

# Leadership Connectors: A Theoretical Construct for Building Relationships

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This article provides a model for developing and sustaining relationships that can lead to ongoing school academic success. Leaders can successfully engender positive relationships and develop healthy organizational cultures that advance powerful teaching and learning by focusing on the six relationship connectors described in this article. As professors of educational leadership, we can influence what happens in schools and we can assist practicing and aspiring leaders in developing healthy organizational cultures which are safe, collaborative, and creatively vibrant. We can help them manage highly contentious political environments with moral integrity and sensitivity to individual and group relationships. In addition, we can help them develop mutual trust, respect and support among all school employees in order to increase student achievement and create an environment in which all employees and students are successful.

## Introduction

This year's journal theme is *The Managed Heart: Examining How Effective Leaders Engender Positive Relationships and Develop Healthy Organizational Cultures that Advance Powerful Teaching and Learning*. In this article we discuss what leaders can do to ensure that deep within their hearts they feel positive about the jobs they perform each day in their schools and/or school districts.

The work of school leaders is time consuming, challenging and often frenetic; at times it can threaten to take over one's life. This new millennium has presented new and ever changing challenges for school leaders across our nation. How do leaders manage these challenging times and maximize positive situations? How can leaders avoid the cognitive dissonance they experience when they view themselves one way and others view them differently? How do leaders know that they are succeeding in advancing powerful teaching and learning and ensuring that students, faculty and staff thrive, not only survive? These are questions we have researched and written about and continue to do so as we prepare educational leaders.

## Relationship Connectors: A Theoretical Construct for Building Relationships

A phrase that constantly resonates with us is one by Seyfarth (2001, p. 236), "All individuals want to experience psychological success." We don't know of one school leader who goes to work each day and says, "I hope I fail today." We strongly believe that all leaders want to be successful; they simply need the knowledge, skills, strategies, and a positive attitude to do so.

Developing and nurturing relationships are essential and critical facets of leadership; nothing gets done alone (Davis & Hensley, 1999; Ferrucci, 2006; Goleman, 2002; Hensley, 2006; Wheatley 2004). According to Wheatley (2004, p. 8), "Thinking you can make it on your own is just nonsense and it is one of the most paralyzing concepts we have right now." Fullan (2004) emphasized the need for leaders to build relationships with diverse groups especially with individuals different from themselves. After an extensive review of the literature and countless interviews with practicing administrators, we have developed a theoretical construct which specifically addresses relationship building. We posit that if one is to be successful as a leader in any organization, not just schools or school districts, then he or she must focus specifically on what we have labeled relationship connectors. Our *relationship connectors* include (1) communication, (2) support, (3) safety, (4) competence, (5) continuous renewal, and (6) trust. We contend that all of these connectors must be the continuous foci of a leader; they must function together for the development of meaningful, purposeful and sustainable relationships. If one of these relationship connectors is neglected, damaged or missing, there is a disconnect and the relationship will falter. Furthermore, we posit that these six connectors are interrelated and of equal importance.

If leaders want to engage in a collective and worthy purpose and move individuals in the right direction toward common and purposeful goals, it is incumbent upon them to focus on and develop relationships with those with whom they work. Effective leaders recognize quickly and clearly that people are the most important asset in any organization.

### Communication

According to Nelissen (2007), organizational culture is the result of organizational communication, both conscious and unconscious. Good communication is a complex, idiosyncratic, and sometimes subtle process. It determines the success or failure of the organization and is a reflection of the organization's reputation. Communication helps others decide if they will follow or retreat (Hensley & Burmeister, 2004).

When things go awry in an organization the problem has often been identified as a lack of communication; it tends to be the nebulous scapegoat. If a leader is able to communicate his or her expectations clearly, believes that

the expectations are ethical and trusts that individuals can meet the expectations, then it is highly probable that relationships will develop and constituents will follow the leader. Good communication may be praised openly or it may underlie the smooth workings of the school. However it manifests itself, good communication is consistently recognized in schools as a key success factor. Effective leaders know that language can inspire or destroy individuals. A leader's specific comments and actions can ensure colleagues that they are trustworthy and competent.

A leader's positional power motivates constituents to try to understand who the leader is, what he believes, and what he values. Faculty and staff are always trying to "read" the leader. Everything a leader says or does shapes others' opinions and feelings about the leader. What leaders wear, how they style their hair, their body language, the kind of car they drive, the orderliness of their office, their presence or absence, even their silence communicates something about who they are and what they represent. Understanding this inspires leaders to craft their words and actions that send clear messages and helps others to trust their leadership skills.

## **Support**

Support is transparent in an organization; people know when it is present and they know when it is lacking. Support is a basic need. Teachers, staff, students, parents and leaders themselves all desire and yearn for support. Effective leaders know that no matter where people work, they value support; it is a basic need and is of utmost importance. People can only be successful if this need is met (Barth, 2001; Bennis & Goldsmith, 2002; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998).

Support comes in many shapes and forms. It might be financial, material, physical, emotional, human and/or moral. Leaders who demonstrate these types of support are communicating that they value and care for other individuals. Support communicates connectedness and yields overwhelmingly positive results. It not only helps to build relationships, it strengthens them. When faculty and staff know they are supported, they experience feelings of belonging, feelings of importance and most importantly they feel relevant in others' lives. Support results in empowerment and empowers others to want to support their leader. Individuals who are supported feel good about who they are and the job that they are doing. Support heightens their desire to excel and go the extra mile.

When leaders provide support, it quickly becomes reciprocal. Faculty and staff will watch out for, take care of, brag about, defend, and protect the leader when they know they are supported. This is such a rudimentary concept; however, not all leaders recognize the critical importance of support. It must come from the leader first and it does not take very long for individuals to determine if the leader's support is present or absent. Employees tend to ignore the leader or marshal resources to encourage the leader to leave if support is nonexistent. Furthermore, the best and the brightest

teachers will depart if they do not consider it worth their time, energy, and physical or emotional well-being to remain in the organization. When support is present, individuals work in concert with one another and engage in causes beyond themselves.

## **Safety**

Safety is also a very basic need. As humans, we need to feel physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe. Everyone does their best work when their primitive instincts to fight or flee are calmed to a reasonable state. Individuals can shift their energies from basic survival to complex thinking and reflecting when they are safe (Axelrod, 2000; Goleman, 2002; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998). People thrive on complex problem solving and their self-efficacy is enhanced when they feel safe. The fear and helplessness fall away, clearing the path for creativity, productivity, and ultimately, fulfillment and self-actualization.

Challenges and even occasional frustration and stress keep our brains alive. Without these we wither. The secret is to keep our challenges manageable. It is a state of heightened, anxiety ù minimized attention that researchers Renate and Geoffrey Caine (2008) identified as “relaxed alertness.” Csikszentmihalyi (2004) labeled a similar state as, “being in the flow.” Often we say we are “in the zone.” All of these are attempts to describe the optimum intellectual and emotional place in which individuals’ productivity and creativity blossom. Those who experience this relaxed alertness, flow, or “in the zoneness” report a heightened sense of joy and energy that leads them to seek the experience again. If the leader can orchestrate opportunities for people to feel this positive energy about their job and themselves, the leader is much more likely to create and maintain a positive school culture. As a leader becomes more proficient with clear communication and providing support, his or her faculty and staff will move into a risk-taking, creative, and more productive mode. Ensuring that schools are communities in which vigilant people make sure that all are safe and belong is the primary responsibility of the leader. When the leader places emphasis on safety others will follow.

## **Competence**

Leaders must recognize that they will never know everything they need to know and that learning is a life-long process (Bennis & Goldsmith, 1997). In this age of technology and overwhelming amounts of information, only a supernatural being could be omniscient. There will always be more to learn. The good news is that there will always be a way for a leader to learn what he needs to know. The resources are there, not always in conventional places. It is up to the leader to find and use them. “I don’t know” does not have to be an excuse. We can all gain inspiration from those who say, “I don’t know-yet. But I will know soon.” Being able to identify times when

we do not know something important and then knowing how to find the resources to gain understanding is an invaluable skill for a leader. If a leader frames, “I don’t know” as a catalyst for action rather than an excuse, people will join the leader in the quest at hand. Like Don Quixote, most people enjoy the challenge of the quest rather than the drudgery of “fixing” a problem. Building competence is a quest for better ways of to reach a worthy vision, not a taxing interruption to the “real” work. Effective leaders enjoy the journey of being able to say, “I can help you with that” instead of, “I don’t know.”

According to Goleman (2002) and Morgan and Lynch (2006), leaders hone their social and emotional skills by observing and nurturing one or more mentoring relationships with trusted and knowledgeable colleagues. They actively seek individuals who can coach them on their interpersonal skills. Communication skills are different from and in addition to basic social/emotional intelligence skills. These are the nuts and bolts of leadership communication—a shared vision for the school, decision making, emails and newsletters, effective meetings, the evaluation and documentation process, conflict management, protocol for speaking to the board, interaction with community and parent groups, schedules, school-wide procedures and routines (including discipline), and the budget process.

Leaders cannot survive on impulse and decisiveness alone. They must take time to breathe and reflect on events as they occur. They are able to identify and own their missteps as well as their successes. They constantly engage in the art of reflection. They reflect on their actions and interactions with others and focus on how they treat each individual with whom they come in contact. When a leader respects others, they receive respect in return. One act of kindness at a time can build a bank account of good will and trust that a leader will be able to access for a long time. Respect is aligned with communication, support, safety, competence, continuous renewal, and trust. A leader shows true respect when he or she provides relevant support to colleagues based on his or her competence in an area. Leaders earn respect by becoming competent.

Collins (2001) asserted in his book *Good to Great* that great leaders give the credit to others. Their humility is so genuine and consistent that their names are often not even known outside their organizations. Those who work with these leaders recognize and appreciate their competence, but the leaders themselves do not seek recognition beyond the raised level of their self-efficacy. Satisfaction for these leaders comes in knowing that they have accomplished the task(s) they set out to accomplish rather than in receiving public acclaim. When this situation exists, the relationship circle is complete, and everyone within it succeeds.

Listening, observing, reflecting, finding a mentor, networking, reading constantly, attending classes and seminars, analyzing and not jumping immediately to conclusions help leaders increase their competence. The reward for enhancing and crystallizing competence is trust and respect from those with whom the leader works.

## Continuous Renewal

Just as leaders must take care of their teachers and staff, they must also take care of themselves. Too many young as well as veteran leaders are keeling over with heart attacks or have illnesses that debilitate them emotionally, psychologically, and/or physically. The job of a leader should be one that brings joy, excitement, and validation to one's life. When outstanding leaders hear the clock ticking on 60 Minutes on Sunday evening, they, of course, wish the weekend had been longer; nevertheless, they relish the thought of another rewarding week at school. These leaders have a passion for and are committed to a healthy life, nurturing relationships with their families and friends, and their jobs. They continuously renew themselves.

Healthy leaders pay attention to the messages their bodies are sending them (Goleman, 2002; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998). They psychologically and physically support themselves; they ensure their mental and physical safety; they strive to keep themselves current and focus on continuous renewal. They cherish and protect the relationships they have with family and friends. They strive to keep their emotions under control. Emotions are funny things. They can help one be kind, gentle, decisive, understanding, knowledgeable, and caring. Conversely, they can "eat you alive." When this happens, leaders tend to perceive life, people, and their jobs negatively.

Emotions can breed contempt. They can cause an individual to be out of control and to do things that are later regretted. Initially when one becomes a leader, emotions seem to be unpredictable, but as the leader engages in the art of reflection and focuses on emotions, he or she is able to predict his or her emotions and the emotions of others.

Successful leaders take time to sit down and question what aggravates them and why. They ask themselves what they might conscientiously do to deal with their stressors. They engage in dialogue and reflection with a trusted friend. They seek out conferences on emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and stress management. These conferences help them to continuously renew themselves. They concentrate on their own professional development as well as that of their faculty and staff. They remember that attitude is everything. Attitude has a wonderfully unique way of controlling a leader's emotions. Positive thinking and proactive behaviors are powerful.

Good leaders are patient with people and recognize that they themselves must exhibit patience first if they want others to be patient with them. Patience requires a conscientious effort to examine situations and ask oneself what is going on. Successful leaders know that impatience with people and situations is transparent. Teachers easily identify an impatient leader. Impatience stirs up negative emotions and breeds more impatience.

Understanding one's emotions, identifying what makes one happy, determining what pushes one's buttons, concentrating on professional devel-

opment, and being organized will certainly help leaders to continuously renew themselves. They will become better leaders!

## Trust

We have purposely placed trust at the end of this article because we contend that in order to be trusted and to trust others, the *Relationship Connectors, Communication, Support, Safety, Competence, and Continuous Renewal* must be present at all times. These relationship connectors must be the foci of everything the leader does.

Trust is the most important part of any relationship, and at the same time, it is the most vulnerable and sensitive (Barth, 2001; Hensley & Burmeister, 2008; Reinhartz & Beach, 2004; Shaw, 1997; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Trust takes substantial time, energy, and commitment to the person or group whose trust a leader seeks. Trust is precious. It takes weeks, months, even years to develop and sustain. One of the most astonishing parts about trust is that it can be destroyed in seconds, in just a word, in just a sentence, or in one action. In order to be trusted, leaders must constantly evaluate what they are about to say and do and what they have done. Leaders need to do this because of the fragile nature of trust.

Teachers and students will question a leader's trust if his or her *Communication* does not connect them to the leader. If he or she does not openly and honestly communicate with individuals, trust wanes. If a leader is threatening, harsh, or deceptive, trust dies. *Support* is a vital part of trust. If the leader does not identify, validate, and meet the needs of teachers, trust collapses. Teachers expect, and rightfully so, their leader's financial and human support. *Safety* is as important as each of the other Connectors. A leader will not be trusted if she does not focus on the emotional, psychological, and physical safety of teachers, staff, and students. These individuals need to know that they can go about their jobs of teaching and learning in a caring and safe environment. They need to know that their leader has their best interests at heart. *Competence* strengthens relationships and fosters trust when teachers and staff believe that the leader knows what she is doing. Teachers will hesitate to trust the leader if she lacks the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to assist teachers, staff, and students. Leaders must demonstrate their emotional intelligence. *Continuous Renewal* also determines whether or not a leader will be trusted. If the leader (1) has her emotions in check, (2) is proactive versus reactive, (3) is reflective, (4) engages in professional development, (5) engages in activities that promote her own emotional, psychological, and physical well-being, (6) cherishes and nurtures family and friends, and (7) finally recognizes that health comes first and that no job is worth dying for, then the chances of trusting and being trusted are much more probable.

Honesty builds trust. When a leader is honest, trust and relationships flourish. Honesty breeds trust, whereas dishonesty breeds contempt and suspicion. When a leader is honest in a tactful and caring way, teachers

feel safe; they know what is going on, and they feel protected and supported.

As mentioned earlier, it takes substantial time and energy to be trusted and to trust. A leader who truly cares, communicates effectively, supports, and provides a safe environment for teachers and staff, invests himself in these individuals, and they in him. If a relationship has been developed, a person is willing to be vulnerable to the leader. The person allows the leader to enter her world. When this happens, the seeds of trust are being planted, and they must be nurtured. The person puts faith in the leader and is certain that the leader will not harm her. She comes to school knowing that she can be the person she has been conditioned to be, can confide in the leader, and can go to the leader for help and refuge. Trust connotes protection. Trust is safety from harm. Trust makes everything happen. Trust makes everything work.

## Conclusion

The work of a school leader is time consuming, challenging, and sometimes frenetic. At times this work threatens to take over one's life. This new millennium has brought new challenges for school leaders across our nation. Now, more than ever, it is imperative that leaders initiate and cultivate communication, support, trust, a safe environment, and competence within their school cultures. Because of the demands placed on school leaders today, continuous renewal becomes even more important than it has been in the past.

We all come from unique backgrounds with unique ways of looking at people, of perceiving what is happening, and of evaluating how one fits into the overall scheme of things. Leaders don't have to like everyone or agree with everyone; but as leaders, first and foremost they have to respect everyone and build relationships with everyone. Exemplary trusted leaders have a sincere desire to care about their teachers and staff; they lay the foundation for trust when they look for and value others' strengths.

This article provides a model for developing and sustaining relationships that can lead to ongoing school academic success. Leaders can successfully engender positive relationships and develop healthy organizational cultures that advance powerful teaching and learning by focusing on the six relationship connectors described in this article. As professors of educational leadership, we can influence what happens in schools and we can assist practicing and aspiring leaders in developing healthy organizational cultures which are safe, collaborative, and creatively vibrant. We can help them manage highly contentious political environments with moral integrity and sensitivity to individual and group relationships. In addition, we can help them develop mutual trust, respect, and support among all school employees in order to increase student achievement and create an environment in which all employees and students are successful.

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