

Critical Skills in Effective Interpersonal Relationships

Certain people are extremely effective in interpersonal relationships, whether in circulating at a party, group facilitation with the staff, bedside manner during hospital visitation, or whatever the social situation demands. Others seem to have varying degrees of difficulty in relationships, often pushing people away or shutting them down rather than drawing them closer. Certain pastor leaders are extremely adroit at building trust and directing people. Others tend to have difficulty building confidence and marshalling consensus to move people and churches forward.

But the vast majority of people, whether effective or ineffective in relationships, have a very foggy understanding of the particular skills that either assist them or work against them.

Social investigators have attempted to understand these interpersonal processes to see if particular skills could be taught so that individuals could become more successful in their interpersonal relationships. I think the answer is yes, these skills can be taught. Some people seem to grasp them more naturally than others. But whether you come by these more naturally because of your internal hard-wiring and upbringing or need to work harder to develop one or more of these, I believe these will make you much more effective in your ministry.

Let's look at these basic skills that I think are crucial for ministers in attempting to move

people forward. When I mention the first, you'll probably roll your eyes. But I want you to pay attention. And let me say, each of these skills assumes you will be in the Blue Zone, focused on the mission (which we will discuss later). Once you go Red Zone, all bets are off. You'll default to your own story and be unable to employ any of these with affect.

Pastor Leaders and Observation

To be truly effective, a pastor leader must simply pay attention. My friend Leighton Ford has written a book on this.¹ Leighton argues that this exactly what God wants – and attentive servant -- the path to becoming like Christ.

Many things in modern life crop up to distract us. Not the least of which is busyness. The pastors I know and have worked with over the years are incredibly busy people. Distracts of all kinds crowd into their lives, pulling them from paying attention.

Probably the single more notorious distraction creator is the need on ministers' part to meet expectations of those they serve. Every congregant that you serve has at least, and usually multiple expectations of you. There's the usual expectations of good preaching and teaching. But then there's the subtle expectations of availability ("I expect you to be available to myself and my family whenever the need arises. And by the way, don't send an associate much less a volunteer. Only you will suffice."). If you wrote down all of the congregational expectations, ruling board expectations, community expectations, etc., I think you'd find there's not enough hours in the day or week to meet a fraction of them.

¹ Leighton Ford. *The Attentive Life*.

And yet, I've met pastor after pastor running all over the church community trying as best s/he can to meet this myriad of expectations, and frankly wearing themselves out, all the while losing their own spiritual vitality.

Mark this down, Your task is not to *meet* expectations, your task is to *recalibrate* expectations. Did you get that? This is a critical issue that you simply must understand, or you will fail in your ministry. Many people who go into ministry are people pleasers. As such, they are fair game for the competing demands and expectations of the congregation. And for those of you who are parents, you know to be effective in this role, you can't go around meeting every demand and expectation of your kids. If you do, you manage to raise narcissistic, entitled kids. And Lord knows we don't need any more of them.

Dr. Richard Hanson, a neurologist who wrote *Budda's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love and Wisdom*, states that "attention shapes the brain." In other words, what we pay attention to is literally what we will build in our brain tissue. Our neurons wire in response to what we focus upon.

A fascinating article in *Psychology Today* focuses on paying attention.² The author states that we often confuse paying attention (a neutral function) with judgement (a critical function). Judgement assumes that we must evaluate, categorize, then take action on the thing observed. We rush to get beyond what we observe, deciding whether to fix it, or just let it alone. But this is not true paying attention. Paying attention can actually promote healing

² Alison Bonds Shapiro. "Paying Attention." *Psychology Today*, 7/11/2010.

and transformation as we give our world attention and thus rewire our brains

We can talk about paying attention to God's creation, with is very restorative to us, but others have written on this more elegantly than I, and I think the best place for a minister to concentrate when considering attention is in the area of relationships. When you give someone your undivided attention, you're sending a message that they are worthy of it. You convey to them that you are noticing, concentrating, focusing on what they are saying and feeling—both verbally and non-verbally. By listening, you get into their shoes, understand their frame of reference, different though it may be from your own.

Undoubtedly all of us have been in conversations where the person with whom we talk was not giving us his or her full attention. I find that disconcerting and often maddening. It conveys to me that what I have to say is not as important as other things that are on your mind.

A lot of ministers I know pride themselves on their 'multi-tasking' abilities. But remember what I said about so-called multi-taskers out there: There is no such thing as multi-tasking!

So this brings us to the obvious conclusion:

Great Leaders are Great L

Most folks in positions of leadership – Pastors, CEOs, educators, physicians, what have you—die with their mouths open. Instead of listening, they're either chattering away, or merely keeping silent, waiting their turn to talk.

Leaders must know how to listen. Leaders need to want to listen – they must value listening, and they must see listening as a difficult art that must be learned. Of course the subtext here is the belief that people around you are value-add, that their opinions and disagreements matter. If you don't believe that, which probably means you think your opinion is the only one with merit, then the rest of this will be useless.

Good listening is fueled by curiosity and empathy: It's hard to be a great listener if you're not interested in other people. And again, this ties us back to the basics of leadership – leading is about people, taking an interest in them, developing them, motivating them.

Some of the great leaders in the airline business are good examples of listening: Jan Carlzon at SAS (Scandinavian Airlines System) in the early 1980s, Colin Marshall at British Airways in the early 1990s, Herb Kelleher at Southwest Airlines – Leaders who were always flying on their own airlines' planes, talking with customers, listening, encouraging ticket agents and baggage handlers. This can be called a "dynamic listening" mode, asking questions all the time. And the great listeners aren't always providing answers. The leader is one who acts more as listener and facilitator, precisely because the stakeholders themselves must wrestle with the competing values.

A warning here. Many subordinates, when asked a question, will remain silent. They've been conditioned in other situations that their opinion is not really sought after. The manager is merely asking a rhetorical question that the manager herself will answer. So you'll need to be patient at first, and remind your protégés and direct reports that what they have to say is truly valued.

Great listeners are into music. Great listeners listen musically as well as analytically. Jimmy Carter is an example of a president who was "tone deaf." He relied on "rational discourse" to weigh the pros and cons of various initiatives. People prepared papers that he would sift through in private. Doing it that way enabled him to listen to their arguments analytically, but not musically. Jimmy Carter did not enjoy being in meetings where there was posturing, arguing, and haggling. You could say he was conflict-averse. But as we said about great teams, they are loaded with conflict.

We don't have conflict for conflict's sake. All of that arguing and disagreement give us clues – What do people really see is at stake here, their values, the subtext that includes the history of the situation and the personal stakes that people bring to an argument.

Listening musically attends to tone of voice and the intensity of the argument, which in turn point to the subtext. Listening musically enables leaders to get underneath and behind the surface to ask, "What's the real argument that we're having?" And that's a critical question to answer — because, in the absence of an answer to that question, you get superficial buy-in. People go along in a pseudo-consensus, or in a deferential way, but without commitment.

If curiosity is a prerequisite for listening, what's the enemy? Another thing to remember. Grandiosity is the enemy! Pastor leaders need to check their sense of self-importance. This goes hand-in-hand with the sense that my perspective is the one true perspective. This can grow into the myth of certainty—that I know exactly what's best in all situations. This doesn't arise from bad intentions. It usually grows out of the normal

human need to feel significant (discussed in Chapter 1). I don't know any human being who doesn't want to feel important, who doesn't want to matter to other people. And those of us who have a strong need to be needed -- I happen to have that need, so I know a lot about it—spend our lives solving other people's problems. It makes us feel needed: “Surely you have a problem that I can solve.” But that orientation creates its own kind of problem. The more we demonstrate our capacity to take problems off other people's shoulders, the more authority we gain in their eyes — until, finally, we become a senior pastor or a CEO. And, by then, the tracks have been laid so deeply inside our brain that it becomes hard to stand back, hard to listen, hard to learn from others. Our normal need to feel important — "Let me help you" — has been transformed into grandiosity: "I have all the answers." This, as we already said, is the opposite of the adaptive leader.

Now consider points about active listening. You've probably seen these before, but they're worth repeating.

1. Face the speaker.
2. Maintain eye contact to the degree that you both remain comfortable.
3. Minimize external extractions
4. Respond appropriately to show that you understand.
5. Focus solely on what the speaker is saying.
6. Minimize internal distractions.
7. Keep an open mind.
8. Even if the speaker is launch a complaint against you, wait until they finish to defend yourself.
9. Ask questions for clarifications to make sure you didn't misunderstand. But once again, wait until the speaker has

finished. Start with: “So you're saying . . .”

Pastor Leaders and Questions

Let's begin with a point that is probably counter-intuitive to the way you think about leading.

Great Leaders Ask Lots of Questions and Offer Few Answers except as is Needed

Unfortunately, in so many organizations, people are elevated to places of authority because of their expertise. They're often the smartest people in the room. Because of this, most leaders think they have to be the answer people whenever their subordinates have a question.

Consider what you're authorized as a leader to do. Doling out answers—especially when the people themselves should be wrestling through the issues, or the competing values, or whatever—is not only *not* helpful, it builds dependency on you. Leadership is not about building dependency. It's about having people wrestle through the key issues because they are the key stakeholders (remember the leadership triangle).

We understand these concepts are hard to grasp quickly. Think about this. Leaders think their power comes from being smart, from having answers. Power is actually somewhat paradoxical. It comes from having a non-anxious presence that understands unfolding processes and allowing those led to find their way while managing their anxiety.

Just remember, your job as leader is not to dole out answers, but to frame good questions that allow your direct reports to delve into the issues more intentionally. When these folks show up at your door, questions you could ask are:

- ✓ Tell me what steps you've already taken to solve this problem.
- ✓ Where are you having the most difficulty solving this particular problem?
- ✓ When you see that your tried-and-true solution to most of these problems doesn't work in this case, what alternatives came to mind?

Powerful questions:

- Come from a place of genuine curiosity.
- Are direct, simple and usually open-ended.
- Generate creative thinking and surface underlying information.
- Encourage self-reflection.

Examples:

- Based on your gifts, how would you like to be used here at the church?
- How have the talents and gifting of other people helped you in your ministry?

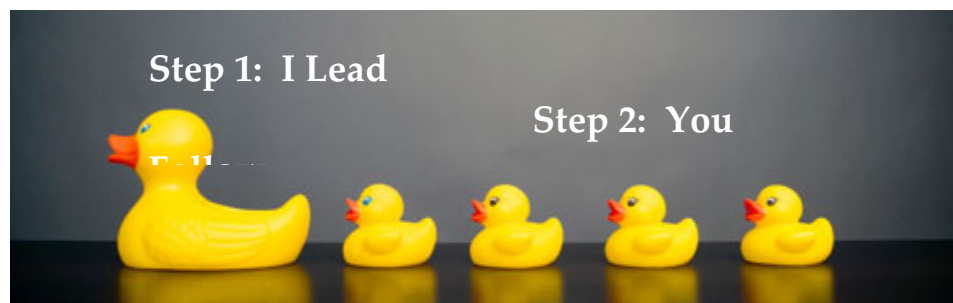
- What do you want?
- What's holding you back from achieving this?
- What is it costing you to continue holding back?
- Do you see yourself changing your mind on that topic?
- What new habits will you put in place to fortify your new mindset?
- What is the most meaningful action you could take now?
- What new skills or support systems will ensure your success?
- What would happen if ...?
- With hindsight, what can you see?
- If you were an expert in this field, what would you do?
- If you had a magic wand, what would you do?
- What dreams did you or do you have for your life?
- What area could you make a contribution in?
- What, in your view, stops you from realizing your dreams or getting to your goals?
- What are you afraid of?
- What do you believe must happen before you can realize your dreams and visions?
- What are the actions you haven't taken to make your dreams come true?

Leaders and Pacing

We next want to look at an old word with a new meaning... pacing. Pacing and listening are probably the two most powerful tools you can have to gain rapport with folks. And why would you want to gain rapport? To gain *trust*. And why do we need to gain trust? So people will follow us!

Remember what we said earlier, trust is the first big hurdle you must get over with anyone. If people don't trust you, they won't follow you, or do whatever it is you want them to do.

Leadership in the past has been seen as a simple **two-step process**:



Actually, it's a three-step process:



Remember the trust element. You've got to gain trust to lead. And to gain trust, you've got to build rapport. Brain scientists tell us that the more primitive parts of our brain are constantly asking the same question when a relationship is first forming. That question is, "Can I trust this person? Will I survive this encounter?" It makes sense. If those questions aren't answered in the affirmative, all bets are off.

Pacing means stepping into another person's world for a moment, meeting the person there to let her know that I am truly "with her." Then, I lead her in the direction of change. A person will not follow another unless she is certain that the leader can be trusted. And she will not give her trust until such time as she senses that she is being understood.

Being understood is one thing. Agreeing is quite another. This is not giving the impression of agreement. In fact, that would be ludicrous and downright manipulative to give the impression of agreement, when in fact you don't. But hearing and giving the impression of understanding is critical.

Those interesting brains we have. Humans have massive brains with which they are able to internalize behavior through the complex processes of abstract thought such as language, philosophy, mathematics, and allegory. Even though much of the action with people is internal, there are still many very simple actions performed by people. These actions are inborn and genetic (e.g. sucking) and may be discovered by ourselves, absorbed from society, or taught formally. In fact, far from being free-flowing, human behavior is divided into a long series of separate acts that follow each other unconsciously and spontaneously. Let's consider several classes of actions that can enhance an understanding of relationships.

The first class is that of gestures. A gesture is any action that sends a visual signal to an onlooker. We are obviously so accustomed to gestures taking place constantly around us that generally we tend not to take particular notice of them. They are there merely as a punctuation to our existence. Desmond Morris, a student of human behavior, divides gestures into two types: incidental and primary.

Incidental gestures are mechanical movements that involve personal actions such as cleaning, rubbing, wiping, coughing, yawning, and stretching. These gestures carry secondary messages to the observer. We can learn about a person by the way that she does these mechanical actions. If you are near someone while you are reading this page, set the manual aside for a moment and observe that person – doing so in such a way that the person is not aware of being observed. Notice some incidental gestures. See if you can guess the person's mood. Then try to make some assumptions about the person's personality. Is that person outgoing? Tentative? Shy? Sincere? Flighty? Whether or not you are right is irrelevant. The point is that you can make these assumptions about a person merely by noting incidental gestures. Unfortunately, we make many judgments about people unconsciously with only this type of information.

Primary gestures, by contrast, involve deliberate signaling. The face and hands are the most important parts of the body that give these gestures. First, think of the face. The more highly developed the species, the more elaborate the facial muscles. Humans have faces capable of myriad poses; in fact, the human face transmits the bulk of nonverbal signaling. The subtle changes that our faces make as we talk with someone constantly sends information to that other person. For example, just the eyebrow position alone can convey moods of dismay, anger, and joy.

We also use hands to convey small mood changes. We tend not to notice consciously when the hands punctuate verbal communication unless they move in pronounced ways. Watch TV with the sound off some time. Watch the characters on screen gesture to one another. Notice their faces and hands. Watch how varied and subtle the movements and changes can be.

Yet another class of actions involves postural changes. We can focus on the ways that people who are in agreement assume particular postures in relation to one another. It is interesting to note that friends who are conversing unconsciously act in unison. First, they will adopt a similar posture. If they are particularly friendly and share an attitude on the subject currently discussed, their actions will become almost identical to each other. This is a natural, unconscious display of companionship and rapport.

Slow-motion filming of this phenomenon has shown that there is a 'micro-synchrony' of small movements, so sensitive that it is hard to see with the naked eye. These movements include tiny, momentary dips and nods of the head, tensing of fingers, stretching of lips, and jerks of the body that become matched for the two people with strong rapport. Evidently the right side of the brain unconsciously registers the movements of the other, matches these through similar

movements, and registers the feeling of warmth to the person. One reason why mental patients *are* mental patients is that they literally are not in “sync” with the rest of the world.

Most people are surprised by how much is actually being communicated at any given time. James Lynch is a doctor who has spent years researching changes in heart rate and related factors as people talk to one another. He states that for too long we, like Descartes, have viewed the body as a machine that is isolated in its functioning. Lynch cites study after study that demonstrates how the organs of the body respond and change dramatically with something as seemingly innocuous as human dialogue. He also states that many people tend not to realize their internal conflicts, conflicts that become manifest in things like hypertension and migraines.

Keep in mind what we said about people who agree, and get into “sync” with each other. These are people who trust each other. As a result, they begin to mirror each other’s posture, rate of delivery, tone of voice, and so forth. And this is exactly what pacing entails. Pacing involves matching the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of the other person so that that person senses unconsciously that we are in “sync” with their and have entered their world and truly understand.

Here’s my reality, and your reality. There is some overlap obviously in the way the two of us perceive reality. Pacing gives a person the sense that there is much more of a correlation between my reality and your reality.



Verbal Pacing

Verbal pacing involves several things. Look at these three questions that I want you to ask when your pacing someone.

What did she say?

Look at this first question. *What was just said?* Sound simple? It’s not. Back to what we just said about listening. Most people are just plain terrible at listening – waiting their turn to talk – as someone once said.

Verbal Pacing Questions

- What did she just say?
- What’s this person’s world?
- What’s the representational system?

The first, and possibly most important, part of verbal pacing is hearing what the person just said and *acknowledging it!* It also involves what the person didn’t say, but what you note in that person’s demeanor:

“John, you look as though you’ve lost your best friend.”

“Mary, if looks could kill, I wouldn’t want to be the recipient of your frown.”

“Mark, you look perplexed.”

Remember, people constantly send us non-verbal clues as to their interior emotional status. We can verbally note it, and the person will feel understood.

What’s this person’s world?

Second, words are matched to a person’s world – where that person lives, works, plays, worships, shops, etc. Look at this:

We gave you the first profession – pilot – and some words that could be used with a pilot to pace his world. Think, if you were talking to these other folks, what words you might use to pace their world.

Profession	Language used to pace
Pilot	Soar, glide, take off, land
Nurse	
Soldier	
Construction	
Programmer	
CPA	

Everyone has a different function, and should be paced accordingly.

Remember, we’re trying to build rapport, which leads to trust, which allows us to lead effectively.

What’s the representational system?

Third, words that match a person’s representational system. We live in a world dominated by words. We therefore tend to believe that our thinking is mainly accomplished in words. But thinking is basically the manipulation of memory images. The greatest source of these is our senses. We literally think in sensory images. We can make mental images of tastes, sights, sounds, and feelings.

One group of people interested in human behavior has taken this idea and has considered how this sensory thinking can be used. These folks are called neurolinguistic programmers.

These researchers have stated that when we experience data consciously, we choose one sensory mode to gather the information, organize it, and express it. The sensory modes we use are the visual (seeing), the auditory (hearing), and the kinesthetic (touching). Of course, people

use all three modes, but a person tends to have one in which she is more sensitive and which she will use to make the finest distinctions.

As an example, if someone asked you to remember the last concert you attended, you would go back into your memory and bring up that experience to consider. If you tend toward being a visual person, you would primarily (not totally of course) remember how the orchestra looked, how the hall was arranged, where you sat, etc. If you tend toward the auditory, you'd remember the music played and how it sounded. The kinesthetic would first note the feelings evoked from the experience.

The highly visual person translates information into a visual image to represent its meaning. This person then relies on visual images at the expense of hearing and feeling. The hearing-sensitive person obviously would emphasize this more, and the kinesthetic would use the feeling mode.

It would be ideal for a person to be able to use all three modes as appropriate to various contexts. A symphony is best enjoyed if the auditory channel is primary. Driving a car requires the visual mode to take charge. Appreciating a back rub needs kinesthetic awareness. You use all of these modes depending on experience. But, undoubtedly, you also limit your experience when you force all experiences through your primary mode.

- Auditory people would use words like *hear, told, listen, tell myself, and sounds like*.
- Kinesthetics would use words like *grasp, feel, handle, in touch with, and contact*.
- The visual person actually gets pictures in her head. She actually is describing what she is seeing with words like *see, look, observe*.

Non-verbal pacing

Consider now non-verbal pacing:

Here various aspects of a person's body language are noted and mirrored, including eye contact, breathing, voice tone and rate, body posture, and posture and other movements. When you are pacing nonverbally, only one or two of these behaviors need to be copied. In fact, one effective way to do this is to pace one movement with another movement – what is paced is the rate of movement. Take for instance a person you're pacing who is tapping his foot. You may want to tap your pencil on every second or fourth beat.

Non-Verbal Pacing Questions

What's the eye contact?

What's the posture and incidental body movements?

What's the tone of voice, rate and amount of speech?

Remember what I said earlier about people talking with one another who are in agreement. They get into an unconscious symmetry with one another, matching breathing, tone of voice, rate and amount of speech. We're now using that information to build rapport. This does need to be unconscious. If you're so blatant about it, mirroring a person's every move, that will

become conscious to the person, and she will become quite uncomfortable – translation: no rapport.

Remember, it's only effective when done unconsciously. The best place to practice this is in social situations, or at home with the family. By the way, many people who are chronically isolated and alone in our society are people who have never really learned how to pace. They're perpetually out of sync with the rest of the world. They can have all the brilliance in the world, but nobody quite trusts them.

Leaders and Reframing

Reframing is one of the most profound and powerful ways to help a person shift perspective and widen his or her map of the world.

A good definition of reframing is to put a new or different frame around an image, a thought, or an experience. This has the effect of transforming the meaning of one's experience. The reframe creates a different framework or context.

Start with the idea of perspective. Everyone has a perspective on virtually everything, basically. And your perspective of any given situation colors your feelings and informs your actions. Take for example an experience where you're home alone at night, and you hear footsteps in the house. If your perspective is that it's an intruder, your feelings are fright, and your actions are to run or grab a weapon. If your perspective is that it's your husband or one of your kids coming in, your feelings are warm, and you prepare for a hug.

The perspective we each bring to our experiences is a function of our development. We all lived a particular story as we grew up. And in that story, we incorporated an infinite number of perspectives that make up our map of reality. I use the metaphor of a map. The road map is not the actual terrain, but rather a representation of the terrain.

My map of reality is a compilation of all my opinions, assumptions, convictions, values, influences, and experiences. As I grow, my mind attempts to make sense of all its experiences – to interpret any given experience and ascribe meaning and hence value to it.

Remember these two circles?
Here's my perspective on reality, and yours. Note that there's some overlap. If there wasn't, I suppose we wouldn't get anything done. Most people, however, think that there's a total correspondence between my reality and yours. They're frankly dismayed when you didn't like the movie they thought was sensational.



People operate out of their internal maps. As they encounter new experiences, they take out their map to give them the perspective (or frame) on those experiences. We're directed through all of life using our map to guide us. The map works much the same as the embedded commands that are part of a word- processing program. Embedded commands tell the computer how to react to certain sections of the text.

Unfortunately, the map is rarely taken out and analyzed. We don't see the map, we see *with* the map, all the while believing that the way we are perceiving the world and our unique experience of it is what is truly real.

Interestingly, researchers find that the left side of our brains (logic side) is committed to interpreting all of our overt behavior and emotional responses. Evidently this is done so that the brain can have a consistent story of all that is happening at any given time. Sometimes the left side will go to bizarre lengths to correlate events into a coherent story. Unfortunately, often these explanations the left side constructs contradict the tenets of the maps – and competing values and double messages are the result.

So our perspective or frame helps us to interpret the meaning of our experiences. But note that our perspective and its usefulness is context bound. In other words, a particular frame that suits us just fine in one context, may in fact be detrimental in another.

Your job as a leader is to listen carefully (again, there's that word listen) to hear how people are framing all of the situations in which they are involved. Note to yourself whether these frames are helpful in moving the project, the relationship, the organization forward. If the frame is not helpful, and in fact is miring things down, your job is going to be to reframe the situation in order that people can get a different perspective on what is occurring.

You have to first listen carefully – in order to pace and gain rapport. Then you must get a sense of the person's perspective (frame) on the issue. Then you need to think of a reframe.

Successful Reframing:

- Understands that there is always more than one perspective underlying every problem. Even problematic behavior usually has a positive intention.
- Provides an alternative view.
- Is valid.
- Provides a positive option.
- Allows someone to take action.

Note each of these points:

- There is always more than one perspective on a given experience or problem. When it comes to people's behavior that is problematic – let's say that a person constantly interrupts you seeking your attention. Underneath of that problematic behavior is a positive intention. In this case, *I want to do the right thing, and the very best job. So I have to get Sara's approval.*
- Next, your reframe must provide an alternative view.
- Lastly, this reframe must provide a positive option that then allows people to take action and move forward.

Further Reading

- Celeste Headley. *We Need to Talk*
- Mark Goulston. *Just Listen*