



Connection Culture

The Competitive Advantage of Shared Identity, Empathy, and Understanding at Work

Michael Lee Stallard, Jason Pankau and Katharine P. Stallard | ATD © 2015

Packed with rock-solid evidence, disturbing statistics and moving stories, this short but passionate plea for connectedness at work and in life delivers a wake-up call. How connected you feel to other people at work turns out to be the primary driver of your sense of engagement as an employee, but Americans in particular have let relationships and community suffer. Experts Michael Lee Stallard, Jason Pankau and Katharine P. Stallard explain why people need to connect. They find that record numbers of US workers are stressed, unhealthy and addicted as a result of ignoring the benefits of close, caring relationships in favor of more work, solo entertainment and a casual approach to marriage. The few organizations that include employees in decisions, respect them and encourage relationship building and bonding ultimately outpace their competitors. *getAbstract* recommends this quick read to leaders who want to build places where the best people want to work and connect.

Take-Aways

- Build a “connection culture” by combining “vision, value and voice.”
- At work, good relationships correlate to higher engagement and productivity.
- About three-quarters of American workers do not engage in their work.
- Connections between people fuel better health, happiness and resilience.
- Employees in the US suffer from an epidemic of isolation, which contributes to ill health, addiction and shorter life spans.
- Neurologically and physically, people need to connect.
- Servant leaders, who commit to knowing, caring about and supporting their employees, drive a connection culture.
- Employees must take responsibility for and proactively build their connection skills.

- Organizations with connection cultures lead their industries and survive hard times.
- Leaders drive connection cultures by paying consistent attention to their employees, knowing everyone personally, and hiring and training relationship-oriented people.

Summary

Essential Ingredients

Human connection drives better health, happiness and resilience. At work, good relationships fuel higher engagement and productivity. Organizations that rank among the best in engagement and connection enjoy far greater productivity and profitability than those that rate among the worst.

“Employees in an organization with a high degree of connection are more engaged, more productive in their jobs and less likely to leave for a competitor.”

Build a “connection culture” in your organization by combining “vision, value and voice.” Vision unites a group of individuals into a team with a shared purpose and mission. In a connected company, leaders and colleagues value, respect and appreciate each other. The leaders give employees a voice by including them in decision making, and soliciting their opinions and ideas.

“As you experience greater peace, hope and joy that comes from having an abundance of connection in your life, you will discover wealth of even greater value.”

For example, after terrorists attacked Mumbai in 2008, the Tata Group, which owned one of the assaulted hotels, took care of all its affected workers and their families throughout the ordeal and its aftermath. Founder and CEO Ratan Tata attended every funeral, and created a corporate trust fund to provide a life-long salary for those who lost a spouse. The firm also pays for the education of victims’ children through college. By acting in accord with its values of generosity and caring, Tata has come to rank as one of the world’s best companies to work for – and it is also among the most successful and profitable.

“The Six Needs”

Vision, value and voice power six specific, immutable needs that drive personal and organizational success. Each need derives from research spanning more than a century, including findings by psychologists Abraham Maslow and Edward Deci, and by professor Viktor Frankl, author of *Man’s Search for Meaning*. The six needs are:

1. **“Respect”** – People at work must treat one another as they would like to be treated.
2. **“Recognition”** – Employees need praise and specific acknowledgement of their work.
3. **“Belonging”** – Human beings need to be included, to have a voice, and to work with others who care for each other.

4. **“Autonomy”** – Workers want to determine how to carry out and complete their tasks without being micromanaged.
5. **“Personal growth”** – People need their work to match their interests and strengths. Help your staffers find the right pace and level of challenge to achieve a state of flow.
6. **“Meaning”** – Your employees need to connect their work to a higher purpose.

“The work context has six specific needs: respect, recognition, belonging, autonomy, personal growth and meaning.”

Behind the connection culture – with support from leaders, supervisors and colleagues – employees take responsibility for building “character strengths.” Leaders see their main function as serving the greater purpose and mission – rather than enriching their own careers – and supporting workers responsible for accomplishing organizational goals. Leaders who involve, include and care for their teams build a lasting foundation for success.

Case Histories: What Works

Organizations with connected cultures share consistent practices. Perhaps most famous among them, Google stands out as a perennial “best place to work.” The respect and care that its leaders demonstrate for employees, combined with a clear, powerful and common purpose – to make the world a better place through access to information – stand at the core of Google’s success.

“To gain the support of your leaders, they must understand what a connection culture is, why it’s important, and how they can create and sustain it.”

Ford Motor Company CEO Alan Mulally transformed an ailing and fractured company into an industry leader by emphasizing the notion of “One Ford.” Mulally and Ford set a new standard for American auto companies by building better relationships with key stakeholders and rewarding leaders who help each other rather than just themselves.

“Human beings are complex. They are driven consciously and unconsciously by an infinite variety of past experiences, temperaments, perspectives, and thinking and learning styles.”

Admiral Vernon Clark took command of the US Navy at a time when retention and recruiting efforts lagged. He built a more resilient fleet by emphasizing the Navy’s mission – and making it resonate with sailors by investing in them with better pay and more training, and by encouraging them to speak up and challenge conventional wisdom. In the five years between 2000 and 2005, battle readiness improved dramatically and re-enlistments increased by 50%.

“Younger generations long for greater connection and leaders who engage them will create cultures that meet that need.”

Other organizations with caring leaders – including the Girl Scouts under Frances Hesselbein, Texas Christian University (TCU) under Chancellor Victor Boschini and the Duke University men’s basketball team under coach Mike Krzyzewski – enjoy miraculous rebounds or sustained brilliance by emphasizing connections, inclusiveness and caring.

“The first element of a connection culture is vision. It exists in a culture when everyone is motivated by the mission, united by the values and proud of the reputation.”

At Duke, Krzyzewski had an epiphany after years of hearing his wife and daughters each night at the dinner table. Rather than getting quickly to the point of their discussions – as men often do – Krzyzewski noticed that they slowed down and spent the time at dinner reconnecting. They asked each other questions about the day’s events and really listened. He noticed that his wife’s perceptions about his players’ moods were almost always accurate. After taking the unusual step of involving his wife and daughters in the team’s operations – for example, by having them build relationships with each player – Krzyzewski began building a college basketball dynasty for Duke.

“Connection is what transforms a dog-eat-dog environment into a sled dog team that pulls together.”

Servant leadership guides the people in charge of each of these organizations. Servant leaders’ commitment to enabling employees rather than directing them extends through every layer of leadership in their organizations. Connected leaders take the time to learn everyone’s name and to get to know who their staff members are as individuals. At TCU, Boschini teaches a freshman course and gets to know each of his students. Hesselbein regularly consulted thousands of Girl Scout employees and volunteers to hear their ideas and opinions before making major decisions.

The Scientific Evidence for Connection

A trove of evidence from neuroscience, endocrinology and economics links connectedness to employee engagement – and closely ties employee engagement to productivity.

“The very best leaders have the mind-set that they are serving a cause greater than themselves, as well as serving the people they lead to achieve the cause.”

For example, John Bowlby’s attachment theory demonstrates that children without strong connections to their parents and other adults fare worse in life and health than those whose environment includes close family and community relationships. Bowlby examined the role of genetics on his subjects’ health and success, and found that genes express themselves differently, depending on the degree of nurturing and connection in a child’s environment.

“If we don’t become intentional about dealing with habits that hinder connection, they will become deeply ingrained in our character.”

Tom Rath and James Harter’s research found that connections at work provide the strongest links to employee engagement, more than any other factor. Self-control and wellness manifest to the degree that a person connects with others. In 1979, researchers examined Roseto, a small Pennsylvania town whose residents showed significantly better health and longevity than the average American. The findings, which startled many, concluded that the townspeople’s better health was due to their unusual – by US standards – levels of connectedness and their community involvement. The findings led to what millions of people now know as “the Roseto Effect.”

“The single best predictor of employee engagement is who people are with (connection), rather than what they are doing (tasks).”

Despite mounting evidence of connections’ and relationships’ causal link with health, happiness, success and longevity, people are more isolated than ever – particularly in the US. Across the nation in general, relationships and community connections have deteriorated dramatically since the mid-1980s. Higher divorce rates, single households, single parents, dual wage earners, solo screen entertainment and extended work hours lead to ever-increasing isolation. The impact of isolation, disconnection and loneliness shapes national statistics indicating low engagement levels, and more drug abuse, harmful addictions and suicides.

“Take time to connect with people on a personal level.”

Connected companies create a setting that causes engagement. Engaged workers exert more effort, perform better, align more tightly to their firm’s mission, make better decisions and have more innovative ideas. Gallup and other organizations consistently identify connectedness as among the top indicators of long-term organizational success. Despite this, few leaders take deliberate action to build connections with and among employees.

Taking Action

Only about 25% of the people in the US workforce experience connection at work. For the other 75%, work drags and productivity suffers. Leaders should take the initiative to help employees connect, and to hold both supervisors and employees accountable for their contribution to a connection culture.

“The deepest connections are formed when you are open to communicate who you really are, what you really believe and your struggles in life.”

Begin building an organizational culture based on relationships by gradually implementing the building blocks of connection. Rally your workforce around a short phrase that expresses your firm’s identity. For instance, Google’s mission statement describes its purpose as providing the world with accessible information; its “identity phrase” is “don’t be evil.” That summarizes many of Google’s values. Choose a short, memorable statement that connects your mission to your

values. Use it to provide employees with a rallying point that helps them subscribe to common goals and take pride in their work.

“If you asked your employees what the organization’s core values are, could they tell you? Most cannot.”

Engage with your workforce in the process of identifying your organization’s “core values that connect.” Link your five main annual priorities to those values. Connect people to your values as they fulfill your mission. At Ritz-Carlton hotels, for example, every employee carries a wallet card listing the organization’s values. Other companies share stories based on employees’ embodiment of their institutional values. They publicly reward and recognize that behavior.

Adjust your hiring, training and rewards programs to select, develop and encourage connected behaviors. Track your progress using engagement surveys. Wherever possible, match workers’ personal strengths and interests to the tasks you assign them. Each year, set a limited number of clear, challenging but achievable goals that align with your values.

As a leader or manager, spend time with your team members. Bring your whole team or your many teams together to discuss goals, mission and progress, and to celebrate their achievements. Meet regularly, both formally and informally. Listen intently and avoid distractions. When you are with a staffer, focus your attention on that person. Talk about work, but also about non-work topics. Share personal and career stories. Ask about their projects, but also about the people and activities they care about outside of work. Get to know your team members beyond a superficial level so you can connect with them personally. This enables you to help them plan their careers, work toward their goals and become better connectors. Don’t micromanage. Support and serve your team members while giving them the space to do their work their way.

New Generation

Fortunately, the younger generation of employees may reverse the US’s national trend toward isolation. They consistently state their need for connectivity above all. This may drive organizations in the right direction. A connected culture requires a leader who is substantially different from today’s prevailing archetype. Connected leaders take deliberate action in order to build links among their members of staff and to connect disparate parts of the organization.

For example, Ed Catmull, president of Pixar, takes conscious steps every day to build a connected culture. His legendary relationship and network-building skills propelled Pixar into its position as the industry’s leading animation studio. Disney acquired Pixar in 2006 to shore up its mediocre business operations and boost its culture. Pixar’s connection culture infused Disney’s thoroughly, bringing the moribund studio back to life.

Though your best chance of building a connection culture comes from the top down, leaders at any level can change a microculture to create a more connected organization or team. Try to

get to know everyone personally, and to hire and train relationship-oriented people. Building connectedness improves your employees' lives, helping them achieve deeper engagement at work – that, in turn, confers health benefits, improved relationships, and greater happiness and success.

About the Authors

Former Charles Schwab executive **Michael Lee Stallard** speaks and consults on building connections at work. **Jason Pankau** lectures and teaches, including programs for religious leaders. **Katharine P. Stallard** works for religious, nonprofit and educational organizations.



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