



JWI 505: Business Communications and Executive Presence

Lecture Notes

WEEK 4: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Reaching Out, Building Relationships, and Making Connections

What does it mean to *engage* someone? It means reaching out and connecting with them. When you are human and real to someone, when you are actively present and listening, you demonstrate respect. This is the most effective way to receive respect in return. It's also the first step toward building lasting relationships that produce collaborative results in the business world. None of your colleagues will want to work with you in the future if you do not engage them sincerely and openly.

As a leader, you own *one hundred percent* of your relationships. You don't have the luxury of waiting for other people to give you fifty percent of the relationship, to *meet you halfway*. If you want engaged colleagues and collaborators, you must take responsibility for the relationship, giving it one hundred percent and owning the accountability for it. If that relationship isn't what you need it to be, if you're not fully engaged with that person, it's not their responsibility. It is *yours* as a business leader.

Now, this does not mean that you are doing all the work. It doesn't mean carrying around your less-than-engaged coworkers, in the hope that they will eventually see the light, if you let them use and abuse you. It does mean, however, that you must be fully committed to growing the relationship. If the other person won't make the effort, it doesn't matter. You must take the steps needed to inspire them, to motivate them, and to build a strong interaction with them.

Why is this important? As a leader, your success soars or fails based on the strength of your relationships with your colleagues. These are your collaborators, the people best positioned to support your goals and make them happen. People will engage with you, follow you, and be inspired by you, based on who you are, not just what you do. *Who they* are and *what they* do isn't your responsibility; you can only lead by example, openly and generously. One way to do this is to develop and maintain empathy in all of your business relationships.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to see and feel what another person is experiencing from their perspective. Empathy, in the business world, could be referred to as a **soft skill**. Cultivating empathy, however, is often one of the most difficult tasks a leader faces, far more important to leadership than the technical skills that leader already knows.



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The stronger your relationship with someone, the more likely they are to work diligently with you toward a shared goal. The better you engage someone, the more earnestly they will strive to contribute to objectives you face together. To build that relationship, you must connect with that person. The key to that connection is empathy, making empathy *a critical leadership communication skill*.

Empathy is also important in handling emotionally charged, often difficult conversations. If you can recognize the source of someone's emotions, you can more easily relate to them and achieve a win-win situation. For example, if a team member becomes agitated when discussing a major change to a corporate procedure, having the empathy to grasp why the employee is so passionate – for example, because that employee originally designed the procedure and feels personally invested – could help you achieve a win-win position through shared understanding. Something as simple as, “You did such great work on the procedure originally, I know you're the right person to help us through this update” could make all the difference in navigating a tense situation.

It's important to note that *empathy is not problem solving*. We may rush to a problem with a solution, but this presumes the person with the problem does not know how to solve it, or is not capable of solving it. A classic piece of relationship advice doled out by columnists is that sometimes, your spouse doesn't want to hear solutions. Sometimes, your spouse just wants to vent and have you listen supportively. This is a classic example of the problems caused by a failure to *listen*. Instead of connecting with your spouse and offering moral support, which establishes trust and builds the relationship between you, you try to solve the problem and make it go away. Solutions have their place, but empathy helps us connect to those who are experiencing problems in the first place.

We've been taught that bringing a solution to someone else is bringing value to them. As leaders, however, we need to focus first on how we can connect to others, how we can build confidence in them, how we can coach them to problem solve, and how we can support them in generating their own ways forward. This builds a stronger team and stronger relationships. Demonstrating empathy in that way more deeply engages with the person you are coaching and supporting. You will, in turn, be able to call on that person in the future to collaborate with you and support your shared goals.

To show empathy for someone, we must fully understand what motivates them, what excites them, and what discourages them. In so doing, we demonstrate that we care enough to check frequently on their motivators and demotivators. This mutual respect helps engender better, stronger, more earnest support for the organization's objectives. You can demonstrate empathy in any context and on any occasion. You don't have to like someone to empathize with them. You simply have to understand them. The more you can step into someone else's shoes, the better you can understand what drives their behavior and what the alternative solutions to a problem might be. The more views available to you, the more possibilities for connection are available, and the greater the possibilities for alignment and results. In other words, the more empathy you have, the more brains you can get into the game in your organization.

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Vulnerability

Imagine that a team member comes into your office and explains to you that she has doubts about the solution chosen for a high-risk project. She has been tasked with implementing key elements of management's strategy to bring the project to fruition. You have faith in the solutions chosen, but you need her buy-in to get her best and most enthusiastic efforts. Do you:

- A. Tell her that the strategy has been chosen by management and she will have to execute it despite her doubts?
- B. Explain to her that you, too, had initial doubts about the chosen strategy, sharing with her the supporting case made to you by your own manager, when you brought those questions to them?

The obvious answer is choice B. Sharing with your team member that you, too, had doubts, and explaining how those doubts were allayed – and offering the reasoning through which they were resolved – has three effects:

- It demonstrates vulnerability in sharing your very human feelings of doubt
- It fosters empathy by showing your team member that you had similar feelings
- It develops trust between you because you were willing to share that vulnerability, while also helping your team member through her doubts

Sharing yourself like this is one of the most authentic ways of connecting with others. When credible leaders communicate their mistakes, their weaknesses, or their fears, and when they do so with empathy, it draws other people to them. Our vulnerabilities do not make us lesser leaders. They make us more *human*, which makes us more real and more connected to those around us.

Take, for example, a social media gaffe. Let's say a company insensitively uses a trending Twitter hashtag to advertise its product, only to find that it has offended a great many people – this happened to a famous pizza company when its social media personnel used a domestic violence hashtag without realizing what it meant. If the CEO of the company offers his heartfelt apology, says that, *hey, he's kind of stupid when it comes to social media*, and promises to be better in the future, that is a much more real, human, and vulnerable response than deleting the tweet and firing the social media manager responsible.

Admitting your vulnerability is much more likely to achieve the desired results. It demonstrates that no one is perfect, that we don't believe ourselves to be better than others. Strategic, judicious use of vulnerability also moves teams and organizations to be more candid, more open, and more transparent. When a leader shows a willingness to be candid and vulnerable, others in the organization will follow that example. They will be more likely to acknowledge what is working and what is not working, admitting their own mistakes, missteps, and vulnerabilities in the process. This will lead to improved relationships and stronger connections, which will produce better processes and faster problem solving.

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The Burden of Communication as a Leader

As leaders, we are always being watched. What we say – and what we do in support of what we say – is tremendously important. We must constantly focus on honoring others, respecting their value and their contributions. We must be candid, showing that we are authentic and open and that we value transparency. Our words and deeds must be congruent with each other and with our mission.

Consider how you connect with others. Purposely and authentically practice these methods consistently. This may sound like a burden. It is not. It is a beautiful opportunity to connect with others, to build relationships, to inspire your colleagues, and to produce a stronger, more adaptable organization that is better positioned to *win*.