

Solve Anything with Dr. Mark

Career Advice
for the
Working Class

Can you relate?

Q: I think I have focused on my technical expertise at the cost of relationships. Even the word “relationships” is a little foreign to me. I know what a team or group is, but the “relate” part is puzzling to me. Yet I see that in difficult times my peers that have the best business relationships have the best chance of finding jobs when they’re out of work and they also seem less stressed than technically-proficient-relationship-challenged me. Can you give me some tips on building business relationships?

A: You’re not the only technically competent person to realize that your skills are not enough to guarantee a successful career, or, in this day and age, guarantee employment. To your credit, you appear open to coaching.

So I asked Ed Wallace, author of “Business Relationships that Last: Five Steps To Transform Contacts into High Performing Relationships” (Greenleaf Book Group, \$19.95) for tips for a person who is new to building relationships (and not too sure of himself).

Here’s what Wallace recommends:

- **Success is not a secret.**

Building successful business relationships is a combination of soft skills and hard skills. And it’s OK to apply process to how you build your relationships. As a technically minded person, you are already hardwired to apply process to what you do. The skills you’ll need to work on developing are the soft skills. It’s OK to go slow. Keep in mind that the more you practice the soft skills of relationships, the easier it will become for you. Take the time to really get to know people. What makes them tick. What are they passionate about? If they didn’t have to be at work, what would they be doing?

- **Accept that your relationships are what will make you stand out from your peers, and then make a plan to strengthen your relationships.**

What can you do to develop relationships? First of all, always be yourself. Then start by getting out of your cube and into the halls. Avoid phone addiction during meetings and meeting breaks. Use the time before and after meetings to talk to real people, face-to-face. You are sure to uncover some common interests. The possibilities are endless. Ask someone to eat lunch or have coffee with you on your breaks. Avoid accumulating “etheral” (read: online gaming) relationships. Join industry associations. Get



Q&A

out from behind your computer and meet new people in your industry by attending those industry association meetings. Go to industry conferences. Volunteer to represent your company at trade show booths and at your local community charity service days. Start a social group that includes people like yourself who have difficulty reaching out to others, and organize social events that appeal to the group. Sometimes just hosting a gathering at a local coffee house or pub will help you break out of your shell and connect with others.

- **Remember that goals are just dreams until you write them down.**

To start to improve your most important business relationships, you first need to identify them. Take a few minutes to think about the actual existing relationships you do have in your world. Take out a piece of paper, write your name in the middle of it, and then begin writing down in circles all the people you know in all the different groups (like industry, social, friends and family, peers and colleagues, community, etc.).

Now reflect on your goals for the next 12 months as you look at all those names. Write down on the back of that piece of paper the five most important business relationships you need to advance in order to achieve your goals.

- **Work on developing the essential character qualities crucial to successful relationships:**

1. *Credibility* 2. *Integrity* 3. *Authenticity*

In successful business relationships, these qualities form the very basis of each relationship. And while each quality is important in its own right, learning how the three converge is the key. One way to demonstrate that you have these qualities is to “go ugly as early as possible.” In a nutshell, don’t let bad news fester. Bad news generally gets worse over time, negatively impacts others’ perceptions of you, and eventually creates a great deal more hassle and concern than it would have, had you dealt with the bad news up front.

- **And last, but certainly not least — ask for and offer help.**

Open generosity in a relationship creates strong bonds between people. Remember that a lot of people are not as comfortable with technology as you probably are. Offer to help a contact in your network who could do the least for you, but for whom with a small amount of attention, you could do the most for. Or think of a contact who could greatly benefit from an introduction you could make on their behalf. Make the introduction, without any expectation of reciprocation.

Ask Mark • Mark Goulston is a Santa Monica-based management adviser, executive coach and author of the book, “Just Listen: Discover the Secret to Getting Through to Absolutely Anyone.” Ask him questions at mgoulston@markgoulston.com.