

Bridgewell Partners
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Becoming a relationship-building master

You can systematically build strong relationships (e.g., with prospects, clients or customers).

Relationships will develop when you:

- Commit to the success and well-being of the other person
- Consciously move the relationship forward
- Acknowledge and respond to the inevitable barriers to forward progress

You can do all this unilaterally and succeed – you can cause the cooperation of the other person!!

Begin by committing to the success and well-being of the other person

It's not a matter of chemistry. You don't have to like the person. Rather, you have to decide, as a professional, to use your talents and resources to help them achieve their goals. Your commitment drives you to learn as much as you can about them and about how best to work with them.

To enable the other person to succeed and grow, you need:

- **Patience** – Because relationship-building takes time. It does not proceed linearly, but rather with growth spurts and plateaus, and even temporary backsliding.
- **Honesty** – You need to see your client/prospect and yourself as you are – both the good and the not so good. Reality is your friend.
- **Trust** – You need to trust your commitments, and not worry all the time about the outcomes. It is like the old adage about growing a tree. It needs to be watered and fertilized regularly, but checking its growth every day isn't helpful. Progress is occurring, even if the observable data isn't always clear on that point.
- **Hope** – Your attitudes shape (to some degree) what will happen. Your optimism and positive energy will draw out the other's optimism and positiveness. Negative energy doesn't help.
- **Courage** – You are sailing into challenging and exciting waters. Your work with your client will lead each of you to big changes.

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You cannot anticipate how they will change or how you will change as you work together – and that’s a wonderful thing!!

You may also need to think “bigger” than your client does. As your client’s relationship partner, you have an obligation to help him raise his sights and think about what he could do and could be; you cannot be limited by his own conception of himself. At the same time though, you must “start from where the other person is,” and accept that the other person understands some parts of his reality that you don’t. Many people, though, limit their aspirations, and you can help them grow those dreams.

You might think that you need to have something pre-existing in common with another person in order to build a relationship. It helps, you may think, if you are from the same ethnic group. Or if you were both in the U.S. Marines at one time, or both like fishing or playing the guitar. Such similarity can help make it easier to get started, since it seems to imply shared values (although the values may not really be shared). Such similarity can make it easier to find shared metaphors with which to communicate; for example, if you both like hunting you can describe situations in terms of things that happen during hunting and have a decent chance of being understood.

In any case, you and the person you are hoping to form a relationship with **will have something in common the minute you make your commitment to their success.** Most people are interested in succeeding, so when you commit to another person’s success you are also creating an immediate shared interest.

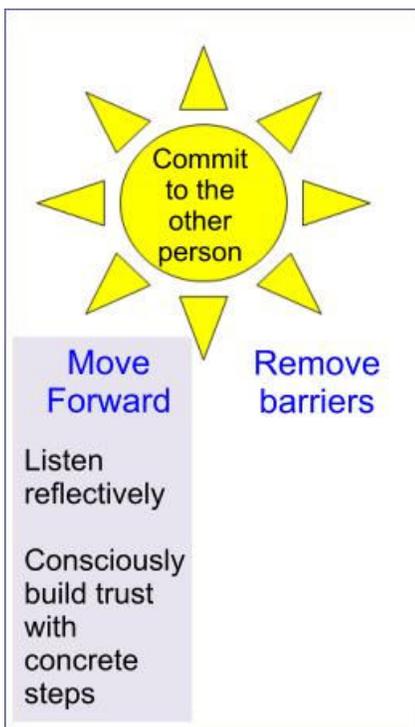
Systematically move the relationship forward

The two key tools are reflective listening and concrete trust-building actions.

Reflective listening

Reflective listening means listening to understand the other person, their environment, and the implications for them of what they say. It also includes observing their (perhaps unconscious) relationship preferences – how they interact with you, and what brings them closer or drives them away. And it includes reflecting back what you have heard; this reflection lets them clarify anything you didn't hear correctly and lets them experience your commitment to hearing them fully.

Reflective listeners pay attention to both the content of a conversation and the relationship dynamics that are exhibited in that conversation.



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Reflective listening

Listen for:

- Content
- Relationship dynamics

Reflect back:

- What you hear
- Its implications

Reflective listeners reflect in two ways:

- They think deeply about what they are observing
- They “reflect back” what they have heard to verify they have heard correctly and to ask for correction or adjustment.

Content of the conversation is important

When you listen to the content of the conversation, you are of course listening for what the other person is saying. But you also listen for:

- What you are surprised to hear. If you have thought of your questions and their likely answers ahead of time, you increase your chances of noting when you should be surprised. You can then probe more deeply – “I’d have thought you would say ‘A’ here, but you said ‘B.’ Can you tell me more about your thinking?”
- What you don’t fully understand. These are also important areas to probe fully.
- What they are not saying. What subjects don’t they bring up, that you expect or might have expected to hear about? What opportunities to say something do they pass up?

This deeper listening will help you understand better what the person is trying to communicate. You can go farther though, by listening to understand what the other person is meaning, and the implications of that meaning for that person. You are trying to see the world through their eyes (this is what is commonly called empathy).

At that point, if you are a very committed and capable listener, you can try to simultaneously see the world through their eyes and your own eyes. You know what you know and see what the other person sees, so you can help them. (This goes beyond empathy and requires you to see the world from two perspectives at the same time – and is the kind of listening reflective listeners strive for).

Relationship dynamics are assessed too

You also listen for and observe the relationship dynamics in each interaction.

- Observe their body language. Are there arms crossed? Are they in open positions towards you, or closed? Are they mirroring your movements, a sign of agreement?
- What is the pattern of their interactions – how do they interact with you, what brings them closer, or makes them retreat? What opens them up, or shuts them down?

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Concrete trust-building

Valuable for:

- The other person (at work), or
- The other person (outside work), or
- Someone they care about

Something you can do

No cost or obligation for them

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Reflecting back what you hear

As you listen, try to reflect back, in a paraphrase, what they said. Even more, try to express the implications of what you have heard. They then have a chance to correct what you heard, so they can let you know what they meant. If you get their statements and the implications right, then you have truly understood their perspective.

The benefits are great

The benefits of reflective listening are great.

- First, you learn a lot about the situation the other person faces and their attitude about it. This can only be helpful as you try to help them.
- Second, you learn what the other person is actually trying to communicate – you discover that it's not what they first say, but what they accept as correct when you reflect it back to them.
- Third, trust is built. The other person senses that you can truly hear his or her issues. They have an experience that conveys that you are interested in knowing them and what matters to them.

Concrete trust-building

Concrete trust-building steps are actions you take that are valuable for the other person and which have no immediate benefit for you. These steps demonstrate your commitment to their success. Your actions are based on:

- *Your unique situation*, i.e., who you are, and what and who you know, and
- *Their unique situation* (which you have learned about by listening).

You will typically choose concrete trust-building actions that are easy for you because of who you are, and are quite valuable for the other person. Concrete trust-building actions are always free-of-charge, to demonstrate your commitment.

You can provide many kinds of help. Particularly useful for relationship-building are actions that are easy (and inexpensive) for you to do, and very valuable for the other person. You can develop your own catalog of such actions. Some examples might include:

Trust-building actions that help someone with their work, e.g.,

- Bringing them a customer
- Introducing them to someone they should know because that person can help them solve a problem or find and capture an oppor-

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tunity

- Sending them some valuable information, e.g., emailing them an article that would be valuable to them or telling them something you have learned about their market or about their competition that would be useful to them.
- Sending them talented potential employees
- Reading a draft of a speech or presentation they are going to give
- Suggesting a book for them to read that would be helpful to them in their business (and offering to discuss it with them when they are finished)
- Helping them with an unrelated issue (not your professional expertise but something you know about) e.g., how to use a software program or piece of electronics, that will make it much easier for them to achieve their goal
- Just listening to them. Being a sounding board for their discussion (out loud) about a problem that is outside your professional expertise but where attentive listening would be very helpful
- Diving in at a time of crisis and being available (at no charge) to do whatever needs getting done.

Other trust inspiring actions involve them personally outside of work, e.g.,

- Supporting a charity that you believe in and that they support
- Suggesting a good book for them to read
- Making referrals for them if they need help with other personal matters (e.g., medical)
- Sponsoring them for entrance into organizations they'd like to join, e.g., private clubs

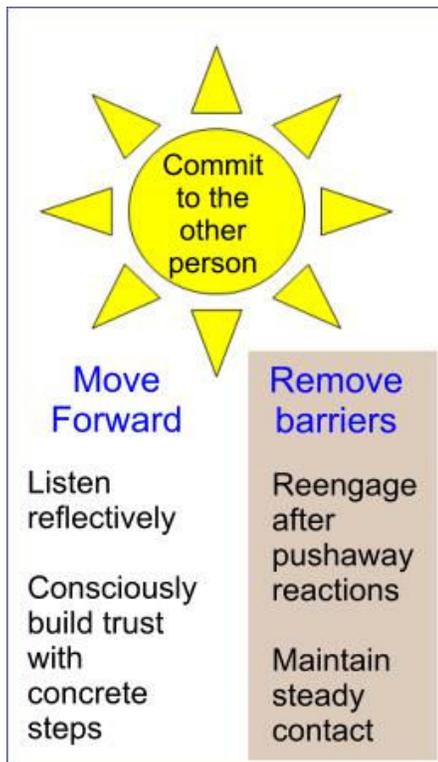
You can also help them by **helping people in their family or whom they know and care about**. Examples include:

- Assisting a member of their family with learning about or getting into a school
- Helping someone in their family find a job
- Providing information that would be helpful for their children or others in their family

Building trust through specific acts is so special because the precise thing you do – the value you deliver in these acts – is something that only you, by virtue of history and circumstance, can do. Others might offer something else, but only you have the combination of background, experience, and connections to make your specific offer. It can only come from you.

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So each action demonstrates both your value to the other person and your commitment to them (because it is offered with no charge and no obligation).

Long and productive relationships have been built on even single acts of trust-building, and great relationships have been started with a timely favor. The sooner you are willing to help, the sooner they will be willing to trust.

Acknowledge and deal with inevitable relationship barriers

Your prospect and client relationships should keep getting better and better, but they probably don't. Handling plateaus or backsliding in relationships is hard for most professionals. Accepting stagnation or deterioration, as many professionals do, can cause you to unnecessarily lose a client or prospect. Responding correctly to a relationship challenge can make the relationship better than ever. But to handle the challenge you must understand what is going on.

Pushaway reactions are often an unseen barrier

Virtually every relationship is challenged by the participants' ambivalence about relationships. Most people like close relationships, but also find them threatening. If you listen and concretely build trust, you will often make great progress. But sometimes you will not get the response you expect. Rather than moving closer, your relationship partner will move away. This "pushaway reaction" could come in many forms, such as a snide comment, a hostile or distancing behavior (such as showing up late for meetings), or even a complete cut-off of communication. You can learn how to minimize these pushaways, diagnose those that occur, and respond in ways that ultimately leave the relationship even stronger than it was.

Relationship challenges come in all sizes. They can be as small as a somewhat nasty comment by the prospect or client at a meeting. They can be as big as a client or prospect suddenly not returning any of your calls or emails. They can be someone saying "the price is too high" or "I'll have to think about that before I decide." Often, the relationship challenge is just a lack of forward movement. When there is a plateau or setback, you must diagnose. Is the cause:

- A service failure? Relationships falter when you don't meet client expectations (and you may not know all those expectations). Most

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Diagnosing relationship setbacks (or plateaus)

Assess cause:

- Service failure?
- Business mismatch?
- Pushaway?

Respond appropriately

professionals don't mess up their core work, but many fail on what they view as "little things." You might have been late, for example, with some work or to a meeting, or you or a colleague might have messed up some logistical arrangements, causing the client some grief.

- An underlying mismatch between what you offer and what they need? Maybe the client doesn't need what you offer, at the price you charge. They might, for good reasons, be looking for a set of skills that you don't have or for a very different level of service or quality than you provide. Many professionals incorrectly assume that all client or prospect problems are based on a business mismatch.
- A normal, common but counterintuitive reaction by the other person to a relationship that is going very well? Most people are ambivalent about a strong, close relationship in which they are listened to, respected, and responded to. Although such treatment is attractive, it is also very unfamiliar and profoundly unnerving to most people. If they are ambivalent, the other person will, at some point, push you away (or in an opposite move with the same result, they will withdraw from you). Pushaway responses aim, unconsciously, at derailing a growing relationship. Pushaways cause most relationships to develop as "two steps forward, and one step back."

If you've been consciously and steadily building the relationship, then you can usually safely assume it's a pushaway whenever you can't either identify a service failure (try asking!!) or a business mismatch the other person can explain to your satisfaction. A good way to diagnose is to simply say, "it sounds like you are concerned; tell me more about it," and then listen.

If you're facing a service failure, then apologize, fix the problem, and explain how you will make sure it will never happen again.

If the problem is an underlying mismatch, then stop working on (or pursuing work on) that business – you are not, in fact, the right person for the job. Instead, concentrate on helping your client/prospect get the right resources to meet their needs. For example, you can refer them to another professional or organization.

If you are facing a pushaway, first acknowledge the content of the pushaway (so the person is certain they've been heard) and then focus on re-establishing the relationship connection that previously existed (and that still exists, once the pushaway is ignored). To do this, first remind yourself of your motive with respect to them – to help them reach their goals and be successful. This step enables you to recover the relationship con-

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Responding to pushaways

Reflect back the content (so they know you heard)

Respond to the reaction

- Refocus yourself on your commitment to them
- Reengage in the relationship
- **Don't** respond to the content of what they've said

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nection, which is necessary if they are going to recover it too. Then, try one of several approaches:

- Restate your motive with respect to them: say you are interested in helping them reach their goals and be successful. Your statement – if it has been demonstrated in the past by your reflective listening and your actions – will help reestablish the connection that just got lost.
- Say something positive – tell them something you genuinely like about them. For example, refer to something they said earlier that impressed you, or something you have admired about their approach to business.
- Go back to a spot in the discussion where things were on track, and go deeper into that point. That will help you get back on the path – together.
- Take a break – start up again in five minutes. Think about rejoining in a different place. (The walk to the soda or coffee machine is a good time to reestablish the relationship, with perhaps a comment about something that you have done, or will do together).

What you don't need to do (and shouldn't usually do) with a pushaway is respond to the content of what they said. Whatever – usually negative – thing they said (or how they acted) isn't really the issue. The issue is the status and quality of your relationship with them. That's what needs attention when there's a pushaway reaction.

When you successfully steer someone back from a pushaway, you help them rejoin a relationship that is valuable for them. They have tried to shoot themselves in the foot by alienating you, and you have prevented the self-inflicted foot wound by not being driven off so easily. If they can see clearly (and sometimes they can) they'll see that you stuck around to help them even when they weren't being helpful to their own cause. And that's unusual and extremely valuable.

Stay in touch

Staying in touch is vital to relationship-building.

Staying in touch maintains a connection you've established. Nurturing that connection shows your prospect you are interested in them and in maintaining a relationship with them. It provides value to them and lets you keep up with what's on their mind. Staying in touch is also valuable for minimizing the damage from a pushaway reaction that happens when you are not around. Because you are on a regular cycle of staying in touch, you can initiate a reengagement when the other person perhaps

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Maintain steady contact

- Appropriate tactics
- Right frequency



- Demonstrates commitment
- Minimizes damage from pushaways that occur when you are not around

would not.

A great way to facilitate staying in touch with people is ending every interaction with something for each of you to do – as a commitment to each other. Perhaps you'll each collect different information and then plan to share it. Or one will do something with the plan to share it with the other. By ending with something for everyone to do next – the more actively the better – you provide a reason that keeps the conversation going.

Your strategy for staying in touch should ensure that you provide value at the right frequency.

Provide value

All of your contacts should be valuable to the other person. Here are some ideas.

- Call and have a “warm call” conversation with them; listening to them and providing value in response to their needs is a great “stay in touch” move.
- Write something relevant and send it to them
- Send them what other people have written. You can forward things you've seen that you think they'd find valuable.
- Go for breakfast or lunch. You can have a relaxed interchange that doesn't feel like business. You can listen to them and be helpful to them.
- Invite them to an event where they'll meet other people they'd like to meet.
- If they blog or participate in social media, participate with them. Your comment on their blog means you are listening to them and responding.

Feel free to repeat your motive –“I'm contacting you so that I can stay in touch with what you are trying to accomplish so I can help you in any way that I can.”

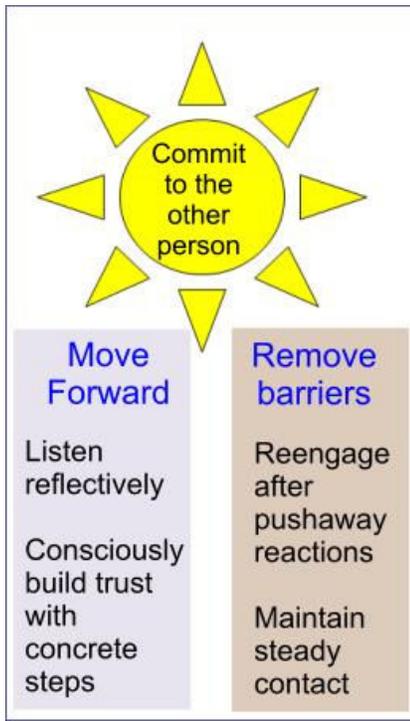
Achieve the right frequency

Contacts should be frequent but not overwhelming. You are trying to keep in touch, not spam them. Reaching out once per month is usually appropriate.

Some of your contacts need to be two-way – but not all of them. It's OK to leave a voicemail sometimes or send an email, even if there's no response. They'll note that you are trying to contact them and that you are interested in them. Try to actually talk to someone at least three times per year or you will fall out of touch with them and won't really know what's

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on their mind.

* * *

If you follow these strategies – committing to their success and development, systematically moving the relationship forward through reflective listening and concrete trust-building, and dealing with the inevitable relationship barriers by responding to pushaways and staying in touch – you will become in short order a relationship-building master.

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