

White Paper

High-Quality Connections

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Key Points:

- High-quality connections are short-term, positive interactions at work that foster beneficial outcomes for individual employees and the organization.
- The mechanisms behind connection quality uncover ways leaders can shape interactions at work more positively.
- Creating and sustaining these connections is contingent on the organizational context and how leaders facilitate connections

Introduction

We live in a work world that relies increasingly on temporary connections and swift coordination. Accordingly, individuals have to build high-quality connections quickly within and across organizational boundaries. Understanding high-quality connections in the workplace is crucial for leaders interested in developing individuals and building strong organizations.

Foundations of High-Quality Connections:

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Impacts of High-Quality Connections:

HQCs impact individual and organizational performance because they:

- Improve individual functioning (e.g., cognitive processing speed, memory, and immune system)
- Facilitate individual employees' recovery from challenges and adaptation to change (e.g. during transitions in their careers)
- Enable individuals to develop, grow and form attachments to their organization
- Create moments of learning and mutual inquiry (e.g. during organizational change)
- Foster psychological safety and trust, which contribute to greater unit-level learning from failures
- Spawn spirals of increasing cooperation and trustworthiness across the organization
- Improve organizational processes (e.g. coordination and error detection)

Forming High-Quality Connections: (Figure 1)

There are three basic pathways through which HQCs at work are built and strengthened:

1: Cognitive mechanisms

Conscious and unconscious thought processes predispose employees to building HQCs:

- Other-awareness: the capacity to distinguish between the behaviors, cognitions, and emotions of the self and that of others. Acknowledging another person's presence and being aware of what others are doing is a primary mechanism for establishing connection.
- Impressions of others: Employees form impressions about another person based on 'thin slices' (less than 5 minutes) of their behavior, such as gestures and facial expressions. Initial impressions shape how connections develop, and who employees chose to connect with.
- Perspective-taking: Perspective-taking involves mentally representing the other's experience as one's own. It helps predict another person's behavior and shapes one's own behaviors in ways that demonstrate care and concern, facilitating a positive response from the other.

2: Emotional mechanisms

Feelings open employees up to connection and are shared between employees in ways that build HQCs:

- Positive emotions: Positive emotions broaden employee's thinking and help build durable, social resources. Gratitude is particularly relevant for building HQCs because it boosts attention to the positive qualities of the benefactor and the motivation to relate to the benefactor.
- Emotional contagion: Emotional contagion is how a person or group influences the emotions and attitudes of another person or group. Through emotional contagion, individuals can share similar emotional experiences as they unconsciously mimic each other's facial expressions, movements, and vocalizations. This increased mimicry is linked to greater liking and rapport.
- Empathy: Empathy occurs when a person vicariously experiences another's emotion. When employees feel empathy for another, they experience warmth, compassion, and concern for the other, which, in turn, motivates altruistic and pro-social behavior, which are markers of HQCs.

3: Behavioral mechanisms

Behaviors are observable elements of interpersonal communication and are critical for building HQCs:

- Respectful engagement: Everyday behaviors and small moves (e.g. gestures, talk and bodily postures) communicate how one person values another. When these behaviors demonstrate the basic human entitlements of respect and dignity they foster peoples' chances of experiencing a HQC.
- Task enabling: Interpersonal actions that help someone complete a task (e.g. through the provision of information, emotional support and other resources) cultivate perspective-taking and gratitude, which fosters connection quality.
- Play: Playful activities enable variation in response patterns, promoting learning about another that is less likely in a work or non-play mode. Being fully engaged with others in the rules that set play apart from the "real world" encourages interpersonal risk-taking, and a loss of self-consciousness. These feelings help open people up to connecting with others they may otherwise not know.

The Role of the Organizational Context:

The workplace moderates connection-building because it alters the opportunities, forms, and meaning of connecting. Using examples from Menlo Innovations, a software design firm that relies on pairs of programmers to develop computer code, we illustrate how organizational practices can foster HQC mechanisms:

- **Organizational practices and cognitive mechanisms.** Practices shape what people know about each other and about the organization. In the case of Menlo, the practice of “extreme interviewing” allows for the acquisition, sharing, and building of information between people. In this process for selecting new employees, 50 candidate programmers directly interact and work with the entire staff. This kind of interviewing allows potential hires to demonstrate skills like perspective-taking as they develop, correct, and share code with other interviewees and current staff. Through observing and reporting on the candidates, Menlo staff test out their initial impressions of job candidates in the context of a participatory hiring process. By selecting on demonstrated skills, Menlo increases the likelihood that employees will have perspective-taking capabilities that allow them to build high-quality connections, and also ensures that current staff involved in the selection process are more aware of new hires, their capabilities, and thus their potential for connection.
- **Organizational practices and emotional mechanisms.** Menlo’s use of daily stand-up meetings is a practice that allows employees to express needs, gratitude, and admiration for others in a public, group setting on a regular basis. Meetings matter, since they serve as arenas for situating others in their roles. Every day the staff, programmers, and directors working in the Menlo office gather in a circle to each give a 20-60 second report on the status of their current project. Standing in a circle puts each person on an equal footing, decreasing status differences that can get in the way of building high-quality connections. These meetings give each individual the opportunity to express their concerns, advice, offers of assistance, and gratitude for help received. Such meetings allow people to collectively and publicly express the positive emotions of gratitude and admiration that affirm others’ contributions, and foster higher-quality connections.
- **Organizational practices and behavioral mechanisms.** Respectful communication is routinized through the practice of the stand-up meeting as well. The turn-taking that is enforced as part of these meetings allows for mutual and collective engagement as each individual or pair of programmers speaks out on their current needs. People only speak up when a Viking helmet (with two horns) is passed to them. This allows members of pairs to both signal that they “hold the floor” as a unit, delimiting who speaks when. These kinds of rituals for turn-taking can be very important for shaping interaction dynamics. In this context, using the helmet also makes the meeting more playful. This play encourages people to open up even more about their struggles and successes, facilitating higher-quality connections.

Conclusion:

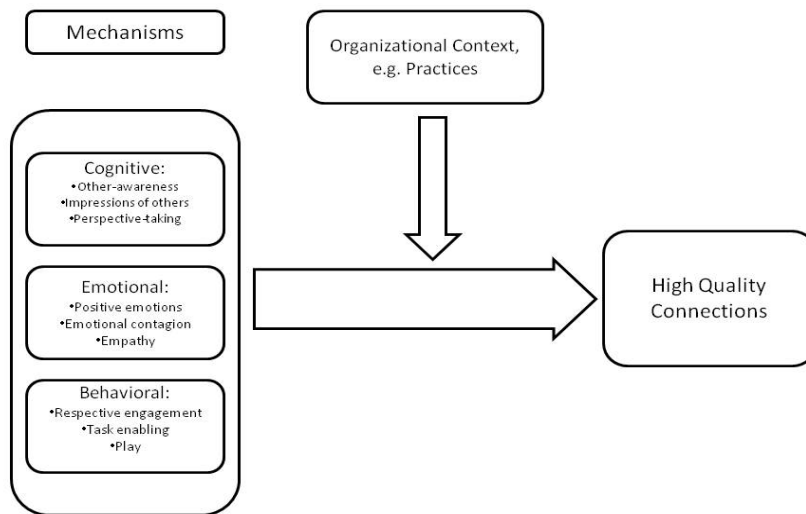
Given the evidence for the value of HQCs to individual and organizational functioning, it is important to understand how such connections are built and strengthened. By understanding the mechanisms associated with HQCs, leaders can broaden and refine the picture of how employees initiate and skillfully cultivate HQCs, and ultimately, positive relationships with others at work.

Take Action:

- ✓ Become more aware of your colleagues (who they are, what they are doing.)
- ✓ Monitor your non-verbal behavior (e.g. gestures, facial expressions) for warmth and acceptance.
- ✓ Put yourself in others' shoes and shape your behaviors to demonstrate empathy, care, and concern.
- ✓ Express gratitude towards your colleagues and intentionally provide something valuable to others.
- ✓ Show affirmation and respect when interacting with your colleagues.
- ✓ Provide information, emotional support and other resources to task-enable your colleagues.
- ✓ Incorporate formal (e.g. human resource practices) and informal (turn-taking at meetings, playful activities) organizational practices that enable the opportunities to connect with others.

*This paper was summarized by Penelope Mallinckrodt (Ross MBA '13) based on chapter 12 of Cameron and Spreitzer's (Eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship* (2012).

Figure 1. Conceptual model of the mechanisms for building HQCs



About the Authors:

Jane Dutton is the Robert L. Kahn Distinguished University Professor of Business Administration and Psychology at the Ross School of Business and her research focuses on processes that build capabilities and strengths of employees in organizations. In particular, Dutton has studied compassion and organizations, resilience and organizations, as well as energy and organizations. (See www.compassionlab.org) She has published over 100 articles and book chapters, edited 11 books, and written a book for managers called *Energize your Workplace: How to Build and Sustain High Quality Connections at Work* (Jossey-Bass Publishers). Dutton is a core faculty member of the Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship.

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