

# Making every interaction count: Connecting with energy!



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**'Every human contact we have will leave a trace... so why not try and leave a positive one?'**

Susan Calman (2018)

## It's all about the quality of the connections we make:

'...the energy and vitality of individuals and organisations alike depends on the quality of the connections among people in the organization and between organizational members and people outside the firm with whom they do business.' **Jane Dutton (2003)**

Every interaction between people has the potential to create and spread energy. Research shows that whenever people are asked to describe their most positive and negative experiences, social interactions consistently have the most positive impact on their lives.

We spend a lot of time working with other people. The relationships and networks we create at work are a vital source of energy, ideas, learning and development for ourselves, as well as a means to ensure effective collaboration, innovation, stimulation and performance within, and beyond, the organisations we are part of. The busy world we work in relies more and more on brief interactions and rapid collaboration – either face to face or, as has become increasingly more common, virtually. These brief interactions or moments of connection can be the key to producing great performance outcomes and leaders have a vital role to play in creating the conditions that will foster great relationships and connections between people.

Jon Gordon, in his book *The Power of Positive Leadership* (2017) expresses it as follows: 'You can be the smartest person in the room but if you fail to connect with others you will fail as a leader. When you make time to connect with your team and create unity by bringing people together, performance will rise to create a united and connected organization. of the connections among people in the organization and between organizational members and people outside the firm with whom they do business.'

The Henley Leadership Programme encourages participants to connect with each other in order to exchange experiences, perspectives and learnings, to help get to know each person better and become a valuable support network for each other. This happens through regular table discussions, sharing in pairs or trios, feedback after practical exercises, coaching 'touch points' and longer coaching sessions with tutors or co-coaching between colleagues. It also happens at coffee breaks, walking to lunch, over a meal or socialising in the bar. We are always amazed at how quickly strong connections are made and the level of disclosure and sharing that occurs after a short period of time together. These connections are then maintained through WhatsApp groups, phone and video conferences and occasional face-to-face gatherings.

This emphasises the importance of making every interaction we have with people, no matter how brief, really count. So much can be achieved during a short conversation, a quick meeting, a swift video conference or a brief phone call. Even in the virtual environment, it is still possible to take actions that ensure we make every interaction count – the basic foundations for building strong relationships still apply even when we are physically distant.

Our point of view is that leaders should invest time in effective networking and connecting with people, and they should create the conditions and environment within their teams that encourage everyone to do the same. Leaders can bring out the best in themselves and others by energising their working environments to ensure that high quality connections are built with everyone they are in contact with.



**'When we really connect with someone, however fleeting it is, we all know how great it feels. There's the click of mutual understanding, and the sense of being on the same page'**

Caroline Webb (2017)

## Moments of connection create energy

Caroline Webb, author of *How to Have a Good Day* (2017), highlights how empirical studies on psychological wellbeing demonstrate that one thing emerges as a reliable foundation for happiness – the quality of our relationships. She points out how a good conversation at work can encourage us, amuse us, or fill us with pride and purpose, which is why it is worthwhile to make the most of every interaction.

We can all remember a time when a short interaction or shared experience with someone has created a strong bond and can even be a catalyst to building a lasting relationship. Brief micro-moments can create relational energy and set off a series of powerful reactions. At Henley, we observe this happening regularly on The Leadership Programme; we see people who didn't know each other previously sharing personal information and observe these connections develop into longer-term supportive relationships after the programme has finished.

In *The Power of Moments* (2017) Chip and Dan Heath call these 'defining moments' – meaningful experiences that stand out in our lives and endure in our memories. They were curious about why we seem to remember some experiences but forget others and refer to research by psychologists that found when recalling an experience, we ignore most of what happened and focus instead on a few particular moments that are more meaningful than others. They suggest that defining moments need to possess at least one of the following four key elements.

A leading writer on this topic, Jane Dutton of the University of Michigan, in *Energise Your Workplace* (2003) describes high-quality connections as ties between people marked by mutual regard, trust and active engagement. She believes that these connections don't have to be deep or intimate relationships – any point of contact can be a high-quality connection and are characterised by shorter-term, positive inte

- 1. Elevation** – defining moments rise above the everyday, boost our sensory pleasure and include an element of surprise.
- 2. Insight** – defining moments rewire our understanding of ourselves or our world.
- 3. Pride** – defining moments capture us at our best, they are moments of achievement, courage or recognition.
- 4. Connection** – defining moments are social and are strengthened because they are shared with others.

Professor Lynda Gratton, in her book *Hot Spots* (2007) talks about how energised and vibrantly alive you can feel when working with a group of people whose ideas and insights are combining with your own and producing new innovative ideas. Time seems to rush by as everyone is in the flow and enjoying the moment, **'You always know when you are in a Hot Spot. You feel energised and vibrantly alive. Your brain is buzzing with ideas and the people around you share your joy and excitement.'** Gratton maintains that 'hot spots' exist when people are willing and able to work cooperatively within, and across, the boundaries of the company, when energy and excitement are inflamed and fuelled by connections, and high-quality relationships can generate enormous value through the power of new combinations.

These type of connections can be created in an instant during an informal conversation, a telephone call, an email or a meeting and their effects can be extremely powerful and long lasting. They are at the heart of all collaboration, coordination, learning and adaptation that occurs in and between organisations. Dutton believes, 'Managers and leaders shape possibilities for energy in connection through two important means: how they interact with others and how they design and construct the contexts in which others interact.'

Jim Loehr, Tony Schwartz and Tom Rath are well-known writers on full engagement and energy. They focus on the importance of frequent and positive interactions in boosting and maintaining energy, as well as improving health and wellbeing. Loehr and Schwartz in *The Power of Full Engagement* (2005), refer to how relationships can be a source of positive energy: 'Creating a rhythmic balance between energy expenditure and energy recovery is more complex emotionally than it is physically, but no less critical to optimal performance and full engagement. The delicate dance of a healthy friendship... can be a powerful source of positive energy and renewal.'

Rath also talks about making every interaction count in *Are You Fully Charged?* (2015) and how life is made up of millions of individual interactions that involve an exchange with another person and which gives our day a positive or negative charge. He refers to research which shows that people who have great interactions throughout the day, were nearly four times as likely to have very high wellbeing. He encourages a focus on the frequency of interactions and the importance of having positive rather than negative exchanges: 'All of this research makes it clear that people greatly underestimate how everyday interactions influence their daily experience... This also means that you have the ability to add a positive charge to every conversation throughout your day.'

## Expanding your network to expand your perspectives

Herminia Ibarra, in *Act Like A Leader, Think Like A Leader* (2015), shares her 'outsight' principle –making changes to how you do your job and the kinds of relationships you form, help you to test old assumptions and experiment with new possibilities. She believes that adopting new roles and activities can put you in contact with people who see the world differently to you. Relationships can hold the key to both current capacity and future success: 'What can a network do for you? It can keep you informed. Teach you new things. Make you more innovative. Give you a sounding board to flesh out your ideas. Help you get things done when you are in a hurry and you need a favour. The list goes on.' Ibarra believes that being lazy about networking can trap us in our current network and mindset; if we don't invest in effective networking we will have a limited view and miss out on fresh ideas and insights which can only be accessed across and outside organisational boundaries.

Lynda Gratton refers to this as 'boundary spanning' (2007) and observes that within groups or teams, relationships can be strong and value created through shared knowledge, but outcomes are unlikely to be unusual or innovative because of similar competences and attitudes within the team. She believes that it is through boundaryless co-operation across teams, functions and beyond the organisation, that the possibilities of novel insights, ideas and outcomes are opened up.

*The Leadership Challenge* (2017) by Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner is based on 30 years of research into what leaders do when they are at their personal best. They also refer to 'outsight' as the key to innovation and this requires being open to innovations that can come from anywhere, even from outside the organisation and encourage leaders to look outside their own experience: 'Insight without oversight is like seeing with blinders on; you just can't get a complete picture.' In other words, if we only speak to those around us and don't seek out new perspectives, we are less likely to come up with anything new. They encourage leaders to be out and about, networking, making connections and establishing relationships.



**'Effective leaders create and use networks to tap new ideas, connect to people in different worlds, and access radically different perspectives... These leaders understand that the time spent building and maintaining their connections is an investment in their leadership skills.'**

**Herminia Ibarra (2015)**

At the organisational level, the benefits of effective networking are significant. It improves the organisation's ability to co-operate within teams and across organisational boundaries. It also ensures that there is effective co-ordination between interdependent parts of the organisation, with greater levels of innovation and adaptation, particularly when dealing with complex challenges. High-quality connections, across and beyond organisational boundaries, help build and sustain the organisation's culture and values (and the level of commitment to them), enhancing levels of loyalty and competitive success.



**'When both parties assume positive intent, there is a better chance they will achieve their shared goals and perhaps be a little happier in the process.'**

Tom Rath (2015)

## Making it happen

This Henley Point of View paper provides compelling evidence of the personal benefits of regular and effective interactions with our colleagues and others, and these can enhance our health and wellbeing, energy and job satisfaction. How can we build more regular interactions into our daily lives – whether face to face or virtual? Much has been written on techniques for doing this – here are a few themes to stimulate your thinking about what will work for you.

### Willingness and commitment

It takes a high degree of **willingness and commitment** on the part of individuals and organisations. It is through personal action and role modelling that the energy is created to focus on regular interactions with people. In today's busy world, it requires a personal commitment to make the time for moments of human connection during the day and an intention to build and extend our networks so that we reap the benefits from them. Given that we increasingly work virtually, we need to consider how to make this a reality for the people we work with in the same office and for those in remote locations. We can make a conscious choice to make our next interaction a positive one, which is likely to result in a positive experience for the other person and can create a ripple effect across the organisation and beyond

### Positive intent and focus

**Assuming positive intent** is another powerful tool for ensuring that you get a positive outcome from all your interactions. Webb (2017) refers to the quality of our intent when we interact with others and how our brains scan subconsciously for evidence that will support our expectations of an interaction. She points out that if we go into an interaction looking for opportunities to collaborate and leave our negative expectations behind, we stand more chance of finding those collaborative opportunities and can also identify the people we know radiate positive energy when we need an energy boost.

It is also important to increase our **focus on the positives**. Negative emotions impact on our ability to think clearly and they activate our defence mechanisms. This is caused by our bodies producing higher levels of cortisol, the stress hormone. Positive exchanges boost the production of oxytocin (which increases our ability to communicate and collaborate with others) and enable us to think more expansively and take action. Negative memories tend to stay with us for longer and immobilise us, whereas positive ones give us energy to take action.

**Tom Rath (2015)** highlights how we need at least three to five positive interactions to outweigh one negative interaction and recommends that 80% of our conversations should be focused on things that are going right and working well; the remaining time should be focused on addressing what isn't working well.

## Routines and rituals

Another common theme is building **routines and rituals** into the structure of the day in a way that will stimulate more interactions; these then become habits over time. 'Formal' examples at home might include setting aside an hour at the same time each week to have a catch up with family, or date night on the same day every other week. Work examples include: the team coffee and chat at set times every week (with remote team members on video); lunch once a week with a team member/colleague; a team fun activity once a month; weekly phone/video chat with key suppliers.

At an informal level, good examples include: walk over to talk to the person you were about to email; have a quick 10-minute discussion (face to face or on video) with a colleague on a specific topic; take a stretch break and walk around the building and connect with people along the way.

Jane Dutton and Monica Worline (2018) suggest that there are four pathways for building high-quality connections. These pathways are useful when thinking about how we can redesign organisation roles and routines:

1. **Task enabling** – help/facilitate another person's successful performance. For example, flexible working hours.
2. **Respectful engagement** – engage the other person in a way that sends a message of value and worth. For example, remember names and personal details to build respect.
3. **Trusting** – convey to the other person that we believe they will meet our expectations and are dependable. For example, enable open conversations and authenticity to build trust.
4. **Playing** – participate with another where the goal is to have fun. For example, redesign staff inductions to include fun elements.

## Reciprocal disclosure

**Reciprocal disclosure** can build rapport and connection between people. This process involves a willingness to be more open about ourselves and to encourage the other person to do the same. Research shows (Aron et al, 1997) that a significant amount of closeness can be established between strangers, in a short period of time, by sharing answers to personal questions. Exercises can be used to stimulate connections between people and you can inject some fun into these as well. For example, share a defining moment in your life; share who your personal hero is; take it in turns to reveal something personal.

The questions that you ask will also have an impact on the strengths of the connection you make. They can either open up or close down the potential for connection. Asking great questions can encourage people to share more about themselves and encourage an authentic connection between them. Doing it in a way that demonstrates real curiosity about the other person and their views will help to make a deeper connection. The trick is to **ask open questions** that encourage people to share their thoughts, views and feeling, which in turn makes you listen more deeply.

Another exercise you can use involves sharing perceived **strengths, capabilities and contributions** with each other. Every team member has a card for each of the other team members, and on one side of each card writes down the key strengths and contributions that they value in that person. On the other side, they write what more that person can do and what further positive energy they can bring to the team. The cards are then handed out and each team member summarises the feedback and shares it with the team, as well as declaring their commitments to act on the feedback.

There have been formal experiments to reveal how interpersonal closeness can be generated through **sharing answers to questions** – one of the best known was conducted by Art Aron et al (1997), a social psychologist. The experiment involved strangers sharing answers to 36 questions, in three rounds of fifteen minutes each. As they progressed, the questions became more intimate. The results showed that a high degree of closeness to each other was established after a conversation of just 45 minutes.

### Assess strength of networks

**Assessing the strength of your networks** will help decide where there are opportunities to expand and broaden them, particularly improving any weak connections. We tend to trust the people that we know best, but this can limit our thinking and creativity because we may be missing out on wider perspectives and ideas. It is difficult to sustain more than a handful of strong relationships and there are many types of relationships that we have in our day-to-day and organisational lives. These may not have the same depth of attachment, but they are important and we should focus more time and effort on this larger network than we do.

Mapping networks can help to assess your current networks and decide what changes or additions are required. This can be done by drawing lines connecting you to all members of your key network – thick lines indicating strong relationships and thin or dotted lines for weak ones (and no lines if there is no connection). This can also be done with bubble charts – each member of your network having a larger or smaller (or non-existent) bubble based on the strength of the relationship.

### Virtual working

We have seen a surge in **virtual working** over the past few years and working with colleagues that are not based in the same location has become a reality. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has meant that we have all had to adjust to social distancing and experience new, albeit temporary, ways of working – mainly through video. This may very well change the way we work in the future. However, the foundations for building strong connections remain the same and we should put even more effort into building and strengthening our relationships when we work remotely, away from our colleagues. This extra effort will help counter the effects of 'virtual distance' which can reduce trust and collaboration.

There are numerous articles that give practical tips for strengthening connections while working remotely or in a social distancing scenario. They include tips for establishing routines and daily habits that optimise interpersonal connections (for instance, virtual check-ins and social occasions), as well as for maintaining our own energy and focus – as outlined in Cirillo's Pomodoro Technique (25 minutes of focused work followed by a five minute break. This is repeated four times, followed by a 20- to 30-minute break). For more information on some of these articles and resources please see the **Further reading section**.





**'Umntu ngumuntu  
ngabantu (A person is  
a person because of  
other people)'**

**A Zulu proverb**

## **A concluding message**

The key message that emerges from this paper is that to strengthen our connections and make every single interaction count is in our own hands. We can make it happen! As Chip and Dan Heath (2010) say, 'defining moments' don't appear by chance and we don't have to wait for them to appear – it is possible to create them. What it takes is action and intentionality.

**'You have the opportunity to decide how you will spend your time... Start with work that creates meaning. Invest in each interaction to strengthen your relationships. Make sure you have the energy you need to be your best. Doing these three things in combination, is the definition of being fully charged and adding a positive charge to those around you.'** **Tom Rath (2015)**

So, this is an encouragement for you to make that commitment and push yourself to make every interaction count. In the next few days, when you are having a conversation with a friend, family member or colleague, move beyond small talk and share something real with them (for example, a challenge or struggle you are facing) and see what happens. Keep experimenting with the simple routines and rituals that you know will work for you. Doing this will help you create your own defining moments of connection.

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Graham also runs his own independent coaching practice, which focuses on individual and leadership development, building on his many years of experience coaching senior leaders in the corporate environment. He has a BA Hons in Industrial & Organisational Psychology and is a Graduate Member (MBPsS) of the British Psychological Society.

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