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RELATIONSHIPS THAT WORK

FOUR WAYS TO CONNECT (AND SET BOUNDARIES)
WITH COLLEAGUES, STUDENTS, AND PARENTS

An **Eye On Education** Book



Most of us end up with no more than five or six people who remember us. Teachers have thousands of people who remember them for the rest of their lives.”

Andy Roney

Chapter 1

The Case for Relationships

My youngest son, Andrew is a Lego fiend. Absolutely loves them. For months last year, he routinely stopped at the refrigerator door and stared at what lay pinned to it by the calendar magnet: two tickets to paradise—admission to the Lego Kidfest at the Hutchinson Convention Center in Dallas. Finally, the big day arrived, and we made the pilgrimage from College Station. The Lego Kidfest did not disappoint. It was all things Lego: robots, superheroes, car races, building contests, you name it. After a twenty minute self-initiated orientation tour of the Convention Center floor, Andrew chose his first activity: a free build in which kids and their parents were encouraged to build a structure that would be incorporated into something of a group project. The result was spectacular—a Lego city built with thousands of Lego bricks of varying shapes, sizes and colors built by hundreds of Lego builders of varying shapes, sizes and colors. It covered over four hundred square feet of the Convention Center floor. Structure was created from the chaos of buckets and buckets of random Lego bricks, and we had played a part. It was very satisfying.

We—humanity—are like a massive collection of Legos. Our individual pieces of human experience vary in size, shape and color, but all were designed and evolved specifically to connect one with another. When we connect with the right people the right way, we become a part of a narrative or unfolding story that gives us deeper meaning and purpose, both individually and collectively. That holds true universally—across cultures, across sexes, across generations, and across ideologies. 22 Sometimes our innate need for and purpose to connect does not become obvious until we see the problematic behavior patterns and dysfunction that arise in a child that did not receive necessary physical and emotional attention throughout critical stages of early development. When a child is deprived of those ingredients critical to healthy human development, his or her relational pattern will tend to be skewed, characterized by being either inappropriately detached from or dependent on others. In more extreme cases, children with deeply impaired relational capacity are diagnosed with Reactive Attachment Disorder. They have become, in essence, Legos that have lost the basic form and shape necessary to maintain the bond.

Why are we concerned when a child lacks the capacity to initiate and sustain age-appropriate, inter-independent relationships? *It is because relationships are resources.* Many would go so far as to argue that relationships are our most important resource—in the end, far more valuable to us than money, education, or physical ability. Children who lack the capacity to appropriately access relationships as resources (and do not receive appropriate intervention), then, will grow up to be adults that are even more deeply isolated and impaired—damaging, even—as they relate with other human beings, children and adults alike.

Therein lies the root of our sense of urgency. Think about it: each student with whom we interact today represents some sphere of relational influence in the future—a future boss, a future employee, a future father, or a future mother. Maybe even a future teacher. Will their future influence be helpful or hurtful to those depending on them? As you probably already know, teachers have the power to play a critical role in the answer to that question.

Douglas Fiore, Ph.D., is a former teacher and principal who has served on faculty at the State University of West Georgia. According to Dr. Fiore, “Teachers who create distance between themselves and their students make it exceedingly difficult for students to develop relationships with

them...the relationships that teachers develop with students have a direct impact on the teacher's ability to teach and the students ability to learn. For this reason, these relationships must be deemed vitally important (2001).”

Great Programming Skills, But Can You Interact With Other Humans?

Relational skills—and not just knowledge of specific academic content—are relevant to our students' capacity to make a meaningful and favorable difference in their future world. The phrase “soft skills” is often used to describe aspects of an individual's emotional IQ—the degree to which the individual manifests skills in knowing themselves and relating with others. Peggy Klaus, professional trainer and recruiter, is all about soft skills. In her book *The Truth About Soft Skills: Workplace Lessons Smart People Wish They'd Learned Sooner*, Klaus notes that shortcomings in social, communication and self-management skills, not deficits in technical knowledge, are usually what limit or kill a person's career. A recruiter I met at the Association of Career and Technical Education conference I recently presented at echoed the sentiment.

“We get tons of applications from young men and women who look great on paper,” he told me. “We bring them in, we interview them, and then we realize pretty quickly that they have very little clue how to interact appropriately with other people. If it comes down to choosing between a candidate who has good interpersonal skills but lacks experience versus a candidate with all the technical knowledge but is interpersonally clueless, we'll hire the first candidate every time.” The importance of soft skills is not just about preparing students for future opportunity, though. There are here-and-now implications. By modeling effective soft skills, a teacher creates the kind of effective and safe relational environment necessary to facilitate learning of any academic content.

What Is Normal Versus What Is Healthy

We see that research has confirmed what we've already known: healthy relationships are an essential element of the learning process, and effective interpersonal skills go a long way in paving the way for future professional success. That's great and all, but for those of us who were raised in chaotic, unpredictable family-of-origin environments, healthy interpersonal interaction may not feel natural or intuitive. In fact, what we may assume is quite normal actually may be unhealthy. *Never trust anyone. Never depend on anyone. Always keep your guard up. Always strike first.* Those were beliefs I held that did not begin to become undone in me until I was well into my late twenties and many sessions into my own therapy.

My developing the capacity to initiate and sustain healthy relationships was not just about identifying errors in my thinking, but also about actually practicing new skills: *I am choosing to let you help me. I am choosing to be honest with you about what I am thinking and feeling.* It felt awkward at first, but I am grateful that I persevered. Imagine where we would all be today if we gave up on trying to drive a car after the first try because it felt awkward or unnatural. Your self-awareness, your ability to explore of your own internal relational landscape is paramount to your ability to initiate and sustain healthy relationships with those around you. Ask yourself: is my normal also healthy?

Generally speaking, most would agree that a healthy relationship is characterized by the following:

- Trust: We can rely and depend on each other.
- Respect: We will give each other our absolute best work.

- Harmony: We will change to accommodate each other when necessary.
- Awareness: We will pay adequate attention to each other.
- Communication: We will openly exchange thoughts and feelings.
- Resilience: We will increase our capacity to recover quickly from setbacks.
- Curiosity: We will seek to know more about each other and the world we share.
- Authenticity: We will be truthful and transparent with each other.
- Boundaries: I am me, you are you, and this is what is and is not acceptable between us.

Many believe that a distinguishing characteristic of a healthy relationship is the absence of conflict. Not true. The healthy relationship begins with the premise that the other person is a good person who makes mistakes. In conflict, then, the starting point is curiosity—not judgment or fear—about why the other made a particular decision. We are being formed continually as we connect with others, and a healthy relationship acknowledges that process of being formed, with a stability and openness to be changed. Further, we extend patience for ourselves and for the other throughout that process. For example, there may be moments when a co-teacher, student or parent says something incredibly offensive to me; in a healthy relationship, I see this as a place for dialogue of how I have been impacted, rather than an impediment to any further relationship of authenticity or justification to lash out in vengeance.

Even as you read through these descriptors, you're probably already thinking of people in your professional life who feel healthy this way. This is the colleague that is authentically invested in your wellbeing and success as an educator. This is the student who confides in you with her deepest struggles. This is the parent who makes a point of thanking you, regularly, for your investment in their child.

Characteristics of Unhealthy Relationships

We might characterize unhealthy relationships by corollary: unhealthy relationships lack trust, respect, harmony, awareness, communication, resilience, curiosity, authenticity and boundaries. While healthy relationships vitalize (and revitalize) us, unhealthy relationships steal physical and emotional life from us.

Generally speaking, healthy relationships fail to develop or eventually stall or sour for one of two reasons. The first reason is a lack of skills. We cannot implement what we have not been taught; the more time we spend with another person, the more our relational skillset will be tapped. So, interacting with most people for brief periods does not require an extensive relational skill set. But think about how much time you spend on your campus and all the different personality types you encounter on a daily basis among your colleagues, your students and parents.

The second reason healthy relationships fail to develop or eventually sour is a lack of desire. Even when we know what to do, we are faced each day with the question of whether we want healthy relationships enough to invest the resources—the time and the physical and emotional energy—to earn the desired outcome. The investment is particularly difficult if we've attempted to make the investment before in our lives, only to be hurt or otherwise mistreated by the other. 27

Again, my bet is that you are thinking of people in your life who feel unhealthy this way. “Life-suckers,” I call them. This is the colleague who is utterly committed to his bitterness and is known for his habit of slandering other faculty, both privately and publicly. This is the student who violates your physical space and reverts to verbal abuse to manipulate and intimidate others. This is the absentee parent who insists that her child’s academic and behavioral difficulties are a direct results and entirely the product of your incompetence as an educator.

We Are Here To Help You

After having conducted staff development and presented at conferences to educators across the country, Jeremy and I began to talk. How do we take this idea of building effective relationships from theory to practice? We knew up front that we did not want to write a book on behavior management or classroom interventions. Those books already exist in abundance. Could we, as mental health care providers, create a practical guide for educators to position themselves to be most poised to create and sustain the kinds of relationships that would make a difference? We believed we could, but we also knew very well that building and maintaining healthy relationships can be an incredibly complex process—a dance between the interaction of our personalities, histories, fears, skills, and personal development and the same interaction of the other person involved. How could we begin to address the issue for a classroom teacher in a book that wasn’t six inches thick?

Jeremy’s wife, Jenny, has been an educator for over a decade, and as she overheard us beginning the conversation of this book and how we might step into this question, her input stuck with us: “I am sure that all the research on why effective relationships are important is really great, but I am a teacher with a lot on my plate. I think for most of us as educators, we don’t want someone to come in and waste our time. Back up what you write, but get to brass tacks quickly and just tell us what we need to be doing.”

She said that in her teacher voice, and it put the fear of God in us, so we worked out a straightforward text. We identified four key themes that have emerged in our work with educators in schools and clients in our private practice. It is important for us to note on the outset that a primary philosophical underpinning in our approach to relationships is a focus on the internal. What that means is that we believe we reach a place of greater personal power when we focus on those internal variables that we can control versus those internal variables that we cannot. And to the degree that external educational variables can be controlled (insofar as they relate to relationship building), again, we believe helpful books already exist in abundance.

As I noted in *The Power of a Teacher*, the average classroom teacher or campus-level administrator has relatively little control over many policies that impact the day-day-realities on any given campus. If you as an educator feel frustrated and disempowered by that reality, we don’t blame you; we probably would be a bit concerned if you *didn’t* feel that way. Our hope is that the focus and presentation of the material in this book will provide you a format to build relationships while focusing on variables that you can control.

The idea was to present a format that would guide the reader through four questions that are foundational to relationship-building in any context; these four questions invoke the practices of reflecting, directing, connecting, and protecting. We’ll go into much more detail in subsequent chapters about the implications for each practice, and we’ll offer you practical exercises to give you

insight into yourself and practical changes you can make where necessary. But for now, what follows is an overview of the four practices.

Reflecting: What Am I Doing Here?

If I have not linked what I'm doing on a daily basis on my campus with my core values (by practicing the skill of reflecting on my identity and calling), it is unlikely that I will understand my role as an educator as anything more than a job, which is simply a basic agreement to exchange labor for a paycheck. In the job model, I will tend to default to offering my employer the minimum amount of my effort in exchange for my established pay rate (a psychological mechanism that allows me to feel that I am getting the highest wage possible). In this mentality, I am unlikely to be willing to spend the effort required to initiate and sustain impactful relationships with colleagues and students. If, however, I am operating from a calling model, I understand that what I am doing is much less about my paycheck and much more about my living out why I believe I am on this planet. I call this "finding the right why." When I find the right why, I am committed to spending the resources of my time and energy to build relationships because I understand relationships to be the kinds of investments that offer the maximum return as I live out my calling. This is the identity check: Am I primarily an employee who receives a paycheck from a school district, or am I primarily an individual whose calling is to impact the lives of young men and women, and who chooses to live out that calling in the field of education?

Take away: my being in touch with the right "why" is necessary for my campus-level and classroom-level relationships to thrive; if I don't want to be here, I won't be invested in building healthy relationships. You'll meet Martha, a secondary school teacher I saw in my private practice who felt she was lacking a sense of purpose after four years in the profession and was considering changing vocations; after reflecting on her own life story and having focused, meaningful conversations with tenured colleagues, she found understanding and meaning that allowed her to approach her vocation with renewed vitality and meaning.

Directing: How Do I Manage My Emotions?

Emotions are fuel, like gasoline. Gasoline can be used to power a vehicle that can drive a family on a dream vacation, or it can be used to start a fire that will burn down a family home. To preserve nurturing relationships, then, I must practice the skill of experiencing all emotions and directing emotional fuel wisely. If I spend even an hour on any campus in my professional capacity, I am likely to experience a wide-range of emotions, some of which might be both uncomfortable and intense: anger, anxiety, incompetence, sadness. If I do not give myself permission to experience an emotion (to name an emotion is to claim an emotion), I am repressing and storing emotional energy in my body that will eventually cost me. Further, if I am not mindful of how I manage (e.g., express) my emotions, I may be destroying relationships with my colleagues and students by criticizing, attacking, blaming, passive aggression or withdrawal. My fluency in experiencing and expressing emotion is closely linked to family-of-origin experiences and to my experiences in interpersonal relationships.

Take away: if I habitually suppress emotion or express emotion in hurtful ways, I undermine my capacity to build healthy relationships; wise and appropriate experience and release of emotional fuel is necessary for relationships to thrive. You'll meet Ms. Dunn, a secondary school teacher whose capacity to direct was so fine-tuned that she turned the morning Tony became physically and verbally aggressive toward her by 9:06 a.m. into an opportunity to deepen Tony's trust in her.

Connecting: Can I Build a Bridge?

Bridges are about joining, and to be relationally joined, I must practice the skill of connecting to my colleagues and students. The river of difference that separates and divides us can be wide and deep, and it can run with strong undercurrents. Our looks differ. Our speech differs. Our values differ. Our generations differ. Our neighborhoods differ. Much of how I respond to the relational stress these differences create arises from my family of origin experience—what was modeled for me by my parents/role models, siblings, and peers? Will I tap the emotional energy that arises within me as I face that which is unfamiliar to build a bridge, or to will I use that same energy to avoid and disengage?

If building bridges does not come naturally to me, I probably am known as a task-oriented individual who can get things done. Perhaps I am someone who lives more in her mind than in her heart. I may also be known as someone who is less-than-approachable in conflict, someone who values a final product over a person.

Take away: we are by nature relational creatures, and building connections across differences is necessary for relationships to thrive; if I have talked myself out of my need to be connected to my colleagues, students and their parents, it is unlikely that will do the work necessary to develop healthy relationships. You'll meet Coach Williams, the middle school teacher who had so mastered the art of non-contingent communication that he was able to connect with the last parent on earth any faculty on that campus would have thought was capable of a connection (a parent, by the way, of a different ethnic, socioeconomic, and generational background than Coach Williams).

Protecting: Can I Build a Fence?

Fences are about defining boundaries—what belongs to me and what does not? As we engage relationships, we will be hurt. To stay relationally-engaged when I know I am continually at-risk of being hurt, I must practice the skills of protecting my mind and my heart without isolating myself and falling into bitterness and cynicism.

My fence-building skill is closely linked to whether I view myself as someone worth being treated with love and respect. If setting boundaries feels uncomfortable for me, I probably am known as someone who is warm, nurturing, and emotionally accessible. Perhaps I am someone who lives more in her heart than in her mind. I may also be known as someone who avoids conflict and has difficulty enforcing consequences consistently.

Take away: self-protection is a basic human instinct, and setting healthy boundaries is necessary for relationships to thrive; if I have not empowered myself to protect my mind and heart appropriately, it is unlikely that I will be able to maintain healthy relationships or deal effectively with toxic people. You'll meet Kelley, primary school teacher who gained the respect of her colleagues and when she maintained an entirely professional demeanor while setting absolutely firm boundaries with an administrator who had, for years, bullied teachers into submission with his my-way-or-the-highway authoritarian leadership.

The Case of the Teacher Who Exploded

In the spring semester of 2013, I was asked by a campus-level administrator to partner with her and her leadership team to develop strategies that would incorporate a relationship-building ethic into the campus growth plan. The student population was showing a sharp demographic shift; within a period of five years, it had gone from 85 percent middle to upper-middle class Caucasian to 75 percent low-

income Latino and African American. The faculty remained predominantly Caucasian, and they were finding themselves “losing control of the campus,” as one teacher put it.

Our early discussions focused on reviewing and revamping the school-wide discipline plan. Positive behavior supports were emphasized, and the counselor offered to lead social skills groups for selected students with excessive office referrals. The leadership team initially expressed a fair amount of enthusiasm: surely, revamping the school-wide and classroom discipline plans will help. As the discussion continued, though, concerns were raised, and tension grew.

“There’s no doubt we need this,” one teacher noted with increased frustration in her voice, “but what are we supposed to do when the supports we’re offering don’t work? What are we supposed to do when students simply refuse to comply with our requests, and our consequences are meaningful to them and not shaping behavior?”

“I understand that not every student will respond favorably the first time,” another teacher responded, trying to remain positive. “Still, though, this is what we need to do. This is what will be best for the students and our campus in the long run.”

“That’s easy for us to say now,” the teacher shot back, “but it won’t be so easy by the time October gets here, and the honeymoon is over, and we’re all already starting to feel tired and burned out.”

She was loud.

“You are right. This will be difficult. But I think that’s why our relationships with the students are so important. If we can build relationships with the students, I believe they will be more inclined to hear us, more inclined to make the kinds of choices we are wanting them to make.” “Relationships with the kids? Are you kidding me? With all the paperwork I have to do? With all the conferences I have to schedule? With all the activities I have to supervise? I don’t have time for relationships!” she exploded, slamming her hand on the table.

And there it was. In her anger, she had given voice to the concern that many of the faculty probably had been struggling with for many months: connecting and building relationships with these students was not coming nearly as naturally or easily or fluidly as it had five years ago. The concern she expressed wasn’t unique to this campus; in my work with school districts across the country, I have facilitated countless conversations about how ever-changing standards and regulations have forced the educator to shift attention and energy from building relationships to compliance with legal mandates. It is both a truly legitimate concern and truly unfortunate reality.

Initiating and sustaining healthy relationships requires effort—emotional and mental work (believe it or not, unhealthy relationships require even more). It’s easy to wonder where that effort will come from with so many other demands competing for the limited resources of our mind and heart. Our hope is that by through the practices of reflecting, directing, connecting and protecting, you will be empowered to wisely steward your mental and emotional energy. We hope that you will have a greater sense and framework to posture yourself to most readily engage.

In the next chapter, we will explore the practice of reflecting. Have you linked your most meaningful life experiences and values with what you do on your campus on a day-to-day basis? Have you found the right why?