



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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IF LEADERSHIP IS ABOUT DEVELOPING OTHERS THEN YOU NEED TO CONNECT

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A leader develops others

I have spent 18 years in the British Army's learning and development domain and worked principally within the areas of education, training and recruiting. On reflection, when you strip back the job titles, descriptions, acronyms and formations, my principal purpose through employment in the Army has been to develop others. Now employed as Commanding Officer of East Midlands Universities Officer Training Corps, our purpose as part of Sandhurst Group is *to develop leaders ready for their next challenge*. If you dig into our excellent leadership doctrine, a principal function of what leaders do is to develop others through training and education; by creating challenging opportunities; and through coaching and mentoring. Those under a leader's tutelage will only reach their potential and be truly inspired to succeed (the unifying purpose of Army leadership) if the leader connects with them emotionally. In failing to connect, you are falling short in your duty as a leader.

A leader is perceptive to the needs of others

In a couple of previous appointments, I was a mentor to the Army's trainee teachers, a role that required me to observe copious Command Leadership Management (CLM) and Junior Officer Leadership Programme (JOLP) lessons and nurture junior officers through their probationary period and beyond. I maintained a checklist of elements that made for exceptional teaching which included pace, differentiation, question technique, creating a purposeful buzz, student interaction and personal contribution. During feedback, I would regularly explore how perceptive and astute the instructors were to the learners' needs; whether the instructor had created a safe learning environment to facilitate student engagement and readiness to contribute; and how well they had managed to establish a rapport with each student. The best lessons, irrespective of subject, content or knowledge, were the principal result of the instructor connecting emotionally with the students and where this was the case, the students were more engaged, committed and *inspired to succeed* in that environment – the responsibility of all leaders.

A leader works to connect with those in their team

How had the teacher connected? If you cast your minds back to your time at school or college, try to think of a teacher you admired and the reasons for this. When I have asked this of trainee teachers or students in the past, it often comes down to 5 or 6 principal points: they took an interest; they made time; they created the conditions for the student to feel safe to contribute – and without fear of consequence; they listened when the student spoke; they sparked interest in the subject being taught; and finally, the catch all for most, the teacher simply got them when others (or indeed most all too often) did not. The teachers that you admired saw the benefit in trying to connect emotionally - and more importantly, understood the consequences of failing to do so.

A leader's legacy is what he or she teaches others

What if you repeat the exercise for a leader that you admired, hold or have held in high esteem - how do the responses differ? The point is simply this – that the very best teachers and leaders are successful in connecting emotionally with those in their care. This is as pertinent for the leader as it is for the teacher – and the principles and mechanisms for doing so are largely the same. If a leader is only recognised as such when ratified in the minds of those under their charge, emotional connection matters. Importantly, it falls to the leader to work out how to connect rather than the other way around and is why, as James Kerr asserts in his book *Legacy*,

that leaders are also teachers. For a leader, your legacy is what you teach - but a protégé best learns once the connection is established.

A leader thinks of, and exists for, others first

In his book, *Everybody Communicate, Few Connect*, John C Maxwell defines emotional connection as 'the ability to relate to and identify with people in such a way that it increases your influence with them.' It is not about being emotional or showing excessive emotion - it is about making a human connection with someone else – and arguably a pre-requisite for effective leadership to evolve and even more important when leading the oft-bashed Generation Z. To connect is to join but for a connection to be established there must be rapport; it is why every relationship starts with a connection. In *Primal Leadership*, Daniel Goleman argues that a leader's primary leadership responsibility is to fulfil the role of emotional guide for others and the organisation and to do so requires connection. Brenee Brown asserts in *Daring to Lead* meanwhile, that leaders must care for and be connected to the people they lead; she argues (rightly in my opinion) that connection alongside the commitment to care are fundamental requirements if one is to truly serve the people they lead. Maxwell suggests that only the secure can stoop - leaders give up the right to think of themselves first; this is the essence of servant leadership – we exist for them.

A leader creates purpose to connect with and inspire others into action

One of the ways proficient leaders seek to build emotional connections is to motivate and unify individuals behind a purpose. Simon Sinek in *Start with Why*, James Kerr in *Legacy*, Daniel Coyle in *Culture Code* and Daniel Pink in *Drive* all focus on it. It requires a leader to connect emotionally through strong narratives, story-telling and the creation of shared goals and values. The purpose of establishing a purpose is to inspire – we are inspired because we have connected – we follow because we are inspired. It is why the ability to make a connection in the workplace matters; it is why good teachers prioritise connection with every student in the class. If employees or students feel disconnected, they will not engage or commit wholeheartedly; they will not realise their potential and are unlikely to stick around. In his book *Connection Culture*, Stallard suggests that employees' feelings of connection and unity provide a competitive advantage and that those with an organisation with a high degree of connection are more engaged and productive at work and less inclined to leave for a competitor. If we wish to retain our talent so that we can maximise it - we must first connect with it.

If we wish to truly lead we must strive to connect

If we agree that 'a' (and arguably 'the') principal output of proficient leadership is the development of others, then it is important that the concept of emotional connection is brought to the fore of our discussions and thinking on leadership. If we truly endorse the concept of 'serve to lead' and advocate that we exist for others, we must strive to understand them, be perceptive to their needs and establish how to inspire them. A unified purpose is one way – through shared bonds, values and story-telling, but we can also look to the world of teaching, where those who excel at it recognise the importance of taking and sparking an interest; making time to listen; and creating a safe environment where individuals all feel confident and able to contribute without fear of reproach. Leadership is relational; it has everything to do with how you relate to others and why the very best leaders recognise the importance of emotional connection. If we wish to truly lead, we must strive to connect.

Questions:

1. How did a leader that you have admired foster connection emotionally with you? What leadership styles did they use to do so and how did it influence your attitude and behaviour?
2. As a leader set on developing others, how do you ensure you listen; make time; create psychological safety; stir interest; listen - or strive to 'get' those under your tutelage? How does it affect their attitude and behaviour?

Further Resources:

3. **Must Read:** Daniel Coyle's *The Culture Code* (and his work on *How to Create for Belonging*) as well as Simon Sinek's *Leaders Eat Last* (and his work on *Circle of Safety*).
4. **Must Watch:** TEDx talks on [Building a Psychologically Safe Workplace](#) by Professor Amy Edmondson; [The Power of Vulnerability](#) by Brenne Brown; and [Start With Why](#) by Simon Sinek.

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