

Exchanging Your Way To Great Relationships and High Performance

By Tim Sanders, author of *Love Is the Killer App: How To Win Business & Influence Friends*

As a leader, your charter is to create a culture that delivers an outstanding customer experience. Regardless of what services business you are in, teamwork makes the dream work. You operate in many situations with slim budgets, but still you are expected to delight and wow. But there's a way you can multiply the capabilities of those you lead or influence: Build relationships with them.

For the last fifteen years, I've researched how relationships are formed at work, and why their strength is required to drive professional performance and service excellence. When you have strong relationships, you can communicate powerfully with others. Napoleon Bonaparte is quoted as saying that, "the leader's role is to define reality, then give hope." This means that although we must set strategy and manage objectives, ultimately, we need to effectively communicate the now, the scary and the inspiring.

Research conducted by Donald Broadbent in the United Kingdom found that human beings have developed a filter over time that selectively allows information to seep into their consciousness. The more stimuli, the denser this filter becomes. In our current world of social media and constant clamoring for our attention, this filter is almost impenetrable. But psychology research points to a workaround: the emotional seat of the brain. Relationships form when transactional experiences take on some emotion, and in the case of strong ones, it's positive. This means that when you develop high level relationships with your team members, your influence with them grows.

The shortest distance between two people is a warm connection.

Strong relationships also drive engagement, willingness to collaborate and enthusiasm. When we feel a bond with our manager or a customer, for example, we go the extra step to perform at our highest level and participate actively in problem solving. Finally, relationships create shock absorbers between people for those situations when there are bumps in the road, be they organizational change, communication mishaps or even conflict over competing needs. When these problems crop up, strong relationships drive empathetic responses as well as a willingness to work through the situation with the future in mind.

While the science of leader-team member relationships is only a few decades old, academic researchers have revealed the key to success: High reciprocity at the leader-member exchange (LMX). (Note: I'll refer to your team members, associates, direct reports, employees, etc. as members for the rest of this article as that's how it usually appears in the research.)

The True Nature of Relationships

Relationships are like wireless phone connections. When they are strong, they produce a clear and satisfying conversation. When they are weak, they produce frustration and are unproductive. The key, then, is to boost the strength of the connection. While your phone call depends on a strong network and functional equipment, leader-member relationships rely on a sound perspective and effective practices.

First things first: leaders don't have a relationship with their team. They have relationships with individuals. LMX researchers point this out often, explaining that relationships are always dyads and connections between two and only two people. I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone say, "I have a great/bad relationship with this group" or "I'm trying to develop trust with my team." This perspective is flawed. It leads to sweeping generalizations that ignore the uniqueness of each human being and their need to be recognized as a person and not a cog in the machine.

Next, understand that relationships are based on exchanges, not intentions. You cannot will yourself to have a good relationship with one of your team members. Conversely, people cannot force a relationship on you, due to their desire to fit in or succeed. Relationships are built not with thoughts or needs. They are developed through thoughtful deeds.

Emotional connections are fueled by the give-and-gives between you and the other. Give and take may work in a negotiation, but mutual generosity is the key to relationships. Regardless of how much you found in common early on, the relationship grows from what you give each other over time.

It starts with the first offer, which is the leader's duty. The offer can start with advice, on how to be successful, fit in, and handle problems. The member may respond with a reciprocal offer of applying that knowledge in practice. Now, the ball is back in the

leader's court; she needs to notice the member's effort and then make the next offer. And so on. As these offers add up over time, the strength of the connection grows.

Exchanges That Build Strong Relationships

Not every offer of value drives performance. The leader-member exchange functions like a swap meet, where the most successful traders have a keen sense of the true value of an offer. Some swap meet items are treasures and others are just junk. Knowing the difference is the key to fair trades that profit both sides of the table.

Here's the formula for strong relationships: The leader offers members knowledge, trust and recognition. In exchange, the member offers competence, engagement and thoughtfulness. When these offers flow back and forth, relationship quality and job performance strengthen.

Leaders: When you share knowledge and provide mentorship as the first offer, your member benefits both personally and professionally. Be on the look out for opportunities to educate members on all elements of the business from operations to marketing to management. Next, it's important to extend latitude to your members, so they can grow in their capabilities through trial and error. This might mean delegating some elements of vendor management, customer experience design or merchandising to members, instead of giving them a job to do. Finally, it's important for you to turn up your noticing knob so that member accomplishments are recognized. It's important that praise be very specific (as opposed to 'good job') so the member knows exactly which actions were valuable to the organization or customer. This not only improves their competency, it gives them an authentic sense of satisfaction in their work.

As I mentioned before, relationships require give-and-give. This means that leaders should expect members to respond to their offers, and then acknowledge increasing competence and high performance service levels. When your offers are not returned by members, this is when coaching is required. You should share your vision for a strong relationship with them, and stress that they do their part to grow in their capabilities and apply themselves fully. These 'crucial conversations' signal that you are intentional about building a bond and willing to do your part to make it work.

In the end, as a leader you need to keep one thing in mind: It starts and ends with you. You need to take on the task of growing the competence and confidence of every one of the people that work for or with you. That's how you create an excellent organization. Not only does this style of leadership produce measurable results, it complements the purpose of higher education: To help others grow, achieve and succeed.