



PEAK PERFORMANCE LEADERSHIP SERVICES Inc.

6 Qualities of Relational Leaders

Welcome to the Relational Dimension of Leadership

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Good leaders bring whatever is required to move a situation forward, whether it's inspiring others with a vision, challenging the status quo, or taking a bold risk. The *best* leaders also bring awareness and care to the quality of their relationships. This requires a variety of skills and ways of being sometimes known as relational leadership.

Relational leadership puts the quality of relationships on an equal footing with all other practical outcomes. I believe that *how* we do something together matters as much as *what* we are doing. When we collaborate in ways that are mutual, voluntary, and connected, we increase the likelihood we will want to collaborate again. Relational leaders motivate others towards an outcome *and* make the journey together along the way worthwhile.

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Through nearly a decade of facilitating groups, coaching teams and leaders, I've developed an overall sense of relational leadership that I want to share with you here.

Relational Leaders Are Authentic

If you're a relational leader, you inspire trust by bringing your best, honestly and genuinely. You'll share your motives and goals openly. You'll have an accurate sense of both your strengths and weaknesses, free of the impulse to keep them hidden. You'll make clear and direct requests. You'll feel comfortable in your own skin, consistently across circumstances, and this will set others at ease around you. You'll express yourself congruently, meaning that your words, your tone of voice, and your body language will be in alignment. You'll make only the agreements and commitments you can truly get behind. You'll do your best to honor your commitments, and when you don't, you'll take responsibility for the consequences and do what you can to make things right.

To get a good sense of this, I encourage you to check out the TED talks "[The Power of Vulnerability](#)", with Brené Brown, and "[The Power of Authenticity](#)", with Mike Robbins. As you listen to their stories, you may tune in to what authenticity feels like. Similarly, as you develop your own relational leadership, you'll develop a richer sense of when you're actually bringing it. When I'm bringing it, I experience transparency, courage, integrity, humility, vulnerability, boldness, dignity, and openness. Leaders who embody authenticity engender trust and inspire those around them to also be authentic. As a result, everyone involved benefits.

Relational Leaders Are Empathic

Empathy is the ability to understand others' experiences, perspectives, and feelings. It's a key tool that allows relational leaders to bring out the best in others.

As you develop empathy, you'll bring curiosity in a way that has your collaborators open up to you. You'll verify your understanding to ensure the message you've heard is the message they've intended. You'll be able to put yourself in their shoes as you discover what they value, what motivates them, and how they like to work because of the close attention you've given. With this knowledge, you'll communicate more sensitively and effectively. You'll also be more likely to predict the effect your choices will have on them.

You'll know how to listen receptively, providing invitations and indicators of safety that have others confide in you. You'll show respect for their experiences and perspectives. You'll be able to see things from their point of view, including their reasoning and their values, even when you disagree.

Empathy fosters psychological safety — an environment where people are unafraid to speak up, offer their perspectives, take risks, and learn from their mistakes because they're being respected and accepted. Notably, Google's *Project Aristotle* found that their most effective teams also have the highest psychological safety. And broader research has backed this up: in her TED talk "[Building a Psychologically Safe Workplace](#)", Amy Edmondson discusses the positive relationship between psychological safety on team effectiveness, a topic she also covers in her book *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*.

Relational Leaders Foster Mutuality

Every relationship has a story. It starts at the beginning, and leads to the present, following a pathway of moments, both high and low, with many points in between. When we experience *mutuality* — in the relational sense that I'm using that word — our narratives about the relationship each lines up with one another's. We're on the same page about what has happened so

far, how it has happened, and why. We share a narrative about how our relationship came to be how it is.

Our perspectives will never match perfectly since each of us experiences reality from a unique vantage point. Yet a good relational leader interacts with authenticity and empathy such that each person's narratives are more likely than not to match up.

Maybe the most rewarding benefit of mutuality is that it promotes being in flow with others. If you've ever taken part in a partner dance, a group performance, or a team sport, you know what being in shared flow feels like and probably know what it takes to achieve it. In these contexts, we rehearse sequences of moves, uncover misunderstandings, and go over trouble spots. Eventually, we achieve a sense of coherence and synchronization. Over time we develop an intuitive feel for how each of us works, experiencing something like a psychic connection.

We create flow and synchronization with our collaborators when we invest the requisite time and energy to foster mutuality. A good relational leader knows how to do this consistently. This translates into team effectiveness — like how a team responds to a good coach or captain.

Relational Leaders Tend to the Quality of Relationships

Consider that between you and everyone you encounter, there is a third entity, *the relationship*, with a life all its own. It includes not just any ideas we might have about the relationship but actually our felt experience of it. For me, it sometimes feels like a cord, channel, or forcefield between myself and someone else. It has its own distinct characteristics, for example: tense or relaxed, warm or cool, heavy or light, pulling-toward or pushing-away, bright or dim, active or passive, resonant or dissonant.

As teacher Guy Sengstock put it, “Consider that there is such a thing as what it is like to be with someone.”

“Consider that there is such a thing as what it is like to be with someone.” — Guy Sengstock

The quality of a relationship we experience in the present arises from the interactions we share through time. In these interactions, we impact one another with our choices.

As a relational leader, it’s important to be truly invested in the impact you have on your collaborators as well as on the quality of your relationships with them. This doesn’t mean that you should try and control their responses (which you can’t really do anyhow). It does mean you are able to extend your awareness and account for their responses as they actually are, rather than how you wish they were.

If you’re unclear about the impact you are having, it’s up to you to be proactive and curious to find out. If you don’t, you’ll be flying blind, and that is not good leadership. Tending to the quality of your relationships means being mindful of the impact you are having, and taking this into account.

How you tend to the quality of your relationships will directly affect the willingness of others to stick around when the going gets tough. It will also affect their willingness to join you in future endeavors. This leads us to the next key characteristic of relational leaders.

Relational Leaders Are Sporting and Honorable

In his book *Finite and Infinite Games*, James P. Carse writes, “A finite game is played for the purpose of winning; an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play.” Carse’s concept of the infinite game captures an essential aspect of relational leadership.

“A finite game is played for the purpose of winning; an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play.” — James P. Carse

Consider how working together on a goal or project is like a team game. There will come a time when the game ends. At that time, the players will have achieved the desired outcomes, or not. Whenever you’ve experienced the end of a project, you’ve undoubtedly developed relationships with the other players along the way. You probably had feelings about those relationships. Some of those feelings may have you eager to play again — perhaps you’ll go on to another project or start a company together. With other people, you may have feelings that lead you to avoid ever playing with them again.

Guess what? They’ve likely developed the same kind of feelings about playing with *you* again. And yes, this is also happening in your current collaborations.

If you play in a sporting and honorable way, others will want to play with you again. You experience the game together as enjoyable and mutually fulfilling. The best way I know to do this is to tend to the quality of relationships with collaborators with authenticity, empathy, and mutuality.

A relational leader envisions a future for their relationships that goes beyond near-term goals and plans. Through fair-play and respect, a relational leader fosters trust, loyalty, and camaraderie. This inspires others to rejoin for future projects and goals.

A good relational leader plays the infinite game.

Relational Leaders Find Meaning in Relationships

In his 1923 book *I and Thou*, Martin Buber makes the case that the human experience finds meaning in relationship. He describes two modes of relating, contrasting the *I-It* relation with the *I-Thou* relation. When we relate to another person as *it* we treat them instrumentally, as an object or thing to be used for the achievement of our self-interests or other purposes. When we relate to another person as *thou*, we honor them as intrinsically valuable in themselves. The *I-Thou* relation is to encounter another person authentically, such that when relationship is experienced, it is inherently worthwhile.

“Spirit is not in the I but between I and You.” — Martin Buber

When we ignore the intrinsic value of relationships, we will have a tendency to objectify other people. We’ll use them as tools rather than relating with them as beings. Psychologist and professor Susan Campbell articulates this by encouraging us to ask, “Is my intent to *relate* or to *control*?”

“Is my intent to relate or to control?” — Susan Campbell

An Invitation to Relational Leadership

Taken all together, the qualities I’ve described in this article are my take on what it means to embody relational leadership. They build upon each other, and they mutually reinforce each other. In your own leadership journey, I encourage you to consider how well you’re measuring up.

- *Are you bringing your best self to your collaborations?*

- *Are others bringing their best selves to your collaborations?*
- *Are you experiencing a sense of group flow and team synchronization?*
- *Are you having the kind of impact on others you intend?*
- *Are others willing to stick it out when the going gets tough?*
- *Are your collaborators eager to rejoin you on subsequent projects?*
- *Are you enjoying meaning in your relationships with your collaborators beyond the goals you are working toward?*

If you're not able to answer most of these questions in the affirmative and you desire to have more of these experiences, I have good news: knowing is an essential initial step toward creating more of these, and you can develop these qualities with practice and guidance. Feel free to reach out to me for resources that can help.

Considering my relationship with you, the reader, I think of what I want to leave you with. I want to live in a world where you and I both create the successes we aspire to. I want us to enjoy being with those who join us in our endeavors. And I want you to have all the satisfaction and enjoyment possible in your leadership.