Why are Relationships so Difficult?

David Bradford

Introduction

The pandemic has highlighted how important relationships are in our lives. Being stuck at home, unable to travel to family, visit friends or have them over, has created loneliness and estrangement from those whom we love and need. Phone calls and Zoom have not replaced the closeness that personal contact provides.

Relationships are crucial for our very existence. In his seminal work, *Together*, Vivek Murthy points out that strong emotional ties play a significant role in our mental and physical health. People who have several deep connections suffer less from depression and other ailments, and they live longer. We obviously need others for a wide array of activities. Going to shows is a richer experience when we can discuss reactions. Sharing our personal issues and gaining different perspectives can help to clarify and resolve our difficulties. And just having others we can turn to in times of need provides us with invaluable support.

Yet so many people have difficulty building meaningful relationships. When Murthy took over as the US Surgeon General in 2014, he expected that obesity or the opiate crisis would be the major medical challenge. Instead, he discovered that it was loneliness. 17% of Americans today report that they have no close relationships. A survey was conducted in the fall of 2015, before the Covid-19 pandemic, of a random sample of US adults who were asked, "In the last two years, how hard has it been for you to make new platonic friends?". Over a third said "Hard" or "Very Hard". Another third said "So-So", and only a quarter said, "Easy" or "Very Easy". (About 5% said, "Never Tried".) Interestingly, these percentages were unrelated to the respondent's age; similar results were found for those in their 20s as well as their 60s, and all ages in between. As the Beetles sing in *Eleanor Rigby*, "All the lonely people – where do they all come from?".

'Touchy-Feely' at Stanford

If relationships are so important, why do so many people struggle to find meaningful connections? What does it take? And can those competencies be learned? At Stanford's Graduate School of Business, we have studied those questions for over five decades and discovered some answers. The competencies required are not innate or due to chance. They can be acquired by a wide range of people from many cultures in a relatively short period of time.

This learning occurs in a course titled *Interpersonal Dynamics* (that participants affectionately call 'Touchy-Feely'). Over 85% of the MBA students sign up for this ten-week elective program. Interacting in twelve-person groups, students learn how to build strong, open relationships where they can be more themselves, take the risks of reaching out to others, raise disagreements, and interact in a more authentic way. This often occurs with those whom they initially believed they had little in common, and even those they had negative impressions of from previous interactions. Students frequently describe their experience in the course as "life-changing" and "transformational". Alumni, even ten or twenty years later, regularly report that they still use what they have learned. They say that it saved their marriage, resolved a serious conflict with their boss, or allowed for closer relationships not only at work but also with friends and family.

What happens in this program that produces such significant learning? It is not due to an elaborate design with case studies, exercises, and simulations. Instead, it is deceptively simple. It is based on the notion that: "It takes two to know one; I need *you* in order to know *me*". Even though I intend that my behavior has a certain outcome, only you know its actual effect. I need the information that you have, but I may not get it. You frown. Is it what I said? Are you bothered or have you just remembered yesterday's troubling incident with another person? If I don't know the impact of my actions, I am 'shooting in the dark'. And you don't hit many targets when you shoot in the dark.

This information is crucial for building satisfying relationships. I need to know if my behavior is annoying you, is keeping you from getting closer to me or, alternatively, is connecting you with me. Likewise, I need to say how I am responding to you. What are you doing that is intriguing me? Are there any difficulties in our interactions? If the relationship between us is strong, these concerns might be raised – but often they are not. And yet knowing the impact of my behavior is crucial for developing relationships in the first place.

But often we don't how to raise our concerns and are worried that bringing them up will cause hurt and damage. So, we stay silent. Our frustration grows to the point where we get upset, and the anger produces just what we feared. In *Interpersonal Dynamics*, students learn how to close this loop; to learn the impact of their actions. "You seem to be upset with what I said. What's that about?"

And they learn how to state the impact of the Other's actions. "When you cut me off before I had made my point, I felt discounted." They also learn to say what they need from the Other, in order to build trust and have a satisfying relationship.

As mentioned, this learning occurred through a deceptively simple process. All groups need leadership, an agenda and norms for how to operate. In these twelve-person groups, we remove these three components. Yes, there is a facilitator but they do not act like a traditional leader. There is an assignment. "Our job is to build a group where we can learn from each other". But this is too amorphous to provide much direction. And there are no rules as to how they are to achieve the goal other than that they will meet for set times. This creates a vacuum which participants have to fill and, in doing so, they receive feedback from each other about what behaviors are more or less effective. More importantly, they learn how to learn from each other; how to identify and express their needs and feelings; how to give *and* receive feedback; how to raise and resolve contentious issues; and how to build strong, meaningful relationships.[1]

The Characteristics of Strong Relationships

Relationships exist on a continuum. There are some that are just acquaintances and others that are casual friendships, whereas others become deeper friendships with some becoming intimate (sexual or not), and a few that are truly exceptional. We need relationships along this continuum because each provides something different. But if we want more from any one of them, we have discovered that there are six dimensions of a strong connection (expressed here as six questions), and even though some relationships may benefit from more of one of these dimensions than another, all are relevant.

1. To what extent can I be more fully myself? Can I express my needs, hopes and concerns? Can I show a wide range of facets of who I am? Or do I believe I have to suppress large parts of myself or, even worse, pretend to be something that I am not? In a new relationship, we are careful about what we disclose but, as the connection develops, we share more which decreases misunderstandings and increases the ways we have available to relate. But that general statement begs important underlying questions. "How much should I share and how soon?". If too little, the relationship may not develop. But if too much, too soon, will I scare the other person? "How open and vulnerable do I want to be? Should I be?"

2. The reciprocal question is, *What can I do to encourage the Other to let themselves be more fully known?* Of course, sharing more of myself - such as what I want in this group - is likely to encourage the Other to do the same. But there are other actions that I can take, include asking questions, to better understand the Other. But there are questions and there are questions! Some can be experienced as inviting; others as intrusive and off-putting. Or

is there something in the way that I ask them that makes the Other feel as if they are a specimen to be studied? How can I convey that I really want to know that person? As this reciprocal pattern of sharing continues, mutual understanding builds, and trust grows.

3. The third question is, *Can I be confident that what I share will not be used against me?* The more personal the disclosures, the more vulnerable each of us becomes. How will this information be used? Will you judge me negatively? Confidence increases when what I have shared is honored. But confidence doesn't have to be destroyed even if there has been a violation. This temporary setback can be overcome if the infraction has been raised and repair has occurred.

4. *Can we be honest with each other?* Do I know that what you say is what you mean? I should not have to read between the lines or worry that important information is being withheld. But it is not as simple as that. What do we mean by 'being honest'? When somebody says, "I'm going to be brutally honest", I find that they are usually being more brutal than honest. In most cases, they are making a judgment about the other person. But if I stay with what I know about myself, my needs, my feelings and my reactions to you, that is the truth about me. When we make judgements about the Other's motives or character, we are just guessing, and that is what can be brutal and cause harm to the Other and the relationship.

5. As we begin to know and work with each other and share more of ourselves, it is inevitable that disagreements and even conflicts may arise. The fifth question is, *Can we raise and productively resolve these disagreements?* Many people are afraid of conflict for fear of harming or even destroying the relationship. As a consequence, they avoid raising contentious issues which only sends problems underground where they fester and grow causing even greater damage. The skill in dealing with disagreement is not just to arrive at a mutually satisfactory solution, but to resolve the issues in a way that further strengthens the relationship.

6. The final question is, *Can we help each other grow and develop?* People often think that making closer connections demands that they agree with the Other. But what if you see that person doing things that is limiting them? Would a good friend just let this situation pass? Even though pointing out the behavior and giving challenging feedback can be temporarily unnerving, isn't true caring about committing to the Other's development? When each person knows that the Other has their best interests at heart, relationships can become even richer.

Understanding these six characteristics can help us to understand why relationships are difficult. Many people don't know how to let themselves be known in a meaningful way or are so concerned about how they are coming across that they pay little attention to knowing the Other. But, more significantly, each of these characteristics involves risk. It is one thing to say, "Let yourself be known", but there is the fear that, "If you knew *this* about me, you would judge me, think less of me and perhaps even reject me". Being more honest in your reactions could help to bring the relationship closer or it could distance it. And, as we have mentioned, there is the issue of timing. A disclosure that might lead to rejection early on may be more acceptable once the Other knows you more fully.

Then there is the risk of going first. It is much easier to say, "After You, My Dear Alphonse". Yes, the more I am open and honest about my reactions, the greater the potential for growth in our relationship which then makes it easier to be even more honest and self-disclosing. But it is safer if you go first. The danger is that this might not happen so the relationship may never develop. Waiting for the Other to initiate means that what happens to you is under *their* control.

The time when taking the initiative feels most difficult is when raising the issue may threaten the relationship fundamentally. Is it better to 'let sleeping dogs lie'? How often have we have seen students (and also experienced ourselves) sitting on an issue for fear of disastrous consequences? When they say nothing, the relationship stalls. A few times, when they raise it, their worst fear is confirmed. But in most cases, when they take the risk, even though the conversation may be difficult, it breaks the logjam, and the result is an even deeper level of closeness. Building relationships always involves the possibility of rejection and failure.

Personal Barriers

In looking at what impacts people's willingness to take the risks that relationship-building entails, we identified three main factors. The first is a lack of relevant competencies. The second is certain assumptions – mental models if you will – that are constraining. And the third is our own problematic sense of Self. Let's examine these three barriers in more detail.

The Lack of Key Competencies

A cluster of key competencies is central to building relationships. One is being aware of one's emotions. Another is to move into curiosity and inquiry by avoiding judgments. Giving and receiving behaviorally specific feedback is crucial. So, to, is not being trapped in mutual blame but instead moving to joint problem-solving. Being able to recover and repair when things go wrong provides the reassurance to take the necessary risks.

Emotions are crucial for building relationships because they indicate what is important to us. They are also a key component in giving and receiving behaviorally specific feedback since such feedback includes our emotional reaction to the Other's behavior. Emotions are central to the ability to empathize and understand others. As central as feelings are, many people have difficulty identifying

their emotions. This may be the result of parental statements ("You shouldn't be angry at your younger sister"), gender socialization ("Men shouldn't feel sad"), or early experiences ("If you hadn't been vulnerable, you wouldn't have been picked on"). Suppressing some feelings starts to numb others.

Even with all the education that people have received on giving and receiving feedback, relatively few do it well. Sticking with the observable behavior and its impact sounds simple, but our desire to 'figure out the Other' quickly leads to making assumptions about their motives and intentions. From there, it is only a small step to developing attributions about the Other's personality and character. Saying, "You just want to dominate", is not behavioral feedback, and is likely to cause defensiveness and hurt. Likewise, inquiry that comes out of true curiosity is different from asking leading questions to confirm one's hunches.

These are only a few of the competencies that help us to build connections. Just as important is the ability to apply them appropriately to the specific relationship. Just as you have a preference about how another person raises issues, expresses disagreements and gives feedback, so do they. One size does not fit all. The ability to work out a mutually satisfying way of relating involves its own set of skills. All of these crucial competencies can be learned -- and yet few of us have them.

The Mental Models We Hold

Whether from our upbringing or our own experiences, we all develop beliefs about what builds and damages relationships. "Negative feedback hurts connections"; "Conflict is a sign of a flawed relationship"; "If I am vulnerable, people will see me as weak". Although there may have been occasions when these incidents occurred, have we taken the lessons too much to heart? Mark Twain said that a cat doesn't sit on a hot stove twice – but doesn't sit on a cold stove either. Have we over-generalized from an experience, causing us to hold back and not see if it applies to this specific relationship?

Because we hold these beliefs – and have been burned in the past – we are unlikely to test them in new situations so they continue to constrain us. They also prevent us from developing a more nuanced understanding. What specific behavior does not work at which state of relationship-development, and with which particular individuals? Furthermore, we are more likely to downplay several incidents where our behavior was successful and remember only the one that supports our original belief.

Our Own (Problematic) Sense of Self

Even though we hold a picture of who we are and the value we bring to others - our identity and our self-worth - are we certain that is how others see us? We all know people for whom there is a significant discrepancy between how they see themselves and how others see them. Sometimes they hold an inflated view, and at other times they hold an underestimation of what they bring.

Being unsure about how we are seen and, more importantly, how we are evaluated, makes us susceptible to another's feedback. This is especially the case when the feedback involves our motives and character. "You think only of yourself." Even though we may know that feedback often says as much about the giver as the receiver, is part of that accusation true? Do others see me in the same way? This quandary is captured in Robert Burns poem:

"O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us

To see oursels as ithers see us!"

When we know that others see and accept us, warts and all, this uncertainty decreases, and we develop an internal gyroscope that centers us. This allows us to accept our Self, warts and all. Even though we may be taken aback momentarily by a new piece of feedback, we are not thrown off balance. We have a larger sense of our Self that can incorporate new perspectives. We are like children's inflated punching toys that bounce right back. Being centered allows us to raise difficult issues, confront others, and be confronted without the fear of being devastated. There is great freedom when we know our strengths and can accept our flaws. Our internal gyroscope keeps us steady when we make mistakes or when others are upset with us. We don't have to hold others at a distance in order to protect our self-esteem.

Lacking a strong sense of who we are causes us to become highly dependent on others' approval. We then withhold significant aspects of our Self or – even worse - pretend to be someone we are not. Upon receiving negative feedback, we defend ourselves rather than seeing this as an opportunity to learn. We become cautious and play it safe instead of taking the risks that could test the validity of the mental models we may be hiding behind and help us acquire new competencies.

<u>**The Ambivalence of Change**</u>

If these three barriers weren't challenging enough, there is another factor that compounds each of them: our ambivalence about change. It may sound attractive to become more interpersonally competent, remove limiting barriers and build strong satisfying relationships, but are there costs? "What will this demand of me? With competence comes responsibility. What will I have to give up (including some of the excuses that I hide behind)? Can I do it well, and will it improve conditions? The sixth characteristic of a strong relationship is that the Other is committed to my growth. Even though their feedback and encouragement is well-intentioned, do I want to follow their advice?"

Furthermore, the interpersonal competencies for building strong connections are different from the skill of learning tennis or a new computer program. The former have significant personal implications that may lead to troubling

self-reflection. Several incidents come to mind from the Stanford groups that speak to this.

One of the competencies is being in touch with your emotions. I remember Susanna who had difficulty both accessing and expressing any negative feelings. Events occurred in the group that bothered others but, apparently, not her. "What are you feeling?" she was asked. "Nothing", she replied. This happened several more times with her giving the same response. Then, in one session, she snapped at Josh. "You sound angry", said another member. "Yes. No. I shouldn't feel angry because I know Josh was trying to be helpful", she said. "He might have been, but you can still feel angry. What's so difficult about feeling angry?" Susanna was quiet for a while tearing slightly. "I was raised so that I shouldn't feel that way. And people won't like me if I'm negative." "Not for me", said Josh. "In fact, I feel more distrustful when you strike me as incongruent." Others chimed in saying that they would feel more relaxed with her if they knew exactly how she felt rather than having to guess. Suzanna struggled to take this information in. It took several experiences of allowing herself to express these scary feelings before she could begin to accept this new reality.

Deepak was always doing things for others. He would bring cookies to the session, make sure that others had the best seats, let himself be interrupted if others wanted to talk. Finally, a member said, "Deepak, what's going on with you? Why are you always doing all these things for others but I never hear what you need?". He was a little taken aback and then blurted out, "But I like doing things for others". "That's fine, but what about *you*…why can't you also take care of yourself as well?" Deepak was silent for a couple of minutes as he struggled to make sense of this apparent contradiction. "I want to be liked and I think that the best way to make friends is to do things for them." Several other members jumped in to disagree. "When you only do things for me, I start to feel indebted and that doesn't make me want to get close." Another added, "This behavior doesn't make you seem real to me; I don't feel like I know you".

Karl was a student from Scandinavia who not only had a cool demeanor but would frequently question others about whether they really meant what they were saying. This went on for several meetings until Leeor exploded. "Karl, what the devil is going on? You repeatedly question whether others are being honest, and I am really annoyed!". "Well, it's naïve to think that everybody is telling the truth; I don't want to get sucked in and be open until I can trust others", he said. "But you seem to start with the assumption that we're not to be trusted", Leeor replied. "That's not only annoying, but it doesn't make me want to open up to you. I feel discouraged that we could ever get close." Karl was now fighting back tears. "That's just what my girlfriend said before she broke up with me." He then shared what in his past had led him to act in this way. Other members said that his behavior distanced them, too, and also shared what he had done at other times that made them want to connect.

For some people, overcoming the barriers and acquiring the ability to build meaningful relationships may not be that difficult. But for others, it may require examining long-held assumptions, letting go of limiting behaviors, and even reconsidering parts of how we evaluate and define our Self. This can be difficult because we have put effort into these self-concepts we have developed. I remember an incident several decades ago when doing a program with a friend. I expressed some self-doubt and he said with exasperation, "When are you going to give up on that?". I was jarred but then realized that I was holding an outdated self-concept. It might have been appropriate years before, but now it was limiting.

But not all reconfigurations are that easy. What will Susanna have to do to feel alright about herself when she expresses annoyance with others? Will she know how to find the appropriate point on the anger continuum or will she 'go from O to 60' when bothered by another's actions? How is Deepak going to balance taking care of himself and still being considerate of others? How vulnerable will he be to the accusation, "You just think of yourself!"? Karl's suspicious approach may be costly to him, but it also provides a defensive shield against rejection by confirming his world-view. People may see what they need to do to build relationships, but the mountain might seem to be too steep. We often hold on to dysfunctional self-concepts and actions because change feels so hard. Fritz Perls, the famous Gestalt therapist, said, "To suffer one's own death and to be reborn is not easy".

Overcoming the Barriers

This paper started with the question, *Why are relationships so difficult?* The next question is, *What can be done about it?* The Stanford *Interpersonal Dynamics* course is one way. This is a supportive environment in which participants who have elected to take the course on improving their interpersonal competences can, aided by a trained facilitator, reduce the risk of trying new behaviors and receiving feedback from peers. But few have access to such a situation, so what are the alternatives? One can read about the characteristics of behavioral feedback and the importance of empathy and open-ended questions, but it is in the doing where learning occurs.

In our book, *Connect*, we describe the various competencies and provide examples of their use, but we also give suggestions for how they can be applied to existing relationships. What we stress is the importance of a learning orientation. No matter how it turns out, you can learn about yourself and the process. This is especially important because, as we have mentioned, one size does not fit all. The very nature of relationships is that two individuals are involved, and the challenge is to learn what works for the two of you. Something that doesn't work isn't a failure; it's a sign that something else needs to be done.

Doing this with one or two others is not sufficient. One of the benefits from the Stanford groups is the opportunity to get reactions from many others. As we have mentioned, the feedback you receive says something about the giver

as well as you. Starting to understand how several others respond to your behavior enables you to begin to build a more complete picture.

In the opening paragraphs, we described the benefits of a strong, open relationship. Now we want to suggest that there are great benefits in the *process* of building such relationships. You have, basically, 'learned how to learn', and that can be applied to a variety of situations – with family, friends and colleagues. You learn how to develop the competencies and to apply them differentially. You learn more about yourself as you confront untested assumptions. You learn that you can take risks, have conversations that you never thought you could have, and even fail but be able to repair and recover. Also, the two of you working this out together is its own form of intimacy. It's a sign that "I care about you and our relationship".

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BIOGRAPHY

David Bradford is the *Eugene O'Kelly II Emeritus Senior Lecturer in Leadership* at the Graduate School of Business, Stanford University. In 1969, he came to Stanford University to join the Graduate School of Business in order to develop what has become the landmark course in the MBA program – *Interpersonal Dynamics* [that students call "Touchy-Feely"]. He was the Founder and first Director of The Management and Organizational Behavior Teaching Society

In addition to numerous articles, he has co-authored eight books including *Influence Without Authority, Reinventing Organization Development* and *CONNECT: Building Exceptional Relationships with Family, Friends and Colleagues*.

Dr. Bradford has lectured at, and consulted for, a range of organizations in the private sector including Frito-Lay, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Levi Strauss, McKinsey, Raychem, Starbucks, Roche Pharmaceutical, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, The Detroit Institute of Art, The Getty Museum, and The Whitney Museum of American Art.

ENDNOTE

1. This is the basic T-group format that was developed by The National Training Laboratories (now the NTL Institute) for Group Development in the 1950s.

September 2021