



DOING THE HARD WORK

The hardest work of leadership is often the work within.

Can You Still Build a Relationship?

In a world increasingly designed around the individual, the ability to connect across differences may become a leader's greatest advantage

It has never been easier to build a world around yourself. Your news can reinforce what you already believe. Your social media feed learns what keeps you engaged. Entertainment arrives on demand. You can work remotely, shop without entering a store, and increasingly use AI to answer questions that once required asking another person for help.

Much of that is useful. But it can also mean fewer encounters with people we did not choose - people who see things differently, misunderstand us, annoy us, or do not validate our perspective. Those interactions are inefficient and messy. **They are also where we learn to build trust, navigate differences, and become human together.** As information becomes easier to access, the ability to build relationship and common ground may become more valuable, not less.

1 Recognize how easy it has become to build a world around yourself

For much of human history, people had limited ability to curate everyone around them. You had neighbors, extended family, coworkers, church members, customers, and the person beside you at the community meeting. Modern life gives us far more choice, and algorithms add another layer by showing us more of what holds our attention. Over time, **my concerns, my frustrations, my interests, and people who agree with me** can be repeated back until our customized world begins to feel like the world - and our perspective begins to feel like obvious reality.

ASK YOURSELF: How much of the world I experience has been selected because it already fits me?

2 Remember that your story is not the whole story

Your experience gives you a real side of the Rubik's Cube. So does someone else's. Your frustrations make sense in the context of your story. Your intentions are visible to you. The other person's often are not. When conflict happens, it is easy to conclude, **'I know what happened.'** Maybe. Relationship requires enough humility to ask, **'What does this look like from where they are standing?'** Understanding is not agreement. It is one of the prerequisites for relationship.

ASK YOURSELF: When someone disagrees with me, how quickly do I become curious about their story rather than defending mine?

3 Do not eliminate all the places where we bump into each other

Some of the most important relationships are not efficiently created. They happen because people repeatedly **bump into each other** - before the meeting, after church, at lunch, in the hallway, at the county fair, while working on something together, or during the drive home. Joe Rigney's *Leadership and Emotional Sabotage* explores leadership amid the emotional pressures that develop in groups and relationships. A useful application is to remember that people need places to actually encounter one another. Not every interaction needs an agenda. Sometimes trust develops because two people spend enough time together to discover, **'You are not quite who I assumed you were.'**

ASK YOURSELF: Where do people in my organization, family, church, or community have opportunities to encounter one another as people - not simply complete transactions together?



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4 Do not let technology replace the human work

AI can explain something, draft an email, analyze a problem, challenge an argument, or help prepare for a difficult conversation. But **knowing what to say is not the same as being able to sit across from another person and say it well.** A leader still has to notice hesitation, hear what was not said, recognize when someone feels dismissed, stay calm when emotions rise, ask the next question, admit a misunderstanding, repair trust, and sometimes sit in uncomfortable silence. Technology can prepare us for those moments. **It cannot do the relational work for us.**

ASK YOURSELF: Am I using technology to become better prepared for human interaction - or increasingly using it to avoid human interaction?

5 Learn to build common ground without requiring agreement

The leaders who become increasingly valuable may not simply be the people with the most information. They may be the people who can walk into a room containing different generations, politics, personalities, economic interests, histories, and fears - and create enough trust for those people to accomplish something together. That requires humility, curiosity, emotional steadiness, listening, and the ability to disagree without making disagreement personal. Consensus does not mean everyone gets what they want. Sometimes it means: **'We understand each other well enough, trust each other enough, and share enough common purpose to move forward together.'**

ASK YOURSELF: Can I build enough trust with someone who sees the world differently that we can still accomplish something worthwhile together?

The Relationship Advantage

Technology is making information, analysis, content, and transactions easier to access. But the most important parts of human cooperation remain stubbornly relational.

BECOMING EASIER TO ACCESS

Information
Analysis
Content
Transactions

BECOMING MORE VALUABLE TO CREATE

Trust
Understanding
Belonging
Common Purpose
Relationship

When answers are everywhere, the ability to bring people together becomes a differentiator.

The leader who can rapidly build trust and common ground among people with disparate views may increasingly outperform the leader who simply knows more than everyone else.

THE RELATIONSHIP TEST

CURIOSITY - Can I become genuinely interested in someone else's perspective? Or am I mostly waiting for my turn to explain mine?

HUMILITY - Can I accept that my story is not the whole story? Can I recognize another side of the cube without immediately surrendering my own?

PRESENCE - Can I stay in uncomfortable interaction? Or do I withdraw, become defensive, dominate, text instead of talk, or find people who agree with me?

CONNECTION - Do I create places for people to bump into each other? Have efficiency and technology removed opportunities where relationships used to develop naturally?

TRUST - Do people experience me as someone who wants to understand them? Especially when we disagree?

CONSENSUS - Can I help people find common purpose? Can I move a group from competing stories toward enough shared understanding to act together?

Can I build a relationship with someone without requiring them to become more like me first?

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Building relationships across differences requires us to confront our own ego, certainty, impatience, defensiveness, and desire to be understood before we understand. Technology may make many parts of leadership easier. Being human with other humans probably will not be one of them.

AgStrat works with founders and leaders who are building both stronger organizations and the personal capacity required to lead them. To begin a confidential conversation, contact AgStrat at virgil@agstratsolutions.com.

Humility | Curiosity | Relationship | Trust | Leadership