



# Why Cultivating Connectivity Counts for your Leadership Success...

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Based on materials and experiences drawn from our  
Leading with Emotional Intelligence Tool-Kit and Master Class

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Donna regularly received complaints about how she seemed to treat others. Her performance was flawless in her professional capacity yet flawed in terms of her leadership capacity. Partly it was how she saw herself as a direct, 'no-nonsense' type who wasn't afraid to 'call a spade a spade'. During her coaching sessions with me, Donna discovered things went deeper...

She was blind to how she came across. Her manner was not just direct. It was demanding, abrupt, abrasive and lacking in empathy or understanding, as she ended-up saying of herself. It wasn't her intention to be like that, and as we peeled back more layers she realised she felt unconfident connecting, and rationalised this as a waste of time in terms of getting work done.

## Connectivity Comes First

I notice that more leaders now connect successful outcomes with their level of *emotional intelligence* – their ability to 'tune into themselves' and be more mindful of the impact their thinking, feelings, moods and behaviour have on the people they lead. They're interested in a more connective style – *in leading through feelings*.

Yet there's still many Donnas out there in work-land who seem to see connecting with people as a 'time-soak' rather than a central part of their role. In my *Leading with Emotional Intelligence* program, I try to get across that *'connectivity is a basic precondition for almost everything else leaders do'* – that without connection, you can't persuade, influence, inspire, motivate or co-ordinate – *that if you want committed action and superior performance, you best connect with their feelings first*.

□ Connectivity is not only a telling social factor for constructive work relationships. You need to connect at the 'feelings' level because this is often where many performance problems and motivational stimuli lie. People can't focus and do good work if they're distracted by strong emotions.



□ Success revolves more than we think around our level of connectivity, and to do something about bettering that takes *emotional intelligence*.

□ It covers leader competencies like: being mindful of how I feel and come across; managing disruptive emotions and staying balanced; using emotions to build positive relationships; and empathy – being able to read how others feel and resonate with them.

- Emotionally intelligent leaders are always connective; always try to make themselves approachable; and always make the time to engage in connective conversations with others. Even when faced with difficult situations where hard messages have to be delivered, they stay connected, respond with sensitivity, authenticity, respect and care, and always keep one eye on the relationship.

## Connective Conversations



Of course connectivity, as you know, has much to do with the way we talk to each other and how much respect, positive regard, acceptance and safety there is in a workplace.

Conversations are the playing field where leaders most visibly demonstrate their level of EI. Through connective conversations,

- we inspire, energise and motivate; build a sense of harmony, unity and belongingness; set the tone of our workplaces and create supportive cultures that make for good work.
- we get in tune with feelings of people around us and shape supportive emotional climates; build team spirit, trust and encourage each other to show initiative, ask for help or talk over mistakes.

The calibre of conversations you engage in is a key element for the effective functioning of your team. If your conversations are off-colour, you don't connect and your team's likely to be suffering too!

Unfortunately, connective conversations don't happen in many workplaces. We don't connect deeply with each other. Things are kept 'polite'. Genuine feelings remain unexpressed. Hard issues are avoided, and true needs and feelings are rarely revealed. The result?

- Vastly different understandings and misapprehensions develop about each others' motives, about what the priorities are – and feelings never get aired openly.
- Before we know it, trust deteriorates; coordination breaks down; complaints, mistakes, and misunderstandings multiply; productivity plummets and workplace climates turn toxic.

When you think begin to think of it this way, connective conversations can be seen as an indispensable leadership tool! When conversations are emotionally off-colour, coordination breaks down, mistakes multiply, productivity plummets and your team is likely to be suffering too! They leave people emotionally exhausted, despondent, distrustful or just plain frustrated.

The most common causes of difficulty can be traced to low levels of listening, acknowledging and sharing of feelings and thoughts – in other words, to a lack of empathy. Like Donna, the trouble is that much of the time, we tend to use conversations to be critical, judgemental and positional rather than supportive, connective and appreciative.

## Empathy in Action



The person you're talking to will be telling you about a situation they've experienced. As they do, you notice there's a tone in their voice or a facial gesture that gives away the fact there are feelings associated with their story.

There always are – and often it's part of the leader's job to find out what those feelings are and help the person deal with them. This takes empathy.

- Empathy is what makes connective leadership possible. Think of it as your emotional guidance system or social radar...
- Connective leaders read what other people are thinking and feeling. This empathetic connection keeps them in touch and in tune. It's not fiction. It's real brain function. Empathy is what our limbic system is for.

- ❑ Spindle cells and mirror neurons, for instance, are designed to detect subtle emotional signals others emit. They thickly connect our orbito-frontal cortex – *the likingness centre* – to our limbic system and light up as the OFC processes how we respond to someone – friend or foe? Like or be wary?
- ❑ Before our thinking brain decides, our OFC via the spindle cell connection has already made up our mind for us! *So likingness is one important basis for real empathy.*
- ❑ Our limbic system acts like an emotional radar – constantly scanning the human terrain, picking up emotional ‘blips’ that help us tune in to others and get on the same wavelength. Neuroscientists call this ‘limbic resonance’. It also explains how we feel sad or glad when someone else does.

There are many signals our emotional radar detects, from reading between the lines, non-verbal signals, facial expressions, tone of voice and generally intuiting someone’s mood or sensibility – to actual chemical emissions. It all adds up to an immediate and automatic sense of what other people are feeling.



But you can also see empathy in action. Watch closely. People incline toward each other, they nod more vigorously, tension goes out of their bodies.

They may even begin to mirror each other’s body posture, hand gestures, facial expressions or tone. There’s an aura of relaxed attentiveness and listening without interrupting goes up. It’s a dance – as Daniel Goleman once famously called it – *a limbic tango...*

In more everyday terms, empathy is reading emotions without others having to tell you what they feel. Sensing what others feel without their saying so is the essence of empathy. It’s about picking up on where someone else is coming from feelings-wise (even if I don’t agree with it). We often speak of being able to ‘read the emotions’ of other people – this is empathy in action.

When we’re empathetic, we’re receptive to other people’s feelings as well as to our own. The more attentive we can make ourselves in the moment, the more attuned our limbic radar becomes. Flipping the coin, emotional states like self-absorption, anger, contempt and harsh disapproval dull our radar and dissipate empathy. When we’re hyper-critical or too judgemental of someone else, we close ourselves off to what they’re feeling.

## Practical Empathy

There are several practices that make leaders more connective but empathy is the most foundational. Most important is listening without criticism, with judgement filters switched off, and with the urge to leap in to say what we want to say firmly curtailed.

Research shows anyone can limber-up their limbic radar and improve the accuracy of their emotional readings by mentally exercising their limbic systems. It can start with something as simple as paying attention to faces and reading what your radar tells you.

But why exercise to fine-tune our limbic radars you ask? Because, when it comes to leading, empathy serves us well in lots of practical ways. For a start, understanding what people feel – getting insights into what makes them tick – is essential for working out how to best deal with them and their particular situation. But empathy serves us well in several other ways too:



- ❑ It enables us to handle feelings in relationships with skill, sensitivity, harmony and humour. Being able to read what others feel is also part of our own emotional guidance system. We take our emotional cues and make up our emotional minds based on how others feel.

- ❑ If we can read how people feel accurately, we can predict how they might react. This enables us to modify our message or behaviour so we can *'get through'* to them better.
- ❑ Reading where people are coming from feeling-wise is at the bottom of good relationships, getting along well with others, building friendships, supporting and makes good customer service sense too.
- ❑ It's also important if you want to get your own way too. To influence someone, I have to create a connection with them first so they'll trust what I have to say and pay attention.
- ❑ With empathy, leaders can say and do what's appropriate to match the feelings and moods in others around them. We can also head off and calm emotional outbursts from others.
- ❑ When we empathise – even if the other person is being hostile or unreasonable toward us – it seems to provide a re-balancing moment, where both of us can re-assess and cool-off.



*"Followers look to a leader for supportive emotional connections – for empathy"* says Daniel Goleman. Yet many managers are still wary of it. Empathy's a word that makes many of us go green.

We associate it with being soft and mushy, giving in to tears, taking a too softly-softly approach when we should be stern or stoic, or allowing ourselves to all-too-easily catch another person's mood and be disabled or flooded by their strong feelings – giving in to tears, catching a disabling mood, being flooded by another's panic.

Sometimes of course this confusion arises because we mix up empathy with sympathy. This is where we take on the same emotion as the other person (eg. If they're feeling sad, we start to feel sad too). It's summed up when we say we "feel sorry" for someone.

Funnily enough, we tend not to notice other critical times when we catch an emotion that inspires us, makes us feel determined, gives us a sense of hope, leads us to pull together, focus, or gets us out of the doldrums. But that's empathy at work as well! On the other hand, taking a *no-empathy-here approach* doesn't seem too constructive. Those lacking empathy (or rather, choosing not to tune in to their radar) often act in ways that antagonise, upset and grate with people. They say or do things that distance or disconnect them from others.

## Taking Steps

The first step in moving towards empathy is making yourself have *the intention to pay attention*.

Of course telling yourself you're *"no good at empathy"* is a sure way to guarantee you stay that way. Saying we can't read feelings often has to do with a fear we might get it wrong if we try, get sucked into someone's else's feelings vortex or simply that we can't be bothered to read the signals our radar's sending us or we're feelings-shy. But the thing is, the more we practise tuning into our radar and reading feelings, the better we get at it.

- For example, why not practice taking that extra few seconds to empathise, to acknowledge something the other person thinks or feels (eg. *"Seems like you feel/think that..."*)?
- Conversationally, this is called "2nd position statement" and it's a simple but powerful connector that shows you're *'being present'* for people.
- Or simply make time to spend with staff and have enough genuine interest to add that extra question or comment to show you care. (eg. *"Tell me more. I've got the time"*, *"I really want to hear"*, *"Is there a way I can help?"* or *"I was concerned you might feel like that..."*)



- Express gratitude in a way that inspires cooperation, honesty and trust and motivates people to do better (eg. “I really liked how you did that” or “I really appreciated it when you...”). And finally...
- Be genuine in what you say too. Don’t ignore your feelings and thoughts – be courageous enough to share them. When others feel we’re speaking our truth, from the heart, this can increase trust and openness between us.



Connectivity is the 2nd of *7 Practices of Emotionally Intelligent Leaders* we cover-off in our 2-day leadership learning program on *Personal Mastery: Leading with Emotional Intelligence*

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