, skills and abilities – it tends to become a self fulfilling prophecy[1]. Not only does everyone deserve some level of respect – simply enhancing our view of their value enhances the possibilities in the relationship. From here the goal is to increase our trust so that these possibilities can be magnified. We must even

[1] Livingston, J. Sterling, Pygmalion in Management (HBR Classic), Harvard Business Review, January 1, 2003.

be willing to make trust an explicit part of our conversations. If we are to do this it is helpful to understand the key components of trust.

Trust has three key components (see figure 2):

- **Inner Integrity** means that I trust you will be open about your key concerns, that what you say aligns with what you are thinking (e.g. no hidden agendas). Therefore I know were you stand on issues and with me.
- **Competence** means I believe you are have the skills to follow through on my requests or on the value propositions you are making to me.
- **Reliability** means that you will manage your commitments. That you will keep your word or give me enough appropriate notice if you are having problems following through.

ELEMENTS OF TRUST

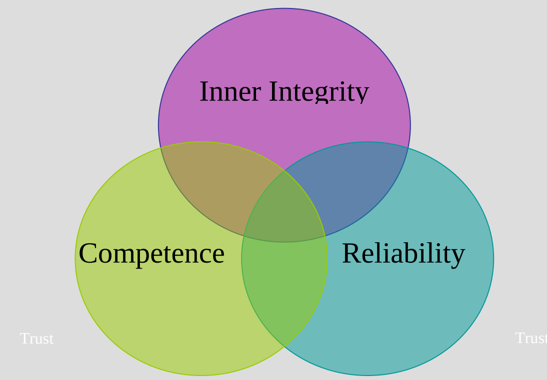


Figure 2

Understanding trust in this way allows you to address issues of trust more directly in the relationship so that trust can be improved or repaired. For example, if keeping commitments is the issue – we are dealing with a breakdown in reliability. This gives us something specific to address with that individual so that together you can determine new ways of operating so that trust is actually strengthened. In such a case, the opportunity is not just focusing on the breakdown in trust but rather to examine how to strengthen it in the relationship.

There is another important aspect of trust that must be addressed and that is how we give our trust to others. They key in business is to give enough trust to support a healthy start in a relationship and then allow the person to earn deeper levels of trust over time. For example, we might assume the best with a new direct report yet allow them to deepen their trust with us over time as they fulfill our requests (reliability and competence) and assess how honest they are being with us in our discussions (openness). As the trust builds we can expand their responsibilities and opportunities.

Unfortunately, in our work in organizations we have seen far too often an unbalanced way of generating trust. Either trust is given away too freely or too stingily. Then when people do not meet our unspoken expectations around trust complaints arise that these individuals just can not be trusted. We might be able to get away with this in our personal relationships yet doing so in business is extremely costly in dollars, lost time, inefficiencies, and bad feelings.

Executives must ask the question "*what has to happen for me to have trust*" and bring these answers explicitly into their relationships. If clear expectations are set then we have a way to measure how we are doing. Then when there is breakdown in trust we can have a conversation about it, learn from it and potentially deepen trust through that breakdown. At the very least if the person consistently does not follow through after clear expectations are set – we have the right to complain and take corrective action. The good news is most people want to work towards more trusting relationships that produce high value outcomes. The key to ensuring such results are produced and that your relationships are strengthened is to understand the natural flow that occurs in relationships and conversations.

THE RELATIONSHIP OR CONVERSATION CYCLE

The possibilities that are generated out of business relationships can mean millions of dollars for an organization. Each of our business relationships is really a series of conversations that lead to commitments. It is through these ensuing conversations and commitments that:

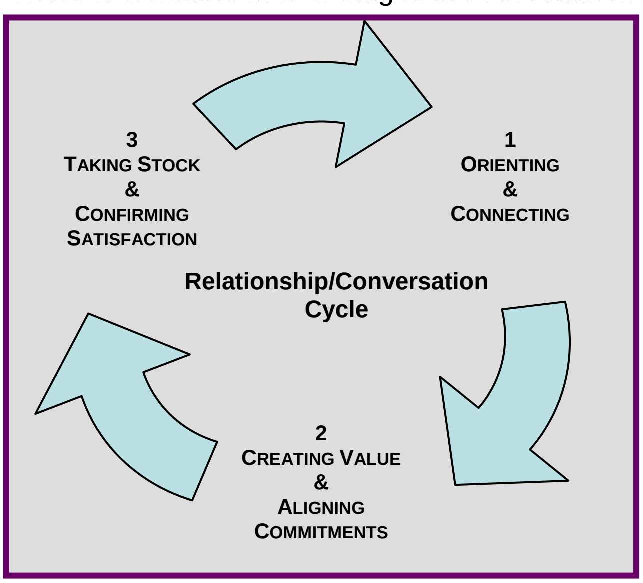
- Vision gets communicated, affirmed and turned into reality
- Mergers and acquisitions are negotiated and closed
- Teams make decisions and forward project milestones
- Clients are engaged
- Organizational culture is built and sustained
- High potentials are coached and developed

Given all of this, it is amazing that with the exception of the sales profession very little time is taken considering how we improve our capabilities as relationship builders and conversationalists. When we first start working with many of the executives we coach they tend to see good relationships as a nice to have rather than as a priority. Certainly at some level executives value positive relationships yet due to the pressures that come from being accountable for important results many executives tend to lean on their positional or political authority to get things done rather than applying influence skills.

Leaders who overuse their positional or political authority to get things done are usually trying to control others to get them to do what they want and/or protect their interests. This habit of control is not a judgment – it is simply an aspect of being human that one must outgrow in time if they are to embrace true leadership. The problem with controlling and protecting is that it ultimately undermines what most of leader's truly want – to build high performing organizations and create long term high value partnerships with our clients, suppliers and key stakeholders.

Given the pressures these leaders face and the fact that few have studied what it takes to influence it makes sense why they orient themselves the way they do. The good news is there is a way to clearly understand the influence process and to consistently improve our ability to build relationships that lead to enhanced productivity and results.

There is a natural flow of stages in both relationship building as well as in a conversation. Each stage has a particular purpose and builds a solid foundation for success at the next stage. This is a cycle because we can rotate through this many times in each relationship. Also, at the micro level this cycle applies to each conversation we have. Understanding the cycle allows us to both assess how we did in a conversation or how we are doing in a relationship as well as plan for important interactions with others.



It is important to stress that the principles we are sharing in clarifying this cycle are very powerful and should be applied in order to build and sustain relationships based on a foundation of mutual trust and respect as well as to build mutually high value results.

Otherwise, this will simply be another tool used to try to control others and it will backfire creating a breakdown in trust and ultimately will hurt productive output. As we said earlier, expanded self-awareness and a shift in mindset is essential to gain the full power of this cycle.

Now let's take a look at each stage of the cycle. Please note within each stage there are two strongly related elements. The combination of each element serves a specific purpose as follows:

The Orienting and Connecting Stage shifts the focus to a mutually high value agenda and generates an initial level of trust. This sets the stage for a dialogue of inquiry and high value commitments.

The Creating Value and Aligning Commitments Stage focuses on deeply exploring concerns and possibilities. It leads to highly effective commitments that include both business and relationship outcomes for all involved. This sets the stage for mutual satisfaction and a strengthening for the partnership to expand.

The Confirming Satisfaction and Taking Stock Stage focuses on ensuring value was delivered for all parties and sets the stage for further opportunities. It leads back to the first stage of the cycle.

Each element and stage of this conversation cycle provides a building block for each subsequent element and stage. A rule of thumb is if we are feeling stuck in one element we need to consider that we might have to back up to the previous stage and spend some more time there. For example, if we are sensing a resistance to important questions we are asking during the creating value element you need to check out the sense of connection or rapport that is in place. If you sense the connection is off you might need to reconsider how well the orientation stage was done. Let's flush this out a bit more by examining each stage and element in more detail.

ORIENTING AND CONNECTING

Orienting Element

Orienting is the building block for the entire conversation cycle. If we orient well, we will be able to make a stronger connection which allowing us to build enough trust to explore ways we can create value. Ultimately orientation builds effective high quality commitments that forward what is most important for all parties involved. If we don't orient ourselves well we stand a big chance of not generating the outcome we desire in a relationship or the interaction.

The process of orienting has to do with setting a foundation for what we are aiming to mutually create in the relationship or the conversation. Initially, if we are not used to making this a conscious step it may take a bit of time but the time spent is well worth it. Yet, like everything else, with practice powerful orientation to building a high value interaction becomes second nature. In a sense the orienting element has to do with strengthening our mindset to generate a mutually valuable agenda and producing the highest possible outcomes possible. This mindset is especially important as we enter potentially high conflict situations where creating alignment is essential.

Orienting effectively involves taking into consideration the concerns of all parties concerned. Unfortunately, most of the time, individuals tend to think about only what they want out of an interaction rather than being curious what outcome the other is seeking. If we follow this path there is a high likelihood that we will end up with dueling agendas. If we are lucky the agendas are aligned yet such luck is a rarity. Many times we end up in disagreements and conflicts. We might even walk away from the interaction privately saying to ourselves "They just don't get it!" and asking ourselves "what do I need to do to get this moving in the right direction?"

It takes great skill to suspend one's agenda and truly listen for expanded possibilities. Again, there is usually some personal work an individual must do to let go of their desire to control the situation and/or to protect their point of view. To orient there needs to be a fairly strong confidence in oneself and a commitment to collaborate in order to create a highly valuable outcome.

Steven Covey says "in order to influence we must first be willing to be influenced[2]." What Covey is talking about here is a kind of orientation we must have to succeed in relationships. If we do not have this orientation we simply will not be as effective in the other elements of relationship building. The benefits of orienting well include:

- Shifting our focus to the most important result in the relationship and/or interaction
- Creating fertile ground for innovative solutions
- Being able to be present for the other's concerns
- Building a solid foundation for the rest of the elements in the cycle

While there are a number of practices you can apply to help you orient effectively (see below) – the key to orienting most powerfully involves shifting one's mindset away from trying to convince towards creating a result that matters to both parties.

Orienting Practices Include

- Setting your intention prior to an interaction for a mutually valuable outcome. Research has shown that results are impacted by such an intention.
- During your planning take the time to consider what the other person's agenda might be as well as what are some good reasons for that agenda. Take a walk in their shoes.
- Take time to center yourself prior to the interaction. Centering allows you not to be so glued to your own opinion so that you are more open to listening for understanding.
- Engage from a place of curiosity about the other's point of view and about the possibilities that could be created from the interaction.
- Maintaining focus on both the business <u>*and*</u> relationship outcomes. Many people lose track of the later and in the long run it can cost you.
- Consider how you are going to set a positive context for the interaction. What you say at the outset of the interaction, where the interaction occurs, and the mood in which you engage through all have impact on the context.
- Set an agenda at the outset of a conversation that serves as an orienting point for all involved in the interaction (e.g. At the conclusion of our time today let's walk away with a plan of action that will re-engage the client and also take a look at how we got in this position so we can learn from it.)

Once we have oriented the next step is focusing on strengthening connection.

<u>Connecting Element</u>

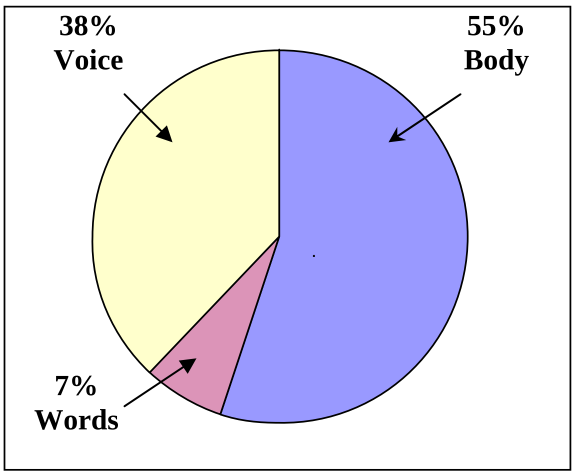
Most people understand the power of making a great connection with someone. When we make such a connection a natural interest arises about the other person, what value they can bring, and the possibilities that could be created with them. On the other hand most of us have also have experienced what it's like when we feel disconnected. In this case we might

[2] Covey, Steven, Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Fireside Press, New York, NY, 1989.

experience a breakdown in understanding or even an initial lack of trust. We have even seen situations in our work with executives where an initial disconnect leads to a bad first impression generating a lack of trust the continued to deteriorate over time. After examining the reason for this lack of trust, no substantial reason could be given other than their opinion that the other person could just not be trusted. In most cases trust can be restored to a new level if a different action is taken. This usually involves having the executive reorient around the value of the relationship and take initiative to connect in a new way with the other party.

In most cases, when we start off on the wrong foot with someone we usually chalk this up to something external to us – the other person or situation we find ourselves in. Yet, some powerful research gives us another way to look at this and provides access to ways we can improve the trust in and outcomes from our relationships.

Dr. Albert Mehrabian, a psychologist, conducted a seminal study in the 1960's focusing primary on one-on-one and small group interactions. Mehrabian found out some very interesting statistics that showed that there are three important components involved in how communication is interpreted. These components include the words we use, our voice quality and our body language. Now we have always known that all of these were important yet Dr Mehrabian's research uncovered some amazing results.



The research reveals that the words themselves have far less impact on the communication than the voice quality or body language. In fact, as the figure shows words have 7% of an impact, body language has 55% impact and voice quality has 38% impact on how communication is interpreted. In other words, a bulk of our communication is based on nonverbal responses (93% according to Merabian's research). The question becomes how can we apply this to improve the overall engagement with another person? To help, let's take a look at another aspect of how communication happens.

Have you ever noticed what happens to people's body posture when they are in rapport in a conversation? If you spend some time doing your own research you will find that there is a natural matching and mirroring that occurs in some aspect of their body positions. They might both be leaning forward, crossing their legs, leaning to one side or the other. You can usually pick one pattern out that is the same. If you have never noticed this you can do your own experiment. Go to your favorite restaurant and notice others conversing around you. You will see patterns in matching and mirror of posture, voice quality and even the words used. Again research on rapport has shown this is what happens when people make a connection.

Conversely, if people are in discord there tends to be a mismatching that occurs. Pointing back to our discussion of getting off on the wrong foot – it might be as simple as a mismatching that occurred during the first meeting which might have been exaggerated from a lack of orientation or misaligned agendas. Many have pointed over the years that this issue of establishing rapport and connecting as "soft skills" yet we are beginning to see how critical it is. If we do not pay attention to rapport we are ignoring a powerful element that allows everything else in the relationship or interaction to actually work. Rapport can improve the likely hood that our commitments are effective. We suggest that we replace the term "soft skills" with the realization that we are dealing with the core software or operating system the serves as the basis for all interactions.

Key practices for Connecting

- Ensure you have oriented well and that you enter in the conversation with a sense of certainty for the value you are bringing to the table.
- Shift your focus to a mutually aligned agenda and curiosity for the others point of view
- Set a strong context for the interaction that facilitates a high level conversation focused on results.
- Be mindful of rapport and use it as a gauge for how the connection is manifesting. Also, be willing to be flexible in your approach to build stronger rapport through consciously matching and mirroring.
- Ask questions that allow the other person to speak about what is most important to them.

Depending on how strong our relationship is with someone depends on how much focus we need to have on this stage. Obviously, if we are in a long term relationship with lots of positive history – Orienting and Connecting can happen within a few moments or even seconds. If we are in new relationship or a more contentious one – then we are wise to place more emphasis on this stage. Once again, we also know we need to reemphasize Orienting and Connecting if the next stage does not seem to be unfolding well. For example, it is not unusual during a meeting to step back and ask something like "John, I notice you are less engaged today – is there something we need to speak about or is something else on your mind?" We might have not picked up John's disengagement by what he said, but how he was "mismatching" our posture or pace in the conversation. Paying attention to such things enhances our ability as a communicator and influencer. The time it takes pays dividends when we reach the commitment or negotiation stage. In any event, once connection is solidly established the flow naturally moves to the next stage.

CREATING VALUE AND ALIGNING COMMITMENTS

Creating Value Element

What is value and where is the value created in a relationship? Certainly the end result of an exchange between two or more parties delivers value. Yet, that has more to do with the finally commitments we make. The first step in creating value involves understanding the internal concerns of the other(s) we are engaging. These concerns can usually be boiled down to purpose, goals and an internal set of operating guidelines for satisfaction. It is through this lens that the other(s) will evaluate (e-***valu***-ate) the significance of what we bring.

The more deeply we understand the desires and concerns of those we engage the more powerfully we can align commitments and generate actions to deliver a highly valuable result. Our experience, in working with many executives is that because they are brilliant they tend to be quick to the trigger in conversations. They either feel with very little data that they know the solution and direct others to take action or they get frustrated that people do not think like they do or match their style. Yes, the pressures at their level are immense yet many times they push through an interaction only to have it come back to haunt them later. In her book "*Fierce Conversations*" Susan Scott says that every conversation we have during each day is important and that if we took the point of view of taking each conversation we have to heart different results would be possible in our business. As Scott discovered after over ten thousand hours of conversations and many workshops with leaders confronted by their relationships – all challenges are faced one conversation at a time[3]. It is true while no one conversation will change the trajectory of a business, a project or one's leadership – one conversation actually can. What she was pointing to here is the importance of slowing down to understand more deeply what others are say and ultimately what is most valuable to them. From there we can share our concerns more deeply and create a more compelling value exchange.

However, it is also important to point out that taking time to explore and speculate does not mean meandering and being nice. It does mean orienting to what is possible, making a respectful connection and opening a dialogue that will set the stage for a higher level of results. The central tenant of creating value is to:

1. Inquire more deeply into others concerns so that we build a true understanding of the real problem (versus offering a premature solution).
2. Speculating about creative solutions and explore what each party can bring to the table to address the identified problem – prior to committing.

Creating value is inherent in this process because many times what people are presenting as a problem is rarely the true problem. Many times we ask the question to the leaders we work with "how many times when a request is made to you are people asking for what they really want?" We usually get the answer 10% or less. In most cases, when a person expresses a concern it demands further exploration. The very process of exploring the issue more deeply expands people's understanding of both the problem and potential solutions leading to the best outcome. This in turn creates greater clarity and focus about what really needs to be effected and how. The definition of a higher order outcome and articulation of powerful options creates value in and of itself. Unfortunately, this level of dialogue and deep exploration required is rarely done and the productivity costs are huge.

On the other hand, if orientation and connection have gone well, and individuals in the conversation are able to deal with some creative tension the process will be successful. Also, depending on the complexity of the situation, one does not have to spend an inordinate amount of time here. You have accomplished the purpose of this element when the deeper definition of the problem is uncovered and a creative solution is generated.

The central tool for Creating Value boils down setting proper context, asking powerful questions and being willing to listen deeply to the answers. While we will not go into the whole questioning strategy here we will point to a few of the most potent questions that should be asked during this stage.

Questions for deepening the understanding of the problem:

- What are the biggest issues you are facing (with the client, with your team, in your business, etc.) at this time?
- What are the biggest challenges you are facing or biggest opportunities you are looking at?
- Say more about the issue(s)?
- If that (issue/challenge) was resolved what would be most important about that?
- If that (issue/challenge) was resolved what would that give you?
- If you had this situation the way you wanted it – what would be most important about that to you?
- Of the issues you mentioned which is more important – A, B, or C?
- What time frame do we have to deal with this?
- What resource limitations do we have in dealing with this?

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[3] Scott, Susan, Fierce Conversations – Achieving Success At Work and In Life One Conversation at a time,, Viking Press, New York, NY, 2002.

Questions for speculating:

- So how would we define our ultimate outcome at this point?
- Given the outcome – what might be some options for addressing it?
- What is the risk reward ratio for each option?
- How would we prioritize the options given the impact they will have on getting us to the goal?
- Are you prepared to make a decision?
- If so, which option are you suggesting?
- What are our next steps?

Key practices for Creating Value

- Ensure rapport is strong.
- Be clear about and remain connected to your commitment to the outcome for the interaction.
- Focus on clarifying the problem before speculating about solutions.
- Focus on creating an open dialogue that values others' views.
- Use questions to uncover deeper understandings as well as the best strategies for resolving the issue or leveraging the opportunity.
- When the problem is clear brainstorm potential solutions.
- Come to consensus on the best approach or solution.
- Determine next steps and move to creating commitments.

If we stayed connected and asked good questions next steps will be outlined and creating a commitment will be easy.

Commitment Element

As stated thus far the commitments we make can be far less productive without:

- A self-awareness of what blocks interactions with others.
- A commitment to orient with others allows for the best strategy to emerge
- An openness to engage in deep inquiry in order to manifest real value.

In our experience, if we engage with others effectively in the previous elements – making strong commitments is much easier. Utilizing the first several elements, a strong sense of partnership around finding the best solution can be formed. When this partnership happens, negotiating a powerful commitment is much more likely. At the same time, while these previous elements are fundamental to generating productive business relationships our effectiveness in making commitments and reliably carrying them out is where the rubber meets the road in business. Therefore it is helpful to look at the anatomy of effective commitments.

Effective commitments and effective actions come from making effective promises. Yet, such promises come out of two proactive actions which are:

- Making requests

  A request involves an individual asking for a specified set of conditions to be delivered at an agreed upon time. When an individual makes a request they are declaring that "Something important is missing" and they trust that the person they are making the request to can provide what is missing.

- Making Value Propositions

  A value proposition involves and individual making an offer to fulfill a set of conditions based on what is missing for another. The key in making a powerful value proposition is being able to understand the other's concerns to at the deepest possible level. When you are able to help an individual become more focused on what is missing you will automatically be seen as a valued partner to assist them.

A key thing to remember with both requests and value propositions is that they are not in and of themselves commitments. They only turn into commitments or promises when the "yes" is given by the person hearing the request or being made an offer. This is not a small point. Think about it. How many times have we made a request to someone and we hear something like:

- "That does sound important"
- "uh huh"
- "let me look into that"

Are these a ***YES***? You know from your experience that many times these are not and when they are not an explicit yes, a lot of productive time is lost or worse we get "egg on our faces" because the promise we thought we had is connected to a promise we then made to someone else!

If a clear "yes" is obtained in the process we must also be aware that there is a particular architecture to a commitment. There will be a wholesale change in our productivity and that of our team when we consciously improve our skills in the previous elements of the conversation cycle and integrate this architecture into our process of making commitments. Let's take a look at the commitment architecture.

The Architecture of Effective Commitments

1. **The Commitment Maker**
   There is an individual who says yes to the request or will deliver upon a value proposition offered.

   Key question: Who will ultimately deliver on this promise?

2. **The Client or Commitment Stakeholder**
   This is the individual that will benefit from the request or value proposition being fulfilled. Certainly, there is value in the exchange for the commitment maker too. Yet, ultimately this is the individual that declares they are satisfied with the result.

   Key question: Who ultimately will declare satisfaction that the commitment has been fulfilled?

3. **The Conditions of Satisfaction are Clear**
   These are the specific requirements that must be met in order for the client or commitment stakeholder to declare they are satisfied.

   Key questions:

   "What must happen for you (the client) to be satisfied I/we have fulfilled the request or value proposition?

   "How will you know we have delivered x to your satisfaction?

4. **A Deadline is Clearly Stated**
   There must be a clear deadline for when the promise will be delivered. Reliable delivery of a promise is defined by generating a deliverable that meets the specified conditions of satisfaction within the timeframe required.

   Key question: When must x be delivered?

5. **Surfacing Assumptions**
   Sometimes there are conditions of satisfaction that are assumed. A simple example is an east coast Sales Vice President expects a report by the opening of business every Monday east coast time but this is not explicitly expressed. The west coast sales manager assumes this means the opening of business pacific time. Surfacing assumptions can be a tricky business. Many times these assumptions surface during the delivery of a promise. What is important is that we do our best to surface these assumptions during the commitment process. At the same time it is very important to understand that surfacing all assumptions is sometimes impossible. The key is to work in a respectful manner to re-clarify assumptions as conditions of satisfaction as we move along rather than being upset when our expectations are not met.

   Key questions: Based on the commitment are there any underlying assumptions we have that are implicit (e.g. who the client(s) is/are, the time, unspoken conditions of satisfaction)?

If we look at commitments that are not being met effectively you will always see one or more of these elements missing. In addition, you will likely find something in the communication cycle was not completed.

In addition to looking at the architecture of your commitments it is important to consider two key territories. All commitments involve – business outcomes and relationship outcomes. While we tend to focus primarily on the business outcomes it is equally important that we take into account how we can enhance the commitments that strengthen the relationship. For the most, part the relationship side is an after thought. Yet, if we are interested in making things easier over time and avoiding the pitfalls created when relationships go awry then it is important that we consider both relationship and business outcomes when we make commitments. Below are some examples of what I mean:

Business Outcomes	Relationship Outcomes
• Definitions of success • Specific deliverables • The scope of the request • Resources needed • Costs and budgeting issues • Schedule and impact on project plans	• How changes should be communicated and made • Dealing with the impact any technological change will have on people (a huge piece missing in most change initiatives) • Whose acceptance and commitment are critical if changes are necessary • How we will deal with problems if they arise • How to communicate about progress • Reporting requirements • When to take stock of progress

Over the long term, incorporating both sides of the equation will enhance your performance as well as those around you. Ultimately this will bring about innovation in best practices as well as better results. Finally, it is important to remember that priorities shift and things change in the fast-paced environment we find ourselves in. This requires a final stage in our cycle.

Taking Stock and/or Confirming Satisfaction

Yes, things change – including mergers and acquisitions, a new CEO, a shift in corporate strategy, personal challenges and mismanaged commitments from others. When managing commitments there needs to be a taking stock process that allows us to check in on satisfaction with progress. Unfortunately, most times we are taking stock when things are going awry. In those instances emotions can be raw and we find ourselves in a firefighter mode. This is why it is strongly recommended to take stock when things are going well. When we do this we are not only reinforcing our value – we can possibly surface other opportunities to generate additional opportunities in that relationship. Relationships are like bank accounts – as we deliver on our promises and remain present to another's concerns there is a bigger account that we can draw upon. In this relationship, we can make more powerful requests and be more easily forgiven if something does go wrong.

Finally, when we have delivered on a commitment it is extremely important that we gain a declaration of satisfaction. The power of one stating out loud that they are satisfied with results provided by you enhances your stance in that relationship.

Keys to Taking Stock and Confirming Satisfaction

- Build a taking stock process into the initial commitment
- Take stock when things are going well
- Confirm your client or commitment stakeholder is satisfied once you have delivered on the commitment

Conclusion

In short, our effectiveness in building and sustaining meaningful business relationships is at the heart of productivity. Being good at relationship management is not about playing nice or passing the ball in a polite or compliant way. It is also not about pushing your agenda or demanding obedience.

The ability to build high value relationships and to engage effectively in the multiple conversations one has on a daily basis is an essential leadership skill. Being effective in this skill involves effectively forwarding results in such a way that it brings out the best in others. This skill set involves being willing to bring tough issues to the surface, put them on the table and grapple with them until we have discovered the best strategies for leveraging opportunities or mitigating challenges we are facing.

In summary, the foundation of relationship management skills for a leader involve:

- Expanding self-awareness so that he or she can leverage their strengths as a relater and close the trap doors that prevent them from being effective.
- Approaching engagements with others from a collaborative and respectful mindset.
- Being authentic in his or her approach and courageous in their willingness to talk about the real issues that impact the group's abilities to generate profound results.

From here the relationship/communication cycle can support the leader in both preparing for and diagnosing our interactions so that over time we gain more and more skill in forwarding productivity and important results.

While building high value relationships and partnerships can be broken down to this cycle, building and sustaining relationships is also not a step-by-step experience. Being a master relationship builder involves awareness, intuition, emotional flexibility, and above all an intention to create a win-win outcome. At the same time, there is a natural flow to building trusting, respectful, and mutually valuable partnerships. Consciously understanding this flow will provide you with the ability to improve existing relationships, get new ones off on the right foot and effectively assess current interactions. Following this path ultimately allows the leader to motivate rather than direct, influence rather than control, and multiply their impact rather than add incremental improvements.

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