**Five Practices To Build Authentic Relationships At Work**



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True story: One of the most uncomfortable moments of my corporate career was when I was invited to go to lunch with the general manager leading my division. I was a young assistant brand manager at Procter & Gamble and he was three levels above me. As a form of recognition for my work, my boss arranged for some “informal face time” with the GM.

I am not sure who was more uncomfortable, the GM or me. We walked to a noisy Skyline Chili restaurant in downtown Cincinnati, quickly wolfed down the chili hot dogs and were both grateful that the noise was too loud for any real conversation. I realize now that it was a lost opportunity to build an authentic relationship and see each other as people, rather than through the haze of hierarchy. An authentic relationship would have allowed me to feel more confident in presentations, and to influence him better.

What creates an authentic relationship? Research on the human brain suggests that when we meet someone, our brain (often unconsciously) scans all the possible information to determine whether he or she is trustworthy. This is part of the evolutionary human survival instinct. As cave people, our physical survival was paramount. Only when we established our safety in a relationship did we next scan for how useful the other person might be. Fast-forward to the 21st century: While physical survival is often not an issue in the corporate jungle, the survival of our ego is. In fact, Google’s research on teams suggests that the highest performing teams have one thing in common: “psychological safety,” or the ability to share your ideas and who you are without fear of being judged by others.

Here are five practices that can help you make authentic connections.

**Start with the right intent**. This has to be the starting point in an authentic relationship. Ask yourself, "What is my intention for this relationship?" It is transactional (i.e., I want to get what I need from them) or relational (i.e., I want a trusted relationship in which both parties look for ways to benefit each other)? [For relationships to be authentic, your mindset has to be one of a genuine desire to be of value to the other person](https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.forbes.com%2Fsites%2Fhennainam%2F2018%2F11%2F05%2Ffive-practices-to-build-authentic-relationships-at-work%2F&text=For%20relationships%20to%20be%20authentic%2C%20your%20mindset%20has%20to%20be%20one%20of%20a%20genuine%20desire%20to%20be%20of%20value%20to%20the%20other%20person) . Take a deep breath and let go of fear, anxiety or discomfort. Our emotions (including positivity towards and willingness to trust another person) are read by others and are contagious.

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**Ask questions that build positive energy**. A great way to develop a stronger connection with someone is to ask questions that create positive, shared emotion. Start by asking questions like “What do you like most about your role?” or “What was the best part of your day?” or “What are you passionate about?” Neuroscience research shows that our brain see-saws between two different domains: an analytical domain, which is task-focused, and an empathic domain, which is relational. Questions that build positive emotion activate the empathic domain. When our brains are in this domain, we are more open to being influenced by another.

**Be mindful of labels**. Our brain is a bit like a popcorn machine: It pops thousands of thoughts a day, keeping a constant commentary going. Most of our thoughts tend to err on the side of the negative. We are constantly labeling our experiences (good, bad, ugly) and sometimes this includes the people we connect with. For example, I tend to be impatient with people who are long-winded. I have a bias because I assume people who can’t get to the point aren’t very smart. When I make this assumption, it can prevent me from seeing the ways in which the person **is** smart. It can also prevent me from appreciating their other qualities and make me less likely to reach out to them to collaborate or seek out their point of view. By being mindful of the commentary in our brains, we can prevent judgement from standing in the way of our authentic connection and influence.

**Listen with full attention**. Most of the time, when we listen we only pay partial attention to what someone else is saying. Some of our attention is spent deciding how we will respond or what we think about what the other person is saying. This is level one listening. Level two is when we listen fully to the other person’s words. This is better. Level three listening is when we fully listen, but also pay attention to their body language and the underlying emotions. When we feel what they are feeling and reflect that back to them, it helps the other person feel understood and valued.

**Be willing to be vulnerable**. Each of us has mirror neurons in our brains. It’s these neurons that make behavior and emotion contagious. When we take a risk to share something personal (for example, a dream we have for the future, a childhood memory, a personal story about a sad or happy time, a meaningful experience), we send a signal to the other person that we trust them. Research shows that when we are willing to open up and show someone that we trust them, they become more trustworthy and open.

Authenticity and trust in relationships is not only critical for performance and results on teams. Authentic relationships are actually good for our well-being. Dr. Barbara Fredrickson’s book *Love 2.0* points to research that micro-moments of connection among humans actually improve our immune systems. The vagus nerve (which connects our brains to our hearts and regulates the body’s inflammation, glucose and heart rate, protecting the body from heart attacks) strengthens as the body experiences more of these micro-moments of connection. Based on the research, these micro-moments require three factors: a sharing of positive emotions among two or more people, synchrony between their biochemistry (via mirror neurons in their brains) and a mutual desire for each other’s well-being.

Which of these practices resonate most with you? Who will you choose to establish a stronger relationship with? I'm on a mission for us to create workplaces where we are each inspired to do our best work, and authentic relationships are the foundation.