

# An Overview of *Get Better: 15 Proven Practices to Build Effective Relationships At Work*, Authored by Todd Davis

## Introduction

*Get Better: 15 Practices to Build Effective Relationships at Work* was written by Todd Davis, Chief People Officer, FranklinCovey. Its premise is simple, but powerful: at the heart of what makes us fulfilled and effective, both in our personal and our professional lives, is the quality of our relationships. And the key to improving our relationships, effectiveness, and results is to begin by *getting* better ourselves by focusing on improving our own paradigms and behaviors. As we do, we increase our ability to influence those around us.

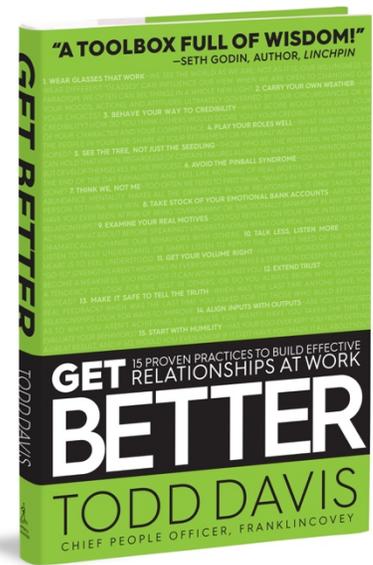
In *Get Better*, Davis moves beyond the adage that an organization's greatest assets are its people. He asserts that it's the nature of the *relationships* between and among the people that is the most significant driver of professional and personal effectiveness – and in the end, creates the culture that becomes an organization's ultimate competitive advantage.

In an approachable, engaging style, using real world stories, Davis describes the most common relationships pitfalls that negatively affect personal careers and organizational results. In observing, leading and coaching others for more than 30 years, Davis identifies 15 proven practices that influential people at any level of an organization use to be successful at work, improve the quality of interactions with others, and truly master the skills of effective relationships.

At both the individual and organizational levels, relationships matter, and when we focus on strengthening them, nearly everything gets better, becomes more effective and is more meaningful. But, there are old habits and biases standing in the way.

In Jean-Paul Sartre's play, *No Exit*, the philosopher concludes that "hell is other people." Sartre found relationships to be so pivotal to one's happiness, that when they go awry, it can literally feel like hell. When we find ourselves stuck in Sartre's metaphorical room, surrounded by people we disagree with or who simply rub us the wrong way, often our first instinct is to point the finger at *them*. It's their fault – if only my boss understood me better, or my colleagues respected me more, or my partner would listen. This is Sartre's hell, where we stay awash in our victimhood and rather than take responsibility for ourselves, denigrate and blame everyone else.

And if we don't just give up and consign ourselves to our fate, often the next instinct is to find a way out. This might mean leaving a team, a company, or even a marriage. There's a strong temptation to look for an external change to make things right again. After all, a new and better room (with more reasonable people) lies just beyond the next door! But what happens when we arrive? Often, we find ourselves in a new room with new people – inherently flawed as all humans are – with whom we must now learn to get along. We are simply the same person traversing one room to the next, carrying with us the same limiting beliefs that keep us ever stuck without an exit. And yes, it can feel like hell. But there is a way out. It begins, as most things do, with a new way of thinking.



While there are numerous practices that affect relationships, *Get Better* focuses on those that can have a have an immediate, significant impact on personal and professional relationships. What's most important, however, is approaching the content in this book with an open heart and mind, and considering the possibility that the only way to truly *Get Better* with others is to first begin with oneself.

## The 15 Proven Practices to Build Effective Relationships at Work

### Practice 1: Wear Glasses that Work



- **When You Don't Apply Practice 1:**

- You act on incorrect information.
- You don't get the results you want.
- You feel foolish when you recognize your version of the truth is limited and inaccurate.

Have you ever discovered that your version of the “truth” wasn't so true or complete after all?

We view not only ourselves, but those around us, through a set of lenses. And like any lens, they either sharpen or distort reality. As philosopher and author Thomas Kuhn wrote, “all significant breakthroughs are break-“withs” old ways of thinking”<sup>1</sup>. As it turns out, what we see informs how we think and feel, which influences what we do, and the results we ultimately get.

Simply choosing how we see ourselves and others has a cascading effect on what we think, feel, and do. This concept is a foundational principle for making significant changes in our lives. Consider some of the common ways we may inaccurately view ourselves and others:

- I don't belong
- I'm too lazy.
- I'm impatient.
- I'll never be good enough.
- I can't change—I am what I am.

We also have some common ways in which we may inaccurately view the world or others:

- Everything is against me.
- Things usually turn out bad.
- My friend is thoughtless.
- My colleague doesn't know what he's doing.
- People can't be trusted.
- My team will never change.

We do a great disservice to ourselves when we wear the limiting lenses that are so often a part of human nature. But the good news is that changing one's glasses is a choice, and we all have the power to do so.

## Practice 2: Carry Your Own Weather



- **When You Don't Apply Practice 2:**

- Life happens *to you*.
- Being a martyr becomes your “brand.”
- You limit your ability to positively influence others.

Do you ever find that you are controlled by other people, circumstances or your own knee-jerk reactions?

We are never without choice. Of course, that doesn't mean that things don't happen outside of our control, or that our choices can't be severely limited. As immortalized in the words of Victor Frankl, holocaust survivor and author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”

It's easy, however, to feel like a victim, surrendering to the belief that we're helplessly subject to the external world. And when others are the source of our dismay and helplessness, it's easy to cast blame, level accusations, and adopt a victim mindset and language.

At the foundation of carrying your own weather is the ability to pause between stimulus and response. The earliest man (and woman) learned fight or flight as a way of reacting to potentially life-threatening situations. Fast forward to the modern world — for most of us, the challenge of daily survival is no longer the standard. Our stresses now come in much different, less life-threatening forms. Yet external stimuli naturally cause us to react quickly, and sometimes inappropriately.

As human beings, we share the unique trait of self-awareness — or the ability to see and to evaluate our own thoughts. It gives us the capability to pause, step back, and see ourselves along with the paradigms we adopt and use. In effect, it gives us the freedom to proactively choose our response.

The power of carrying your own weather is so great, it can overcome even the most difficult storms we face. It can express itself in many ways: from the simple choice to keep a pleasant or professional disposition, to allowing the events around us to spin the needle of our moral compass. But at the heart of it is always a choice, and that power can never be surrendered unless we allow it.

## Practice 3: Behave Your Way to Credibility



- **When You Don't Apply Practice 3:**

- You're frustrated that people judge you on your behavior, not your good intentions.
- You're irritated because you feel you must prove yourself to others.
- Over time, no one trusts you or has confidence in you.

Have you ever tried to talk your way out of a problem you've acted your way into?

If so, you may want to consider the three principles of behaving with credibility:

- Demonstrating high character and competence
- Taking the long-term view

- Adapting to the situation at hand

## Demonstrating high character and high competence

Without a high degree of character and competence, people aren't going to trust you. You might think well of me as someone who's thoughtful and considerate (character), but you might have reservations when I offer to "pack your parachute" for your first skydiving lesson (competence). Chances are you'd probably want to know just how much experience and/or training I'd had in parachute packing (none). And despite my amiable disposition and positive attitude, you'd be right to find me lacking credibility. In the same way, you might be hesitant if you learned that the person who had packed your parachute had just been acquitted of a manslaughter charge on a technicality – they might have every parachute packing certificate around, but if something you feel about their character is off, it will likely cause concern. Without high character and high competence, credibility can't flourish.

While character does not mean that one is infallible, behaving in ways that consistently build trust with others provides evidence that one can be trusted – regardless of all circumstances and even if no one is looking.

## Taking the long-term view

Credibility isn't earned overnight. Taking the long view means you are willing to pay the price to earn it – regardless of the time and effort involved. When it comes to building credibility, there's no escaping time. Transitory actions may build confidence in others, but trust only comes from seeing the consistency of such actions over time. If we don't take the long view, our credibility will suffer.

## Adapting to the situation at hand

Building credibility often means adapting to new situations and people. We always pay a price when we lose credibility. And while it may be tempting to give up, there's something to be said for staying with it... to continually be behaving our way back to credibility, even when it's been damaged or suffered a blow. Once you've damaged your reputation and credibility with someone, the way back can be difficult, and it certainly won't happen overnight. If you've damaged or lost credibility with someone, or if you need to build additional character and competence, begin the process of behaving your way back to credibility now.

## Practice 4: Play Your Roles Well



- **When You Don't Apply Practice 4:**

- You constantly feel out of balance and guilty.
- You may neglect an important role for so long that you cause severe relationship damage.
- Life is ultimately unrewarding.

Have you ever found that success in one area of your life comes at the expense of another area?

It's difficult to think of anyone who isn't challenged by trying to balance all the critical roles they play in life? There are many people who make a deliberate choice to identify their most important

roles and pay attention to the contributions they want to make in each of them. As a result, they are rewarded with a greater sense of balance, purpose, and most importantly, they build richer relationships.

When you “play” your roles, you don’t artificially perform them or “fake it” using a pre-written script. Playing a role well means expressing your most authentic and deepest value system through what you do and say. Even when an actor is given a fictional part to play, it’s only when they bring an authentic part of themselves to the role that they can touch a truth within the human condition.

Even though the majority of us aren’t professional thespians, the metaphor of the actor and the stage can still be useful when we evaluate how to play our roles well. Reflect on the many roles you play in your life: leader, neighbor, team member, parent, friend, coach, sibling, etc. Imagine if you had the opportunity to read a review of your performance in the roles you play. How many stars would you get?

To get better at playing your roles well, you need to first identify them and then determine the real contribution you want to make in each one.

## **Identify Your Roles**

When you consider the roles you currently play at work and home, pay attention to how many you take on. If you’ve ever watched a one-woman or one-man show, you will see a single, talented actor seamlessly perform the various parts. But what they can’t do, no matter how gifted they are, is play all of the parts well at the same time.

Unfortunately, we wildly overestimate our ability to effectively focus on several things at once. The only thing that comes from working on too many roles at the same time is mediocrity. So, you get to choose which roles need the most attention at any given time. Remember, it’s not about spending equal time in each role (most people will spend more hours at work each week than they will on a hobby or important relationship), but it is about regularly keeping your most important roles top of mind and ensuring you have an overall balance in the long run. Realize that some roles stay with you for a lifetime (parent, partner, friend), and others may change over time (jobs, community or volunteer positions, etc.) Quite often, our long-term roles are where we experience the most character and relationship growth.

Choosing meaningful roles isn’t something someone does for you — it’s something you do based on your value system. Once you’ve identified your most meaningful roles, you’re able to determine how and when you want to show up in those roles. With our most important roles — we should never lose sight of them on our radar, but we should also be prepared to give our full attention to the one that needs it most at any particular time.

## **Determine Your Contribution in Each Role**

Because we have any number of tasks to perform each day, it might be easy to start thinking of roles in terms of “to-do” lists. But, roles go much deeper. Our roles are never just about what we do, but are ways through which we express our values and who we are at our core. Roles require much more than to-do’s. They require “to-be’s” as well. A “to-be” is an ongoing value or a character quality we’re striving to become or at which to get better. If an outside observer can’t connect our actions to our values, we’re doing something wrong.

We can prepare to work within our various roles by drafting a contribution statement, which focuses on how we want “to be” in each role. It expresses our purpose and values, and becomes the standard by which we measure everything else in our lives.

We should be mindful of ourselves as well. Take time to deepen your knowledge of yourself: your dreams, desired contributions, character qualities. Also keep in mind the health of your body, mind, social/emotional and spiritual life. And, remember that no one can tell you how to live your roles or which contributions you should make, for they will be unique to you.

## Practice 5: See the Tree, Not Just the Seedling



- **When You Don't Apply Practice 5:**

- Your limiting beliefs become reality.
- Growth is stunted in yourself and others.
- You're continually looking elsewhere for talent that may be right in front of you.

With people, do you often conclude that “what you see is what you get?”

When we look at a person's potential — whether it's a coworker, direct report, friend, partner or child, it requires us to see past the “seed” and envision the mighty tree it can become. Seeing potential in others is a paradigm that recognizes growth as an organic principle. It doesn't happen overnight — it's a function of growth over time.

Chances are you've been on the receiving end of someone who recognized and believed in your potential — seeing the tree, not just the seedling. It may have come from a parent or sibling, a teacher, or even a boss.

Seeing potential in others isn't just about *hoping* people will succeed. It's believing that they have unlimited talents and abilities and opportunities for growth. It's also understanding that the road to success is paved with failures — that growing is an ongoing process that may take a lifetime. When we take the long view, we see that failure can be a moment of instruction and reflection and can serve to increase the likelihood of success.

Allowing ourselves to see potential in others is also not about flattery — it's not about being the “rah-rah” person who goes around giving everyone “high 5's” and telling them they're great. And on the opposite end of the spectrum, seeing potential isn't about continually correcting performance or focusing on all the risks and mistakes that stand in the way of someone's potential. To see the potential in others requires us to believe that the seed, with the right kind of nourishment, will become the mighty oak.

When you believe in the potential of others, you help them see more clearly what they are capable of, engage their strengths and talents that may lay dormant, and ultimately become the people they want to be.

## Practice 6: Avoid the Pinball Syndrome



- **When You Don't Apply Practice 6:**

- You don't realize where you've ended up until it's too late.
- You're so busy fighting fires, you spend no time preventing them.
- You never beat the pinball game and often end up feeling like the "ball."

Do you ever reach the end of the day and feel like nothing of real value has been accomplished?

What distracts us from those things we've decided are truly important? Why are we willing to exchange the timeless for the transitory? Giving in to the allure of the urgent over the important is known as the pinball syndrome.

Think back to the last time you played a pinball game. These visually beautiful games are designed to engage the senses—lights flash as large scoreboards track progress, while bells ding, bumpers thump, and the ball clacks and rolls across wood and metal tracks. It's a very visceral experience, and it's easy for the sights and sounds to drown out one's senses and demand complete attention. Eventually gravity will win the day, however, as the ball slips past the frantically swinging flippers and drops out of sight. But fear not, for there's always a new ball ready to ratchet into place. All we have to do is pull the handle back and send it on its way.

The truth is, with practically every worthwhile job or career we can all get caught up in the pinball syndrome. Think of a pinball machine as the metaphor for all the urgent things that demand our attention throughout the day. And while we may not feel like we're playing a game, per se, when accomplishing such tasks, we might feel attracted to (or even seduced by) the rapid pace and focus that's required to get them done. Add a small endorphin rush as we check off the next item in our to-do list, and it's easy to see how the urgent can feel gratifying - even addictive at times.

The challenge is that some of the urgencies might also be important, but the allure of the game gives everything equal weight. As a result, we can end up spending time and energy on the less important. In the words of J.K. Rowling, "Humans have a knack for choosing precisely the things that are worst for them."

Urgent things act on us—they compete for our attention and insist on a response.

By contrast, important things often require us to act on them. Important things are those that contribute to our values and align to our highest goals. They are intentional and long-term, rather than ad hoc and transitory. In almost all cases, they include important relationships.

The nature of the pinball syndrome is to confuse urgency with importance. And while we cannot step away from the game altogether, we can differentiate between what we *must* play and what we *choose* to play. The pinball game is rigged, and in the end, will eventually have its way, as eventually the ball slips through. Any win is temporary at best, and then we're only given a small respite before the score resets and the next ball ratchets into place. It's what we do in that moment - between reaching for the plunger and taking our hands off and stepping back - that will make all the difference. Resisting the allure of the game isn't easy. It requires that we delay gratification and take the long view.

Here are two suggestions that may help:

## Set goals that matter

Reflect on what's important to you at the deepest and most meaningful levels. Be specific. Goals that "matter" are those that are typically centered on strengthening relationships, planning for the future, and personal improvement.

## Choose your weekly priorities carefully

Rather than just a to-do list, think about which activities will have the greatest impact on your relationships and the outcomes you care most about. Consider which actions would build trust, make work easier for people, help you be more patient in your dealings with others, or create value for your customers. Think about a weekly calendar as having a finite amount of space and time. And, as everything will not fit, consider the numerous small and urgent tasks as opposed to the few, more valuable and important ones. If we thoughtfully identify and schedule the most important things first (the priorities that require us to act on them rather than react to them), what falls by the wayside are the urgent, less important things. And because they're less important, we won't get derailed if they don't get done right away.

Often urgencies show up as things, but people can pull us into the pinball syndrome as easily as a to-do list. Here are a few strategies that can prevent us from getting sucked into people-created urgencies:

## Block your schedule

Purposely carve out as many blocks of time as you can each week to deal with unplanned events or crises that might surface. If no unexpected crises surface, you'll get the benefit of a few extra minutes to focus on the important, non-urgent things like strategic planning, relationship building, forecasting, crisis-prevention, and raising teenagers.

## Reflect on your day

Look back over the day and ask what worked and what didn't, then make a resolution to handle things better the next day.

## Be ready for drop-ins

Rehearse language to use when people drop in with their issues and urgent requests.

## Practice 7: Think We, Not Me



- **When You Don't Apply Practice 7:**

- You live with the fear that there's "never enough," perhaps resenting others around you when they succeed.
- You achieve short-term "wins" at the expense of genuine, long-term successes.
- People will want to exit *your* room as fast as they can because they don't want to live or work with a martyr.

Do you only see your ability to win or succeed when it comes at the expense of others? Or, do you take care of everyone else at your own expense?

We live in a competitive world — our educational, corporate, sports, and legal systems (just to name a few) encourage and reward us to “one-up” each other, reach the top of the bell curve, land in the upper most percentile, score the most points, or add the definitive “W” to the win column. As human beings, we’ve been conditioned to view the world as having only so much to offer — so we’d better get *ours* while we can.

## The Importance of Mindsets

There are several mindsets when it comes to how we live and work with others. These mindsets are largely driven by two factors:

- The nature of our maturity level
- The amount of courage and consideration we employ when dealing with others

There are three levels of maturity: dependence, independence and interdependence. Dependence comes with the mindset of “you.” *You* are responsible for me, for my feelings and circumstances. It’s your job to take care of me. We all experienced this level of maturity when we came into this world. As infants, we were dependent on our caregivers for everything: food, clothing, shelter and love. There is nothing wrong with being dependent in certain situations. But, dependence represents the lowest level of personal maturity, where we consign our happiness to others or adopt a victim mentality when things go wrong. It often sounds like, *you* let me down, *you* make me so mad, *you* didn’t come through, it’s *your* fault.

Independence, the next level of maturity, comes with the mindset of “I.” Independence sounds like, *I* am the one who can do this; *I* am responsible; *I* will decide what’s best. When we think and act at this level, we move our focus from the people around us to our own strengths and capabilities. While independence is certainly more mature than dependence, there’s something even more satisfying and transformational that happens when independent people choose to work together.

With interdependence we adopt the mindset of “we.” When we think and act interdependently, we make a choice to combine our talents and capabilities with those of others, creating something even greater as a result. Interdependence sounds like, together *we* can do it, together *we* can collaborate, and together *we* can figure this out.

The most effective way to strengthen our relationships and find the “win/win” is by seeing and adopting the mindset of interdependence.

For many of us, we resign ourselves to live with a win-lose mentality. The most effective way to strengthen our relationships and find the “win/win” is by seeing and adopting the mindset of interdependence. If we’re not careful, when we’re in situations that can trigger reactivity, we can drop to independent, or worse, dependent behavior — blaming and accusing others, or holding others responsible for our emotional well-being.

## Courage and Consideration

Those who consistently model interdependence balance courage and consideration when working with others. We define courage as *the willingness and ability to speak our thoughts respectfully*, and consideration as *our willingness and ability to see and listen to others’ thoughts and feelings with respect*. While it’s challenging to maintain a perfect balance of both in every situation, the real watch-out is to make sure you’re not dramatically weighted toward one side or the other. Too much consideration without enough courage can turn you into a “pushover” or “doormat.” Too much courage without consideration can turn you into a bully.

The challenge is to demonstrate high courage and high consideration equally across *all* relationships. Sometimes we're more courageous at home than we are at work, or more considerate with our professional colleagues than we are with our personal relationships. When we strive to balance both equally, we pave the way to interdependence and to mutually beneficial outcomes in all relationships.

How we choose to view and work with others leads to one of four outcomes.

### **Lose/Win (high consideration/low courage)**

- What Lose/Win looks like:
  - I lack courage to express or ask for what I need.
  - I'm often intimidated — I give in easily.
  - I'm motivated by the acceptance by others.
  - I tend to hide my true feelings about things.

### **Lose/Lose (low consideration/low courage)**

- What Lose/Lose looks like:
  - If I'm going to lose, so are you.
  - I'm willing to be hurt, so long as you are too.
  - I give up on what's really important.

### **Win/Lose (high courage/low consideration)**

- What Win/Lose looks like:
  - I use position, power, credentials, possessions, or personality to get my way.
  - I put down others so I look better.
  - I compete rather than collaborate.
  - I'm going to win and you're going to lose.

### **Win/Win (high courage and high consideration)**

- What Win/Win looks like:
  - We work together until we find a solution that benefits both of us.
  - I value your needs and desires equally to my own.
  - I collaborate rather than compete.
  - I balance courage and consideration when communicating.
  - I can disagree respectfully.

There's tremendous power in thinking "we" and not "me." Not only are we more likely to achieve the results we want, but we strengthen relationships along the way.

## Practice 8: Take Stock of Your Emotional Bank Accounts



- **When You Don't Apply Practice 8:**

- You're confused as to why someone doesn't appreciate your attempts to be helpful.
- Recovering from a mistake takes far longer than it should.
- You inadvertently lose the trust of important relationships around you.

Are you at risk of being overdrawn or even bankrupt in any of your relationships?

Most of us pay a good deal of attention to our financial bank accounts — the deposits and withdrawals, the interest and penalties, the opening and closing balances on our statements. The idea is fairly straight forward: we deposit funds in order to build up a reservoir from which our various future expenses are withdrawn. When it comes to our relationships, we engage in similar kinds of transactions, either making deposits or withdrawals.

While there are many similarities between the way a traditional bank account and an Emotional Bank Account (EBA) operates, there are a few key differences worth noting:

- **The goal of the EBA is to only make deposits and build trust with others**
- **EBAs don't allow for automated deposits**
- **High trust, good will, and full engagement are the ultimate outcome of the EBA**

Consider some of the ways we make deposits and withdrawals:

DEPOSIT	WITHDRAWAL
Seek first to understand	Assume you understand
Show kindness, courtesy and respect	Show cruelty, impoliteness and contempt
Keep promises	Break promises, or make no promises at all
Be loyal to the absent	Be untrustworthy and disloyal when people aren't around; badmouth or gossip
Set clear expectations	Create ambiguous expectations or none at all
Apologize	Be remorseless, proud and arrogant
Give feedback	Stay silent or give feedback with bad intent.
Forgive	Hold grudges

Here are six best practices for building a strong, high EBA balance:

1. Never deposit to withdraw: We should never build up deposits so we can withdraw from them when it's useful
2. Know the other person's currency: What amounts to a deposit for one person can be meaningless or even a withdrawal for another.
3. Communicate your own currency: Sometimes it's hard to uncover which current matters most to people - especially if we don't know them well. We can communicate to others the currency we prefer.

4. Avoid counterfeit deposits: Be conscious of your intent and make sincere, genuine and meaningful deposits.
5. Make small, consistent deposits over time: Be deliberate, consistent, and intentional in making on-going deposits that build trust.
6. Right wrongs: Make sincere apologies, quickly.

By applying the six best practices for building Emotional Bank Accounts, we not only begin to develop habits out of the meaningful deposits we make to others, but we build the kind of security and trust that can weather the mistakes of unintentional withdrawals.

## Practice 9: Examine Your Real Motives



- **When You Don't Apply Practice 9:**

- You get hijacked by unconscious behaviors that lead to ineffective outcomes.
- You may think you're fooling others when you're not: your motives speak louder than your words or actions.
- You start to lose sight of your values and who you really want to be.

Are your motives aligned with your values and actions? Do you even know what your underlying motives are?

Motives are the underlying reasons for the actions you take and the words you say. No one can tell you what your motives are. They may try, but you are the only one who can know your real reasons for doing what you do. There are healthy and unhealthy motives.

- **Healthy motive:** any motive that uplifts the human condition, in ourselves and others.
- **Unhealthy motive:** any motive that degrades the human condition, in ourselves and others.

Consider the difference between a healthy motive, to “one-plus-it”(a team is highly motivated by quality, each person is viewed as being able to contribute, to add value, and delivers more than what is expected) versus an unhealthy motive, to “one-up-it” (each person on a team is vying to highlight his or her own contributions – no matter what one person accomplishes, there is a need to highlight one’s own achievements – to ensure that one is always on top).

If we are not careful, our motives can end up being unhealthy: driven by fear, anger or sadness in one moment; and in the next, by an unfulfilled need for acceptance, power, or safety. Too often, we go on auto-pilot, allowing our motives to flow out of our daily routines without checking our underlying assumptions or questioning our choices. But, if we examine our motives on a regular basis, we can begin to understand the difference between a motive driven by insecurity or other unmet needs and a motive that aligns with our deepest values and develops the type of character that contributes to effective relationships.

To help you examine your real motives, try these three things:

1. **Use The 5 Whys.**
2. **Choose abundance.**
3. **Declare your intent.**

## Use the 5 Why's

The 5 Whys came to light in the late 1980's as part of the Toyota Production System for building great automobiles. Part of the system included a just-in-time technique - The 5 Whys. This approach was simple: ask "why" five times to get to the root cause of a problem. In the words of the system's pioneer, Taiichi Ohno, "Observe the production floor without preconceptions... Ask 'why' five times about every matter."<sup>ii</sup>

In borrowing this technique for human relationships, we use it to get to our root intentions, or our driving motives in any situation. While it can take less (or more) than five introspective "why's" to get to our motives, because those motives may be buried under years of habit and have been running on auto-pilot, it often takes asking why more than once. At first, the answer might feel obvious. But, if you approach the exercise honestly and with humility thinking through it will help you understand your true motive.

It takes a lot of courage, humility, and self-awareness to look at ourselves closely and with honesty. If you don't see the value of examining your motives and developing your character, your motives may end up serving your ego instead of serving others. And, when this shift happens, you actually perpetuate the feelings of fear, insecurity and unmet needs.

The intention is not to make you feel guilty about your motives or to shame you for attempting to fill your unmet needs. The intention is to help you become more aware of any unhealthy motives so that you can choose to redirect them toward healthier, more abundant motives. When you realize that your motives are driven by something other than to *uplift the human condition*, in ourselves and others, be patient with the part of you that's trying to get what it needs. But also recognize, that another part of you can choose a different motive. Once we identify an unhealthy motive, how do we move to a healthier one? Try choosing abundance.

## Choose Abundance

Many of us are conditioned to believe that there's a finite amount of everything — that there's only so much reward, credit, recognition, benefits, or even love. And because of that, "the more *you* get means there's less for *me*." It comes from the following beliefs: "I am threatened by the success of others—especially those closest to me, I treat people with varying degrees of respect, based on position or status, I have a difficult time sharing recognition or credit, and I find my sense of self-worth from being compared to others or from competition." These beliefs create a scarcity mindset, which produces an underlying motive of fear. With a fearful world view, it's difficult to shift the focus off of ourselves and take the needs of others into consideration.

An abundance mindset, however, is the primary foundation for establishing ongoing healthy motives. It comes from the following beliefs: "there is plenty out there for everyone, I'm happy for the success of others, I treat everyone with equal respect, I find it easy to share recognition or credit, I have a deep inner sense of personal worth and security." As you build this authentic, sincere, and positive outlook, it will be a key contributor in influencing for good the people around you.

## Declare Intent

Intent is another word for motive. Stephen M. R. Covey, the bestselling author of *The Speed of Trust*, said, “Declare your intent. Express your agenda and motives. Then be true to your intent.” Declaring your motives is one of the core behaviors that builds trust.

While we judge ourselves largely on our intentions, others judge us by our behavior. Only you know your real motive. But sometimes, if we don’t communicate it early on, we end up putting others in the position of assuming or guessing — like a person changing lanes without signaling. You can easily put others at ease (and avoid a lot of misunderstanding) when you declare your intent as often as you can.

Declaring intent serves several purposes:

- It provides a safe environment for a relationship to thrive, allowing the other person to respond to what’s really going on, rather than having to guess and get suspicious of what’s happening beneath the surface.
- It create transparency and stability. If left unspoken, your motive is more likely to shift when a high emotion is present or when a circumstance might tempt you to change directions.
- It can anchor everyone involved in the motive so that people are operating on the same page. It lets people know what to look for, to recognize, understand and acknowledge.

Without stopping to examine the motives which have largely gone on auto-pilot and have been buried under the routines and unconscious habits of our daily lives — we can’t become intentional about transforming them into healthy ones.

## Practice 10: Talk Less, Listen More



- **When You Don’t Apply Practice 10:**

- You rarely get to the heart of an issue, if at all.
- You lose the opportunity to be influenced by others, and in turn, have greater influence yourself.
- You alienate people who might otherwise respect and confide in you.

Do you listen to others with the intent to reply or to understand?

In the rush to solve problems and get things done, there’s a natural tendency for all of us to simply *tell*. And we’re quite good at it. Think of the great communication classes you may have had over the years. While called “communication,” they were all about how to *deliver* or *present* a message. I challenge you to find one that was about how to effectively *listen*.

Making quick decisions and judgement calls will often lead to misdiagnosed solutions, faulty assumptions, narrow perspectives, and misunderstood facts. As a result, we deprive others of the opportunity to solve problems on their own.

Think about a time when you felt misunderstood by someone. How did it make you feel? Maybe you got defensive and vented your anger and frustration? Or maybe you felt intimidated or shut down, perhaps committing never to open up to that person again? Regardless of the response, each time we feel misunderstood (not truly heard) by someone important to us, we can feel disrespected and hurt. We may even experience an unintentional breach of trust—as if an essential part of the relationship bond was chipped away.

One of the most profound gifts you can give to another human being is your sincere understanding. To do so requires clearing away your mental clutter, suspending (at least

temporarily) your agenda, and stopping long enough to focus and hear what someone is really saying. When it comes to creating effective relationships, *with people fast is slow and slow is fast*. An attentive, unbiased, listening ear gives people the rare opportunity to feel understood—a gift some psychologists argue we need as much as the air we breathe. Being truly present provides a safe environment in which people can learn to listen to themselves, to assess their own behavior, diagnose their own problems, and come up with their own solutions.

## Reasons We Don't Talk Less and Listen More

1. We're trained to talk more: We take all sorts of classes to become better communicators, speakers, or more persuasive negotiators. But we rarely take classes on how to listen.
2. We're fixers by nature: Most of us want to jump to a solution as soon as possible. And not with malicious intent; we just want to help. We tend to acknowledge the "fixers" as those worthy of praise.
3. The world is in a hurry: In today's world, we live in a *sound-bite* society. Information is coming at us 24/7. All of our communication styles have developed into "how fast we can communicate." And, it's become almost commonplace to see how fast we can interrupt each other.
4. We want to be right: Stephen Covey said, "If you're like most people, you want to seek first to be understood; you want to get your point across. And in doing so, you may ignore the other person completely, pretend that you're listening, selectively hear only certain parts of the conversation, or attentively focus on only the words being said, but miss the meaning entirely. Most people listen with the intent to reply, not to understand."

Many of these reasons can be summed up as "autobiographical listening." Simply put, everything you think and say comes from your point of view. You listen to yourself (your own story) while others are talking, preparing in your mind what you want to say or what you want to ask. You filter everything you hear through your own experiences. And then, you check what you hear against your own story to see how it compares. When you engage in autobiographical listening, you end up deciding prematurely what people mean before they finish talking – which can create huge communication divides.

Autobiographical listening can lead to giving people advice before they've asked for it, and to asking too many questions, not to get more understanding on an issue, but to satisfy personal curiosity.

Unfortunately, when we filter what others say through our own stories and experiences, we draw conclusions based on what we might do or feel in the same situation. Or worse, because we might be uncomfortable with the situation, we prescribe a solution that makes *us* feel better. We're often afraid that if we listen too closely, we may be influenced and not get our way. While it's natural to do so, jumping to conclusions or replying too soon with advice can make people feel like we are judging or evaluating them – certainly not listening to them. It can also make people "dig in their heels" even more, investing in their own point of view, and being less open to looking at other alternatives.

## How to Talk Less and Listen More

It's important to note that while there are several skills to listening well, none of them are as important as having the right attitude while listening. If you're good at the skill but aren't sincerely

interested in understanding the other person, you'll fail. In contrast, if you don't get the skill right, but your intentions are sincere, people will feel your genuine concern and often give you the benefit of the doubt.

Talking less and listening more is not the same as agreeing with people. You may ultimately disagree with what a person is saying or feeling, but while you're listening, you're not imposing your views on the person. You're not trying to figure out how to get them to see it your way. Instead, you're suspending your opinions long enough to really step into their world and try to understand it from their point of view. This approach sounds simple, but it's one of the most difficult mindsets to master—especially if you're diametrically opposed to that person's point of view, or if you're emotionally involved. It takes an incredibly mature person to master this skill.

There are appropriate times to talk *more* and listen *less*. Often, it's necessary to give advice and provide clear answers and direction to get the job done. But there are times when it's also vital to do the opposite. When a person is highly-emotional, or when the Emotional Bank Account balance is low, or you're not sure you fully understand, you'll almost always benefit from talking less. By carefully listening and understanding first, before you advise or give solutions, you are in a much better position to grasp the real issues. Once you accurately address the situation, as well as the person's feelings, they'll feel more respected and trust will grow.

Once you have the attitude of really listening, it's time to apply the skill. It's counter-intuitive, yet ridiculously simple. Essentially, it's the ability to reflect back to someone what they are saying and what they are feeling. But, when it's done earnestly and authentically, it creates magic: it brings the speaker to a greater awareness of what he or she is feeling; it brings the listener into a rare state of empathy, and it creates a trust and rapport in the relationship that can't be matched.

When we are mature and confident enough to set aside our own agenda long enough to get into the hearts and minds of those important to us, we not only get to solutions quicker, but we offer them our best selves.

## Practice 11: Get Your Volume Right



- **When You Don't Apply Practice 11:**

- You're not sure why people respond negatively to your strengths, and it shakes your confidence.
- People misinterpret your intentions because they can't see past the noise, and then they start to avoid you.
- Strengths "overkill" may limit your career and credibility.

Have you ever had one of your "go to" strengths stop working for you?

We all have natural strengths. In defining strengths generally, the Oxford dictionary uses descriptors such as influence, power, intensity, and potency. Utilizing and nurturing our unique bundle of strengths is a fundamental part of who we are. Whether as talents we were born with or skills we developed over time, our strengths are often our "go to" way for getting things done. They've become so engrained in our behavior, we often don't think about how we're using them or the impact they're having on others.

## The Right Volume

Think of your strengths like the knob on an amplifier. As you turn it to a higher setting, you're rewarded with more volume. The tendency to continually raise the volume happens so regularly, that many audio devices come with warnings to let you know you might be putting your hearing at risk. It seems odd, doesn't it, that we could be raising the volume to such a degree that we don't realize it's doing us harm?

Our strengths often function in the same way. We grow accustomed to using them at a certain level. Then, without even realizing it, we often rely on those strengths even more. We turn the knob bit by bit, and unknowingly, make it less likely to achieve the results we really want. And worst of all, we run the risk of damaging relationships along the way.

No one dials up the volume of their strengths with the intention of a bad outcome. Yet, it happens. If the volume of our strengths is set too high, turning it down can often make our strengths more effective.

We may be unwittingly encouraging people to dial up their strengths. Many of the tools used to measure strengths send mixed messages regarding this point. Consider the numerous 360-degree surveys that rank strengths and propose that the higher you score, the better you're doing. It seems like a reasonable premise on the surface, but researchers Bob Kaplan and Rob Kaiser found a problem. "Such tools overlook a key lesson from decades of research on derailment: more is not always better, and executives lose their jobs when their strengths become weaknesses through overuse."<sup>iii</sup> Be suspicious of any strengths-measuring instrument that has an inherent premise that more is better.

## The Right Venue.

In keeping with the analogy, we should also consider the venue in which we're performing. That is, sometimes getting the volume right means choosing another go-to strength or recognize that "venue" or situation is calling for a different strength altogether — one that may not be as natural to you and may need to be developed.

We have many venues in our lives, not the least of which is moving from work to home. We should be especially careful that the strengths that serve us in our career are not assumed to be the same ones needed by our families and significant others and vice versa. An important part of getting the volume "right" isn't just about turning our strengths down when necessary, but making sure we have the right strength applied at the right time and in the right situation.

## Practice 12: Extend Trust



- **When You Don't Apply Practice 12:**

- You lose the passion and engagement of others.
- You're convinced you need to micromanage everything, and therefore, lose valuable time.
- You limit possibilities and minimize opportunities for great relationships at work and home.

Are you more inclined to initially distrust others than to trust them?

Trust is the ultimate outcome of investing in others. And, high character and competence are essential for realizing trust. Simply put, when it comes to relationships, trust matters. In fact, it's essential. This practice is not only about trust being a *belief* in someone, it's also about putting that belief into *action*. Trust, to be fully realized, must be extended to others.

If you chart trust as a continuum, on one extreme is distrust and suspicion. On the other side is blind trust and gullibility.

While occasionally, some of us teeter on either extreme, most of us land somewhere in the middle.

The majority of relationship snags that occur are rarely caused by people trusting too much; they're caused by people trusting too little. Many factors contribute to people being distrustful of others. We may have learned to be suspicious because of our family of origin. Maybe our cultural and social conditioning gave us reasons to mistrust. Certainly, what we read or watch can breed more fear than trust, and can work to shut down a natural trusting heart. The most common reasons we mistrust is because of past negative experiences. It's usually life's emotional-trip-ups that cause us to withhold our trust.

## **The Consequences of Not Extending Trust**

Perhaps you've been burned in a previous job by a boss or business partner, or had a terrible experience in a past relationship. Or maybe you just get overwhelmed by the constant stories in the news about the corruption across the globe. Regardless of the reason, once we develop a suspicious worldview (especially one that originated in a strong emotional experience), we tend to look at everything through that lens. If someone has burned us in the past, it's easy to jump to the conclusion that no one should be trusted. It can negatively color our perceptions when we meet someone new, and if the propensity *not* to trust runs deep, it may justify our ongoing disassociation and mistrust of them and their motives. Of course, maintaining an element of caution is vital to living safely and securely—living at either end of the trust continuum can make life difficult for ourselves and those around us.

## **How to Extend Trust**

The best approach is always to start with a high propensity to trust, then follow it up with three quick assessments.

### **Assess the situation:**

First, identify and consider what you're trusting the person to do: to deliver a weekly report to you on time? To win an important legal case? To sell software? To build a rocket? To honor and cherish you until "death do you part?"

### **Assess the risk:**

Second, assess the potential risks: What happens if the person to whom you've extended trust fails, underperforms, gives up, gets distracted, or missteps? Are the stakes for failure high, or can you tolerate a learning curve? Be realistic and objective.

### **Assess the credibility:**

Finally, assess the character and competence of the person to whom you're extending trust. Do you trust them to be honest and follow through (character)? Do they have the experience or skillset necessary for the task at hand (competence)? If not, do they have the discipline and drive to grow into it?

Once you've made the three assessments, you can determine where your trust should fall on the trust continuum:

- If the risk is relatively low and the credibility of the person is high, by all means, extend trust

- If the risk is high and the credibility is low, you may need to slow down the process, modify your plan, and work with the person to increase his/her skills before you extend trust. In some cases, even when the credibility is solid, the risk may be too high to immediately extend trust.

## What to Do If Someone Won't Extend Trust to You?

Sometimes, no matter how hard you try, you can't prove yourself to someone who withholds trust. While you can't change someone's propensity to trust or distrust, you can certainly influence it. You can invite them to extend trust by proactively working to increase your own credibility.

Sometimes earning trust takes a dogged determination to prove your credibility one small step at a time. If you find yourself in such a situation, don't be afraid to schedule a conversation with the individual from whom you need the trust.

## Practice 13: Make it Safe to Tell the Truth



- **When You Don't Apply Practice 14:**

- You're unaware of what you don't know—likely missing key insights about your impact on others and the chance to change it, if necessary.
- You have less rapport with others, missing out on deep and trusted relationships.
- You not only discover that the emperor has no clothes, but the emperor could be you.

When was the last time you received feedback from someone?

Why do we resist feedback? Why don't we have the courage to ask for it in the first place? For most of us, setting ourselves up to receive what we see as criticism is unpleasant at best, and confidence deflating at worst. So, we choose not to create opportunities for what we assume will be negative feedback from others. We all know how hard it is to give ourselves feedback, but it can be overwhelming, even paralyzing, to get it from someone else. As humans, we are vulnerable. It's the very thing that makes us human. Feedback from others — whether it's 100 percent accurate or not — brings to the surface what we don't want to admit — that each of us is a work in progress in at least some areas.

If we see feedback as something useful that can support our process of getting better, perhaps we won't be so threatened by it. Granted, not all feedback is given with the intent to support or help us—we need to be discerning about the feedback we allow in. The best type of feedback has the goal or intent of fostering our growth. Knowing how to receive feedback and when to invite it in, or respectfully

Can you remember the last time you received feedback? Do you recall the last time you actually asked someone for it? If you recognize that you might *not* be making it safe for others to tell you the truth, let me offer four ways to make it safer:

### 1. Assume Good Intent

While you can't guarantee that everyone has your best interest in mind, you're far more likely to generate good will and build trust if you assume they do. When you assume good intent, you

choose to believe people are doing the best they can (most people are), and that they sincerely want you to succeed. When you show up with an open heart, you send a signal that says, “You’re safe to share.”

## **2. Ask for Feedback**

Assuming good intent makes it safer for you to value others’ perspectives. It also gives you more confidence to seek feedback. Successful businesses and organizations do this step frequently. Consider how many times you get an email, text, or survey requesting feedback after staying at a hotel or purchasing a product or service. Imagine if, as individuals, we had our own customer service department that followed up and surveyed those we interacted with on a daily basis.

Recognize that how we ask for feedback can shape the feedback itself and how others choose to give it. One way to discourage people from giving you feedback is surprising them with a request. Let the person know beforehand that you’ll be asking for feedback later, especially if it’s the first time you’ve asked for feedback.

Another way we make it unsafe for others to give feedback is to become defensive when it’s given (anger, excuses, justification), etc.). While each of us needs to choose what feedback to pay attention to and what to ignore, we must recognize that rejecting feedback can come at a cost.

Deflecting feedback is another way to make it unsafe for others to give feedback. It is another version of defending or justifying. If you defend yourself or deflect while someone is giving you feedback, you are sending the signal that you’re not really interested in feedback at all. If you ask for feedback in a way that invites only positive feedback (manipulating someone to say only what you want to hear) you’re probably not making it safe either.

Continually seeking feedback to validate your self-worth isn’t the goal. As others pick up on this need they will either shy away from offering feedback or be disingenuous because the cost of being truthful is simply too high. In either case, getting defensive or continually seeking validation, you’re not likely to get better.

Sharing feedback isn’t always easy, so when people provide it, it’s important that we always thank them. As we put our ego aside mitigating the need to be right, we allow our self-confidence to strengthen and our capacities to grow. Thanking them sends a signal that we welcome and will continue to look forward to feedback.

## **3. Evaluate the Feedback**

If we never make it safe for others to tell us the truth, not only will we never improve, but we will never get better at deepening our relationships. That doesn’t mean we need to act on every piece of feedback that comes our way. It’s critical to be clear about the values we stand for, and have a long-term vision of who we want to become so that we are prepared to compare someone’s “truth” against what we feel and know is most true for us.

We all have moments of insecurity and self-doubt – and getting feedback can shake even the most confident person. Have a little patience with yourself and be gentle when you feel yourself retreating or wanting to fight back. Remember, in addition to sincerely seeking and evaluating feedback, you can also help people know how to give you feedback.

And sometimes, feedback is not about you. Realize that some feedback – especially when given in angry, reactive ways – is not someone telling the “truth” – but rather, is someone simply

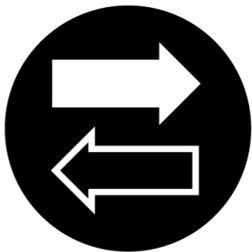
having a bad day and taking it out on you. No one needs to accept verbal abuse disguised as feedback. If someone is angry and harsh with their feedback, you may want to suggest they take a few moments (or hours or days), and return when they aren't feeling so charged.

#### 4. Act on It

It doesn't do any good to ask for feedback if you have no intention of acting on it. While we don't need to implement every piece of feedback, not acting on feedback — or not explaining why we aren't going to act on it — is worse than not asking for it in the first place. While people may *start to feel* safe when you ask them for feedback, they will *know they are safe* when they see you take their feedback seriously. You help them feel safe by writing the feedback down, demonstrating you are seriously considering what they've shared, and by letting them know how you plan to implement what you've learned.

But more often than not, implementing feedback takes time. The most entrenched problems we face require a concerted effort to remedy them. Even though feedback might feel like a momentary failure, receive it graciously. And understand that any meaningful change doesn't happen overnight.

#### Practice 14: Align Inputs with Outputs



- **When You Don't Apply Practice 14:**

- Regardless of how hard you work, your results stay the same — or get worse.
- You begin to doubt and second-guess yourself.
- You see others pass you by.

Do you find yourself unable to consistently get or replicate your desired results?

If you happened to be perusing a system's theory textbook on the topic of inputs and outputs (and who wouldn't be?), you'd read that an input is what you put into a system to fuel a process, and an output is the result you obtain.

We can refer to outputs as lag measures, or the metrics by which we decide if something is successful. Lag measures show up at the end of a process — by the time they're visible, our ability to influence them has passed. We can get frustrated by them, depressed over them, and even angry at them, but lag measures couldn't care less.

Lead measures are the actions we take that add up to a lag measure. While many inputs might contribute to the desired output, identifying the right input can make all the difference.

Here is a five-step process we can all employ:

1. Describe the output you want.
2. Assess the current reality.
3. Examine the inputs.
4. Pick the "lead measure" inputs you think will most likely achieve the desired output.
5. Analyze the result.

While there are countless inputs that contribute to our relationships, the 15 practices in this book are foundational and of the highest leverage. Implementing even one can be pivotal to repairing a ruptured relationship, restoring trust, and strengthening an even already solid relationship.

Whenever we experience results we're not happy with, there's a strong chance that we've misaligned the inputs and outputs.

## Practice 15: Start with Humility



- **When You Don't Apply Practice 15:**

- Your ego keeps you continuously looking for external validation that never satisfies.
- You're the topic of side conversations (and not in a good way).
- You miss opportunities to learn because you rarely listen to anybody but yourself.

Has your lack of humility ever held you back from getting better—would you even know if it had?

Above all other character qualities, humility is foundational. It's like salt — it brings out the best flavor of each character quality required for creating effective relationships. Humility enables courage and points wisdom in the right direction.

Those who are humble have a secure sense of self — their validation doesn't come from something external, but is based on their true nature. To be humble means to shed one's ego, because the authentic self is much greater than looking good, needing to have all the answers, or being recognized by one's peers. As a result, those who have cultivated humility as an attribute have far greater energy to devote to others. They go from being consumed with themselves (an inner focus) to looking for ways to contribute and help others (an outer focus). Humility has the power to influence nearly every aspect of your personality. It is the key to building solid character and strong, meaningful connections.

Humility is far from weakness. It allows us to push aside pride, ego, and selfishness, while lifting nearly every other important virtue to greater heights.

Although this is the last chapter of the book, it's titled *Start with Humility* because every practice illustrated here benefits from obtaining, cultivating, and being mindful of this foundational attribute. And while starting with humility is key, revisiting and recalibrating your humility on a regular basis is equally important. It should accompany every practice, every paradigm, and every moment of thoughtful introspection designed to strengthen our relationships.

Jean-Paul Sartre's play, *No Exit*, is a persistent metaphor and reminder that at the essence of feeling like we're stuck in hell (or conversely paradise) is our relationships with the people around us. When things become difficult, our tendency as human beings is to find a way out—to head for the exit and move to another room. That might take the form of changing jobs, abandoning associations, or even dissolving marriages and long-standing family ties. These endless "exit strategies" imply that we see external forces (other people and circumstances) as the source of our problems and means of escape. Yet, we all have the ability to take the focus off of the things outside of us (the room and those who occupy it) and move it inward. This internal focus or self-reflection starts with humility. It's the way we begin to *Get Better* and strengthen each and every relationship we have.

As Sartre wrote, “relationships can feel like hell.” But, if we incorporate these 15 practices into our lives, relationships can feel like paradise as well. And, when it comes to how we spend our brief time on this planet, what can be better than that?

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<sup>i</sup> Kuhn, Thomas S. (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>ii</sup> [http://www.toyota-global.com/company/toyota\\_traditions/quality/mar\\_apr\\_2006.html](http://www.toyota-global.com/company/toyota_traditions/quality/mar_apr_2006.html)

<sup>iii</sup> <https://hbr.org/2009/02/stop-overdoing-your-strengths>