

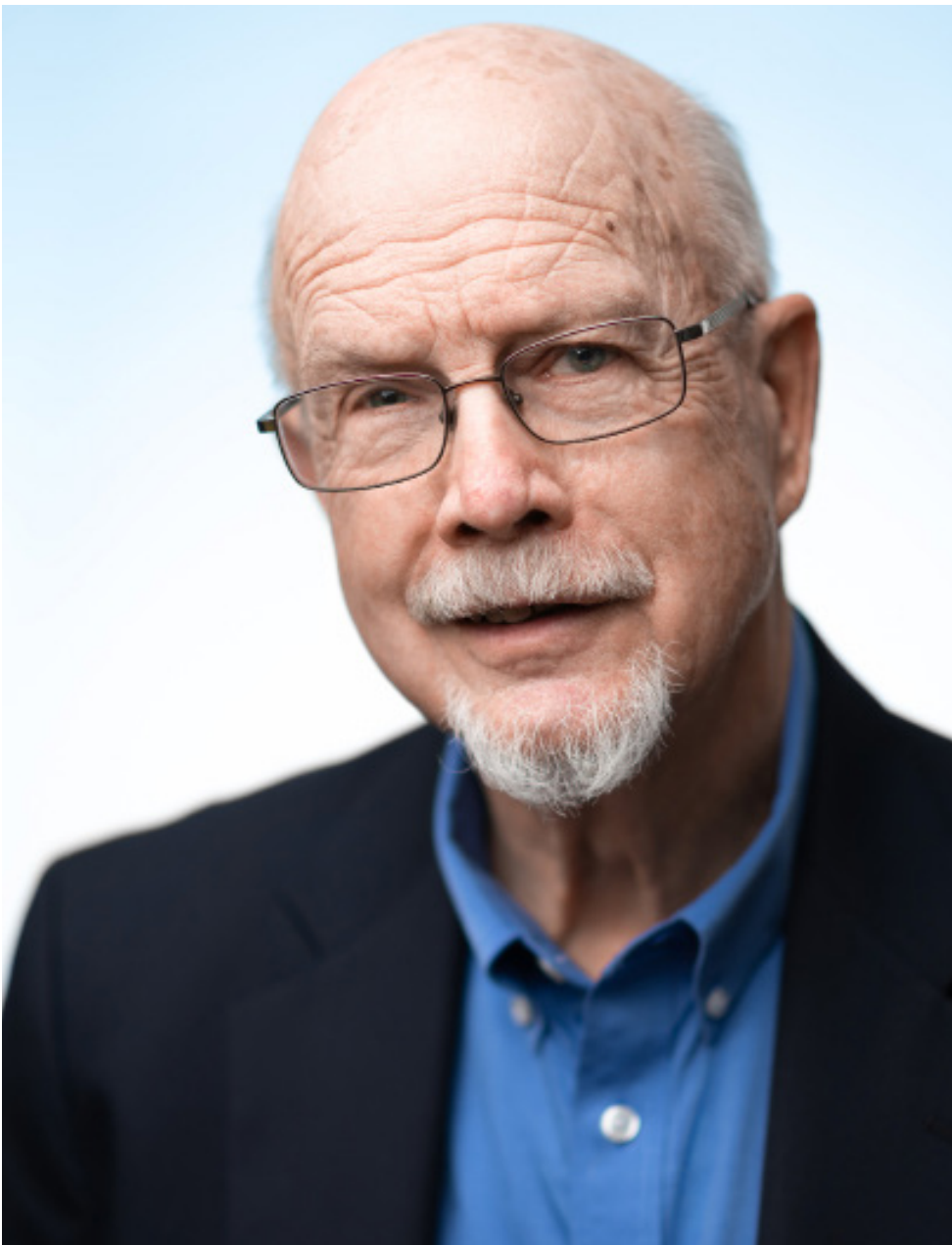
FROM GATHERING OF TEAMS

YOU CAN BE MORE HONEST THAN YOU THINK

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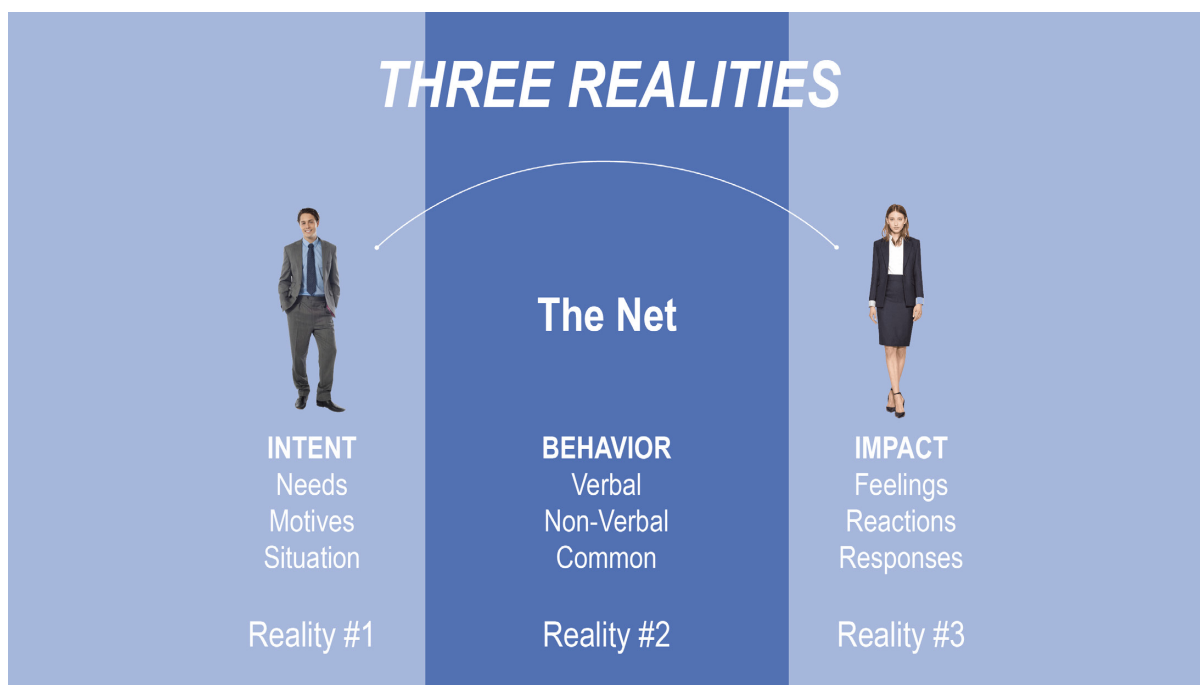
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I want to talk today about the importance of being honest.

Specifically, about how you can be even more honest than you think you can be. You have to be honest and build honesty in your organization so problems are raised earlier. That way, when people are doing something that's dysfunctional, others will say something. You hire people for potential, so you're going to have to give them developmental feedback to achieve that potential. You want to build a culture, a purposeful organization, but people are going to act in ways that may violate that. You have to be able to raise that, confront them, and deal with it. And if you act in dysfunctional ways, you have to be able to handle people's reactions. I



want to talk about how you can build that honesty. We often are scared about being honest. We're afraid we'll hurt the other person. We're afraid that we'll demoralize them. We're afraid they may be mad at us. We're afraid that it will hurt the relationship.

For over 50 years, at Stanford's Graduate School of Business, we've studied how you can build more open, direct, honest relationships. And we've taught it to the students in our class, formally called Interpersonal Dynamics, but students call it Touchy-Feely. They do a lot of touching and they have a lot of feelings, and I want to talk about what this is.

From this work, there are two primary principles that we believe. One is that if you stick with your reality, you can say almost anything, to almost anybody. Second, we believe that if you stick with your reality, then raising difficult issues and confronting others can actually build the relationship and can build connections.

Now, what do I mean when I say "stick with our reality?" It turns out there are three realities when people interact. Here we have Jim on the left and we have Janet on the right. There are three realities there. First, there are Jim's objectives; that's his reality. Only Jim knows that. That leads him to act in a certain way, use certain words, gestures, non-verbals, tone. His behavior constitutes a second reality. He sees that and Janet sees that; that's a reality in common. The third reality is the effect of that behavior on Janet. How does it make her feel? Does it make her feel accepted? Rejected? Closer to him? Distant? More trusting or less? And how is it going to affect her response? Will she withhold information or share more? Be more cooperative or less? Only Janet knows that reality. Now Jim needs to understand her reality if he's to be effective.

On the diagram is the word "Net" and we see an arrow going

back and forth. There are actually two nets. One net is between Jim's intention and his behavior, and the second one is between the behavior and Janet's reaction. I want you to think of a tennis net. In tennis, you can't play in the other person's back court. You've got to stay on your side of the net.

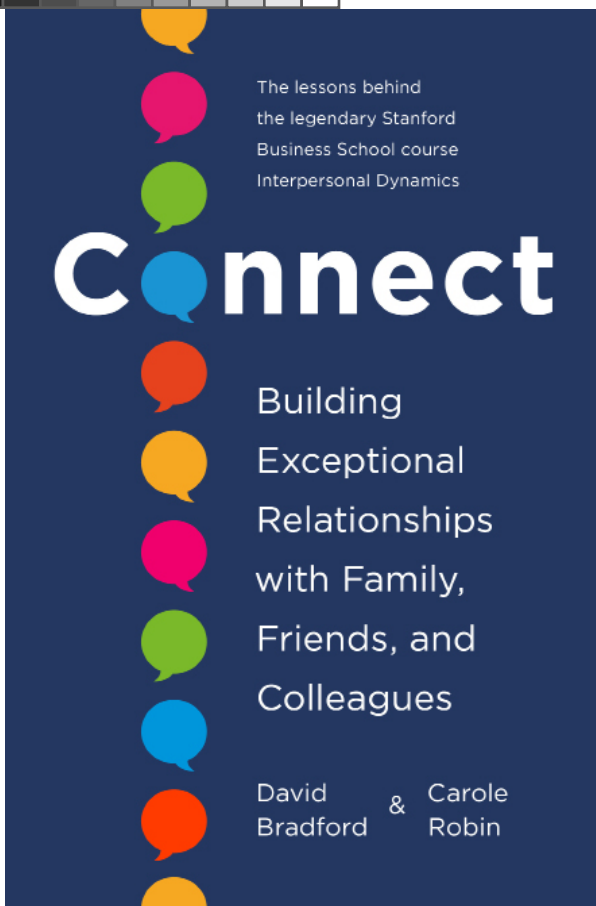
However, think of what most dysfunctional feedback is in organizations. "You just want to dominate." "You only think of your own area." "You're not really committed to the purpose of this organization." "You always have to have the last word." Notice that if Janet makes those statements, she's over Jim's net. She's mind-reading Jim about his intentions and motive. No wonder he's going to be defensive. Even worse, if she's spun up about his behavior, she may say, "You know, you're really egotistical. The trouble is you're insecure and you just want to be in control." She's put personality labels on his actions. No wonder people are hurt. No wonder we have problems interacting. She is not sticking with her reality.

Another problem is that if Janet had made the first comment, "You just want to dominate," it is ineffective. Jim has only to say, "No, I don't." She says, "Yes you do." "No, I don't." And they're in a pissing contest, and nothing good happens.

Let's use this interactive model to see what is possible. Imagine that Janet is starting to think that Jim wants to dominate and control her. That's her conclusion. She's making up a story. She's moving outside what she knows. The first question is, what's the behavior? Is she developing those stories because he interrupts her? Because he disagrees with most of what she has to say? Because he has the last word? She needs to focus on the specific behavior.

Let's assume it's because he interrupts her a lot. (Personally, I can understand that; I interrupt people all the time so that's very familiar!) The second question is what's the effect on her?





How does it make her feel? What are her emotional reactions? How's it going to get her to respond?

Rather than saying, "You just want to dominate," could she say, "Jim, you tend to interrupt me quite frequently. It annoys me, it makes me feel distant from you and it decreases my willingness to raise new issues with you." When you stick with your reality, it's indisputable. Janet's saying, "When you interrupt me, this is how I feel and these are the consequences," and Jim can't say, "No you don't." If he does, he's over her net. How she feels is indisputable and therefore it requires attention.

Now, what if Jim were to say, "That's your problem." One of the clues I want to give you is if somebody else's behavior is bothering you, it's likely to be costly to them. So Janet can say, "Yeah, it might be my problem, but it's also our problem. We work together, we're interdependent. It turns out that when you interrupt me a lot, I stop listening to much of what you have to say. That's not in your best interest. Furthermore, it decreases my tendency to want to bring up new issues with you. That doesn't help us. So, it's our problem. We need to deal with that."

All of this may sound quite simple, and the model is quite simple, but it's difficult to implement. The problem with this is not the concept. The problem is putting it into practice. Most of you are too young, I'm afraid, to remember a comic strip called Pogo. He said, "We have met the enemy, and they is us."

I know this very well because not infrequently, when I'm in an argument, even with my wife, I go over the net. And she says, "You teach this stuff. Why don't you do it?" We're all human. When we are bothered by somebody else, we start to make up stories.

I recently talked with my cousin, Sarah, of whom I'm very fond. Sarah reported an incident with Linda, a friend of hers, who had gotten mad at Sarah. Sarah told me, "She does this pretty frequently. I do something, and then she gets mad at me.

I think I know what's going on." Sarah said, "Well, it's because of how Linda was raised and how she sees me." I said, "Sarah, you're making up that story." "Oh, I'm sure about it," she said being firmly entrenched that she was right.

The trouble is not so much that we make up stories about what motivates other people, but that we start to believe them. We forget that it's our story and isn't necessarily what's going on with the other person! The second problem is that we don't focus on behavior. If you say to somebody, "You have the wrong attitude," that's not a behavior. That's a conclusion you have made based on a series of actions. Can you dial it back and point out the behavior?

What's important about that is, if you can point it out, it's indisputable. If Janet says, "You frequently interrupt me," Jim can't say, "No I don't," or if he does, she can reply, "Yes, you did it two minutes ago here, four minutes ago there, six minutes ago there." When you focus on behavior, it's very specific. It's indisputable.

The other tendency we have is to not share the impact on us. We all agree about the importance of vulnerability, but do we often share our vulnerable feelings? Can Janet say, "You know, I'm really feeling put down. Actually, I'm sort of feeling hurt when you interrupt me all the time." That's her being personal and being vulnerable and that is what builds relationships. Also, it's being powerful because sharing your feelings should come out of strength. If I feel good enough about myself, I can share what I feel. We don't do that enough.

If you want to give feedback to somebody else, my question to you is, what's your intention? If you want to hurt them, ignore everything I've said. Go over the net. Do a personality assessment on them. Maybe it'll make you feel good, but it'll kill the relationship. What the hell, if you don't care! But if you do care about the relationship, can you speak to the other person's best interest?

At Stanford, we say, "Feedback is a gift." Imagine that you're a colleague of Jim's and observe the effect of his interrupting. You could say, "You're hurting yourself, and I want to talk to you. This is what you're doing. Here's the impact on me. This is how I feel when you're interrupting." You have information that Jim may not have and that is why feedback is a gift. It may not feel like a gift to Jim at that time, but that is your intention. If you really want to be honest and build the relationship, speak to the other person's best interests. If they don't know the effect of their behavior. It's like shooting in the dark and you don't hit many targets when you shoot in the dark.

This simple model of the three realities is hard to implement. You are going to be over the net, you are going to forget behavior, and you are going to forget to share the impact on you. But the nice thing about this model is that you can catch yourself.

The model also helps you when the other person is over your net. Unfortunately, the world hasn't heard this theory yet and others will give you feedback that is full of their stories. I said that I interrupt a lot, so let's imagine that somebody comes up to me and says, "David, the trouble is, you just want to control



our interactions." Well, I'm first going to feel defensive. Can I hold back my defensiveness a little bit? Or I may want to share it, but not be controlled by it. "Joe, you know, I'm feeling a little defensive but let me put that aside." Then can I push him back over the net to his side – to what he does know? "Joe, that's not my intention" (reality number one) "but clearly I'm doing something that's giving you that impression (reality number two). What am I doing that has that effect? (reality number three)." I've turned an attack into a learning experience for me. Use the model, speak to the other person's best interests, stick with behavior and effects.

There's something else. Feedback is a process. We'd like to think it's nice and clean. I've thought about it, I'm going to give you this feedback, and you're going to say "Oh, thank you very much," and that's it. But it's not that simple. Feedback is a messy process. And you might want it to be.


Beware of the person who, when you give them important feedback, immediately says, "Thank you very much. I have never heard that before. I am going to take that and change." Do you believe them? Hell no. It's gone in one ear and out the other. You want the other person to struggle with the message and say, "Oh no, wait a minute. I don't do that all the time." Then you say, "That's right, you don't do it all the time. But you did it here, here, and here." You may have to be persistent.

Feedback is a gift if that's your intention. The other person may not kiss you on both sides of the cheek right afterwards, but if you want to put people first it might be necessary to share your reality that could help them. One of the phrases we use at Stanford is stolen from the Hallmark slogan; we say, "I care enough to say the very worst." If I see you hurting yourself and if I don't raise it, that's not caring. That's not kindness. Kindness is saying, "We have to talk about this. I'm bothered about what you're doing, and I think it's hurting you."

An important question is, when do you raise this? You don't want to walk around being the savior of everybody and giving everybody feedback all the time. That may not be the culture/ climate you want to build. You're going to have to be selective.

Often, we say to ourselves, "Oh, it's not worth it." It may not be worth it, but I want you to test it and I want you to change the "it." Reframe that and say to yourself, "He's not worth it. I'm not worth it. The relationship isn't worth it." And if your conclusion is "it's not worth it, then maybe it's not worth it. But if you frame it that way, you're going to likely think maybe it is worth it. Maybe it's worth it to take the chance.

You always have choices. When students say, "I can't," we don't let them do it. Saying "can't" speaks to a physical impossibility. I can't jump over this building. I can't go to the top and jump and live." When somebody says, "I can't," say, "No, you're choosing not to. You are making that choice." So when you see somebody acting in ways that are hurting them, that are hurting the organization, that are hurting your culture, and you say to yourself, "Well, do I say something or do I not," remember that everything you do is a choice and has an effect.

One of the effects is that if somebody is doing something that's hurting the culture and you let it go by, you are implicitly approving of it. You are supporting it. So I want you to always be aware that you have a choice. You have a choice about whether to raise something. You have a choice about whether to ask for feedback. You have a choice about giving feedback and a choice about sticking in there. You always have a choice. And I think that if you can build an organization that is more honest, that is focusing on developing people and developing yourself, that is the best way you can meet the Evergreen goal of putting People First. 

Dr. David Bradford is Senior Lecturer Emeritus at Stanford's Graduate School of Business. Author of Connect: Building Exceptional Relationships with Family, Friends, and Colleagues. He is also the creator and professor of the famous Stanford class, officially called Interpersonal Dynamics, but fondly known as "Touchy-Feely."

LEARN MORE:

David's talk from Gathering of Teams 2022 can be viewed online at <https://www.tugboatinstitute.com/you-can-be-more-honest-than-you-think/>