

Reaching for Rock-Solid Relationships

BY PAUL CASEY

Relationship-building has nothing to do with personality however, how we are wired does affect how we approach relationships. We are commanded to do the “one-anothers” in Scripture; obviously they cannot be lived out in isolation. I think most of us tend to choose isolation (task) over community (people), primarily because of our workload, but the most rewarding experiences in life and ministry occur with people. Leadership (influence) is relationships—the best leaders want to get close to others.

Ornish (1997) states, “Research shows that there is a lifelong connection between the quality of our relationships and our physical and mental well-being.” He continues, “Satisfying relationships have the greatest impact on our quality of life.”

Maxwell (2004) reminds us that “most people can trace their successes and failures to the relationships in their lives.” So, for starters, let’s look at some overarching principles of relationship-building:

- Be transparent and real with what God is teaching you. Rogers (1969) wrote “it is quite customary for teachers rather consciously to put on the mask, the role, the façade, of being a teacher, and to wear it all day, removing it only when they have left school at night.” Rogers made this statement the year that I was born, and it is still true today: we tend to clam up and be inauthentic. On the contrary, Wolk (2003) writes, “We all have successes and failures, dreams and hopes, and we need to share these with others to cultivate relationships, empathy, and understanding.”
- Display a sense of humor. Humor builds bridges in relationships.
- Be a good listener. An active listener gives attentive eye contact and paraphrases in his mind what he has heard. The greatest gift you can give someone is your time and your undivided attention.
- Display empathy. Get “behind their eyes” (well-put by Kevin Leman) and communicate what you think their needs and feelings might be.
- Think the best of people. Envision who they are and who they can become in Christ.
- Pray for them. It is difficult to be angry with someone for whom you are praying for God’s blessings.

Let us progress to six key relationship areas in our effort to firm-up our relationship building.

Relationships with Students

“You have to make that social and emotional connection with kids,” states Brown (2002) “in order to get inside their heads. . . . The fact that you care makes them see you differently.” Think about the most positively-impacting teachers you had in school. Were they the ones who relationally connected to you?

There is a side benefit for students who know how much you care about them. Marzano (2003) states that “The quality of teacher-student relationships is the keystone for all other aspects of classroom management.”

Consider the following tips for building a bond with your students:

- Talk informally with your students about non-school matters before, during, and after class, allowing students to better know you and to show them that you are listening to them. This tears down walls.
- Watch your tone of voice. Your voice should be pleasant, respectful, never harsh, critical, or sarcastic while giving firm guidance. (Students would rather have structure than no structure.)
- Watch your body language. Your facial and body language should show a calm demeanor, a caring attitude, and a genuine concern. Be relaxed, open, and friendly (smiling long before Thanksgiving).
- Start relationship-building at the beginning of the school year, learning about their likes/dislikes, culture, and learning style; “custom-treat” them. I believe differentiation of instruction and teaching to learning styles are some of the most respectful things we can do as teachers. Sizer (1999) agrees, “We cannot teach students well if we do not know them well.”
- Pray individually with students when you sense the Holy Spirit’s leading.
- Welcome your students warmly at the door. (I supervised a teacher who had the class say “Praise the Lord!” before entering the classroom in the morning to remind them of the privilege to attend a Christian school.)
- Use appropriate touch.
- Speak words of affirmation for student contributions, achievements outside of school, and progress toward goals.
- Be their advocate when they are struggling in their school work or social activities, including when they perceive they are being bullied.
- Maintain a predictable mood—not “roller-coaster-ish.”

- Spend time with students outside the class: recess and lunch chats, playing chess or shooting hoops; rewarding them with something away from the classroom—like a milkshake, or attending their games, always saying something nice to them when you are in public.
- Run a democratic classroom. I did not say democracy, but an environment known for choice, discourse, social responsibility, community, critical inquiry, authentic learning, and a relevant, creative curriculum.

Relationships with Parents

A fire-lighting quotation from Maxwell (1997) can be motivating in parent relationships, “If your connection is not as strong as it could be, remember that it is your role to be the initiator.”

Reflect on the following connectors with your students’ parents:

- Be a good communicator. Always keep parents in the loop—from classroom news to individual concerns that can stop a developing situation from occurring.
- Show parents you want to know, love, and care for their children while they are in your care.
- Partner with parents in finding solutions to problems.
- Have a mindset that you are there to serve the home.
- Create an atmosphere that shows parents they are welcome in your class, that will allow them to assist you when you need assistance.
- Be personal. Know your parents’ names.
- Send “thank you” notes to your students’ parents.
- Make positive phone calls to parents to praise their child. This is my single most important tip to new teachers; it deposits positive emotion into the parents’ emotional bank accounts.
- Be accessible. Give parents your contact information, and be available after school.

Relationships with Fellow Staff

Hoffman (2003) states, “The adults in the school set the tone for trusting relationships. When they model trust in their relationships with one another . . . decency and trust begin to permeate the school.”

Mayo (1930) expresses the necessity of unity between coworkers, “The most significant factor affecting organizational productivity was . . . interpersonal relationships that are developed on the job.”

Are you providing relational plug-ins with your colleagues?

- Ask for ideas and advice from others, and conversely share good ideas. Ask yourself, “What can I learn from my colleagues?” and “How can I add value to them?”
- Be an encourager through notes; be spontaneous and use kind words.
- Be an empathic listener without being a gossip (receiving an evil report).
- Look for needs to meet. Can you transfer sick days with a frequently ill teacher or cover a duty for someone having a rough day? “No man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself,” Ralph Waldo Emerson said.
- Distribute some good-natured, appropriate fun. Happy people treat others well, and having a good time is healthy.
- Show gratitude whenever the opportunity presents itself.

Relationships with Administration

You might be thinking, “Why do I need to connect with my administrator?” or “Since he or she does not connect relationally with me, why take the initiative myself?” Having been an administrator, I know that it can be lonely at the top, and praises are rarely given to the leader simply because he or she is easily overlooked, unless there is a problem.

Try to utilize the following techniques for “leading (and encouraging) up”:

- Remember the administrator’s “big-picture” view and the load they are under before criticizing. Then make suggestions or give input respectfully as opposed to lashing out, to circulating a petition, to ganging up with colleagues, or being demanding.
- Be an encourager. Administrators do not receive an abundance of nice words. How long would it take to write an encouraging letter or email?
- Support your administrator in public and in private; be a team player.

- Ask your administrator, “How are you really doing?”
- Pray for your administrator specifically (which goes back to the previous tip, since you have to know what to pray for).
- Keep your administrator in the loop with your life and your class.
- Follow procedures. Nothing strains the relationship more than forcing the administrator to confront you with an issue.

Relationships with Colleagues and Friends

I was tempted not to include colleague and friend relationships, but to do so we would ignore a rich community of non-family, non-work friends with whom to commiserate and grow.

With these needed friends and potential friends:

- Reach out to make new friends. Come out of your comfort zone. Connect at a teacher’s convention or get permission to visit another school.
- Find ways to give back to the professional community; be a seminar speaker and/or look for opportunities to share ideas.
- Locate people away from school to share frustrations with and to stay accountable to who will lift up your requests to God but not tell others.
- Keep a “social life” outside school; in the community with people who accept you not only as a teacher, but as a person of value in the body of Christ.

Relationships with Own Family

The last relationship is the first and most important people relationships. Your family must be first priority second only to your personal relationship with God.

I will close with a few reminders:

- Stay emotionally, physically, and spiritually healthy so that your family does not get the leftovers. My wife does not enjoy leftovers when it comes to food, nor my emotional remnants.
- Try not to take work home with you, so you can truly be “present.”

- Strive for spiritual intimacy with your family, in the forms of family devotions, prayer before the day starts, and worshipping together.

Conclusion

The necessity of rock-solid relationships is accentuated in the following quotation: "We are all angels with only one wing; we can only fly while embracing one another," Luciano De Crescenzo. Your ability or lack of ability to develop positive, godly relationships in the school community will help or hurt you as a Christian school teacher.

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