

The Power of Relationships in Your Career

by Jim Citrin

Knowing how the world works through relationships can bring your goal of career success and satisfaction closer. Find out how to adopt the mindset to connect.

"It's not what you know, but who you know."

I know this old saw sounds incredibly shallow, and it goes against the grain of the meritocracy we all generally believe creates an even playing field in our schools, organizations, economy, and society at large. But if you take the time to understand the art and power of relationships and the concept of how the world works through connections as a central component of -- not a substitute for -- our meritocracy, you might find that your path to success and satisfaction will be greatly accelerated.

Hailing a Success

In January 2003, *Inc.* magazine published an article by Tahl Raz called "[The 10 Secrets of a Master Networker](#)." It's about a charismatic and ambitious marketing consultant named Keith Ferrazzi.

The article was an immediate sensation and became one of the most highly requested reprints in the magazine's history. Ferrazzi started getting letters and emails by the hundreds about how the principles in the article changed readers' lives.

One particularly inspiring letter was from a New York City taxi driver. "He wrote to me that he was an immigrant to America, injured in the 9/11 attacks," Ferrazzi said. "After reading the article, the driver started talking to people in the back of his cab. Soon, he had regular customers and came to be able to afford his own town car. Now he has a flourishing business."

Feedback like this led Ferrazzi to write a book with Raz called [Never Eat Alone: And Other Secrets to Success, One Relationship at a Time](#), which has been a breakout national best-seller.

The Mindset to Connect

What does it mean to be connected? How do you build valuable, sustaining relationships? Ferrazzi says it has nothing to do with "networking." (Thank goodness, because just the word, much less the activity, makes my skin crawl.)

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Rather, it has everything to do with a mindset, which can be summed up in two parts:

1. Relationships are the core to your success.
2. All business relationships are personal relationships.

The first point shouldn't come as a surprise. Just about everything we do in both our personal and professional lives is dependent on other people. And how you interact with those people has a direct effect. Even such seemingly "non-relationship" things as learning from a teacher in school or getting a ticket from a police officer are directly affected by your relationship skills.

I just had this conversation with my kids, two of whom are in high school. "Who do you think the teacher will be more supportive of when it comes to assigning grades -- the student who does his work with a positive attitude, who goes in for extra help and pays full and engaged attention in class, or the one who sits back, even if they have the same test scores?"

For each and every thing you want to achieve in your career, from securing the best job and working on the most important projects to earning a major promotion and building your reputation, there will be other people deciding whether you deserve it.

Mixing Business with Pleasure

The second point is a fairly big leap for many people. The most common mistake people make when building relationships in their professional life, according to Ferrazzi, is treating business counterparts differently than personal friends.

Reflect for a moment on the people you work with -- either as colleagues or clients -- and who you also consider personal friends. Your work with them is almost always more enjoyable and productive because there's a basis of trust and an openness of communication.

Also, they're almost always more forgiving when you slip up and more helpful when you're in need. When businesses award contracts or client work of any type, whether investment, advisory, consulting, accounting, technology, advertising, or legal, the decision-makers are almost always considering both the value proposition (i.e., the value offered as it relates to cost) and the degree of personal comfort and trust in the service provider.

In other words, with roughly equal professional qualifications and competitive pricing, you will always win more business if you have a positive relationship with the potential client.

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Mutually Beneficial Relationships

How do you do it? The same way you make personal friends. Build trust through shared experience, commitment, honesty, and intimacy. People genuinely appreciate hard work, thinking on their behalf, responsiveness, creativity, and straightforward communications - no posturing.

In addition, your relationships will accelerate to the extent that you open up your family and personal life in the appropriate amounts and at the appropriate times. Ferrazzi adds, "Show them that besides being professional, you're human. Skip the small talk and go deep into what really matters -- your dreams or fears, your children or the business issues that keep you up at night. And don't think for a moment that they'll think less of you. In fact, usually the opposite happens."

Equally important, to adapt JFK's famous invocation, "Ask not what your business counterpart can do for you; ask what you can do for your business counterpart." To really build meaningful relationships, start thinking about how you're going to make those around you successful.

Invest your energy, creativity, and access to your relationships to make others successful. And do so without ever keeping score.

A Bounty of Rewards

Ferrazzi adds that in addition to helping others succeed as a way to build relationships, "You also have to be able to accept generosity when it's offered. There are times when you can make a big difference in another person's life. You can open an important door or help set up an internship -- one of those simple acts by which destinies are altered.

"There are times when someone can do the same for you. But too often the offer is refused. You might say, 'Sorry, but I can't accept the favor,' thinking to yourself you'd rather not be obligated to anyone."

Great relationships are two-way streets, though, so sometimes you'll need to let your guard down, accept someone else's generosity, and say a simple but heartfelt "thank you."

You might not have control over events that unfold around you, or the timing of important decisions or the world at large. But you do have control over the ability to build meaningful and valuable relationships. In doing so, you'll create assets that will generate economic and psychic rewards for years to come.

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