

IF YOU REALLY WANT TO CONNECT, TURN OFF THE AUTOMATIC PILOT

Every day, I get e-mails from Plaxo, LinkedIn, Facebook, Classmates, Twitter. No doubt you do, too. *So-and-so wants to connect with you.* I rarely know who so-and-so is or why they would want to connect with me. Is it so they can have a gazillion followers? Is this a contest? I'm not much of a follower, have grown weary of being followed, and am lousy at contests.

This morning, I got an e-mail announcing: "*You know 1,898 people that you haven't connected with yet. Here's the list of your contacts that you aren't connected with yet. Invite them to connect.*" The message used the word connect or connected three times in the 26-word admonition. I looked at the list. Apparently, @Home Billing and Amazon.com want to connect with me. So does the American Automobile Association. Who knew!

In my experience, many people I encounter wouldn't recognize an opportunity to truly connect with someone if it planted itself squarely in front of them. Or if they did recognize it heading their way, they'd turn tail and run. And in my view, not connecting is OK much of the time. No doubt the people using social networking web sites are very nice, but I'm already happily connected to plenty of people I care about. If I need something, I know how to find it, and if people need me, they know how to find me. I'm not hiding, and I'm always willing to lend a hand. So leave me alone.

If you want to become a great leader, a great teacher, a great principal, a great colleague, a great human being, you must gain the capacity to connect with the people who are central to your success and happiness — at a deep level — or lower your aim. The next frontier for exponential growth and the only sustainable competitive edge for individuals, organizations, and schools lie in the area of human connectivity.

So, what does "connect" mean, and why is it so important? I'll answer the second question first. Connection is important because people make decisions first for emo-

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tional reasons, second for rational. Daniel Kahneman, a Princeton psychologist, received the Nobel Prize for economics for this discovery. This is the human condition. Our most valuable currency is not money, nor is it IQ, multiple degrees, good looks, charisma, the number of technical gizmos attached to your person, committees on which you serve, articles you've published, or students who have passed through your doors.

Our most valuable currency is relationships or emotional capital — in your case, with your fellow teachers, administrators, students, and parents. You may have smarts galore, but without emotional capital, your dreams and strategies will stall. And we acquire emotional capital by connecting at a deep level with those at the center of our lives. Yet, this level of connectivity is rare, perhaps because it requires transparency, vulnerability, full disclosure, intimacy. It requires practicing principle 3 of *Fierce Conversations*: **Be here, prepared to be nowhere else.** In *this* conversation with *this* colleague, *this* student, *this* parent (Scott, 2002).

I find this requires setting aside other matters and focusing on the conversation in front of you. For example, I've had a rough week, and it's only Wednesday. I lost the buyer of my house, discovered that my loan to buy a condo still hasn't been approved (I had planned to move in today), then a woman and I backed into each other in a parking lot and damaged the rear ends of our cars, and yesterday I learned that there is \$50,000 worth of work that must be done on my house in order to sell it. I don't have \$50K in my petty cash drawer.

Given all this, I'm fairly proud of the fact that I have remained upbeat, cordial, and most importantly, fully present with everyone who has needed to talk with me, even though it would be an understatement to say that I am stressed. As I write this article, I am with *you*. If you feel at all connected with me as you read this, it is in part because I am letting you "see" me, while at the same time, trying to see *you*. I'm hoping that, as a result of reading this, you will be inspired to connect with at least one person who is important to you, because that is what will advance your life and make you and others happy. All the rest is just noise and will pass, so put down whatever you are dragging into your conversations on your back. It will wait for you.

The problem, by the way, does not always lie in a lack of time together. Almost every busy parent has felt guilty



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about not spending enough time with his or her child. Most couples express concerns that they have not been spending as much time with their mates as they feel they should. Principals suspect that things would go more smoothly if they spent more time with the teachers in their schools. So we carve out the time, sometimes grudgingly.

A parent sits down to talk with a child. A couple gets a babysitter and goes out to dinner. A principal schedules a meeting with a teacher. What happens? Not much. Just space, stretching out uncomfortably in front of you. Many do not make it past, "How are you?" "I'm fine."

When people are not present, not really engaged, there are missed opportunities to talk about something interesting and worthwhile. However, while most people think the problem lies with others, what if there is something else at work here? What if *you're* the problem? What if you're so disengaged that nobody hears you, nobody really listens to you, nobody really responds to you?

Perhaps you're too polite. Or too self-conscious, self-absorbed, politically correct, or cautious. The net result? We succeed in hearing every word, but miss the message entirely.

Hearing people's words is only the beginning. There is a profound difference between having a title, a classroom, or a marriage and being someone to whom people commit at the deepest level. If we wish to accomplish great things in our schools, and in our lives, then we must come to terms with a basic human need: the longing to be known, and being known, to be loved.

When our conversations with others disregard this core need, our lives can seem like an ongoing, exhausting struggle to influence others to do what we want them to do, to rise to their potential, to accomplish the goals of the relationship. We persuade, cajole, manipulate, and issue directives. Unconsciously, we end our conversations as soon as we initiate them, too afraid of what we might say or hear. Consequently, nothing changes. There's little to celebrate. Relationships are on automatic pilot. The scenery is bor-

Connecting through conversation

- Come into the conversation with empty hands. Bring nothing but yourself.
- Set aside your own agenda and ask, "What is the most important thing we should be talking about today?"
- When you ask, *really* ask. One of the greatest gifts you can give another is the purity of your attention.
- Silence your cell phone. You cannot be here, prepared to be nowhere else, when you are interrupted by beeps, buzzes, and bells.
- Speak with and listen to others as your equals, because they are.
- If you're unclear about what someone means, ask them to say more.
- Resolve to get it right (whatever *it* is), rather than to *be* right.
- Look inside yourself — with some people you may have to dig deep — to find at least a modicum of genuine affection for the person(s) with whom you are talking.
- Get past "How are you?" "I'm fine, how are you?"
- Be kind. Everyone is carrying a heavy load.

ing, and the skid marks from heels dug in are visible across the floor.

Only when we genuinely see the people who are important to us can we hope to make the difference that matters to us most.

REFERENCE:

Scott, S. (2002). *Fierce conversations: Achieving success at work & in life, one conversation at a time*. New York: Penguin. ■