



WHAT YOUR CAREER NEEDS  
NOW IS SOME  
**RELATIONAL  
INTELLIGENCE**

**Dawna Markova, Ph.D. & Angie McArthur**

**“Understanding the human mind will be the greatest scientific adventure of the twenty-first century. There’s no more profound or worthy study than how we learn, think, understand, and communicate.”**

—Charles Vest, former president, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Likely you have been schooled in many rational strategies, but you probably never received any training that fosters relational intelligence. Relational Intelligence is the ability to connect with those who think differently through communication, understanding, learning and trust. It is what enables you to grow yourself with another.

In this age of complexity, chaos, and constantly changing teams, the more skill you have to work and relate across differences, the more effective and happier you will be. For twenty years, the two of us have been passionately developing and offering strategies for senior leaders around the world that increase relational intelligence.

What we have come to believe is that those who can lead us into the future:

- Value human capital as much as financial capital.
- Value how people think together and relate to one another to achieve their goals as well as the goals themselves.
- Value discovering how cognitive differences can be an asset as well as other forms of diversity.
- Value relational intelligence as well as rational intelligence.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Outliers, The Story of Success* states that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to attain expert status when learning a new skill. According to renowned neuropsychologist Matthew D. Lieberman, author of *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*, our brains naturally put those hours (and more) into becoming experts in the social world by the time we're ten. As Lieberman says, "Evolution has made a major bet on the value of our becoming social experts and in our being prepared at any moment to think and act socially." In theory, then, humans should all be relational experts. But, instead, we continue to miscommunicate, misunderstand, and mistrust one another expecting new results. Why is relating still so difficult? What are humans practicing during these ten thousand hours, and why aren't our leaders already relational experts?

How often do you find yourself fighting, fleeing, or freezing in work relationships? Do you find yourself in the shower waging an ongoing battle in your head about who is right and who is wrong? Do you hear yourself saying, "Why can't they just get their work done on time?" "He's just not a team player." "She argues against everything, but never for anything." "He's just a difficult person." While some of these assessments may be true, all of them lead to a shrug and a dead end. They are based on the assumption that differences in thinking must mean

difficulties, and that working with someone doesn't think the way you do is not worth the effort.

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In a wiser place of your mind, you have relational intelligence that tells you that collaboration is the leading edge of innovation. What we want you to know is how to access this underused capacity for those difficult situations when you are thinking and find yourself stuck in ruts of disagreement, lost in the shadows of misunderstanding. Instead of turning away from cognitive differences, it can help you loosen the grip of your position long enough to wonder how you could find authentic connection with this person and use every challenge with them as an opportunity to learn.

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# How do you begin?

## First imagine what success looks like:

Think for a minute about what it's like to sing in harmony with another person. Each of you allows your voice to come forward, fall back, and then merge to create beautiful music.

It can be the same when we relate. If you know how to discover it, there is a palpable energy, and an intelligence between you that can facilitate each of you achieving far more together than you could alone.

## Create a benchmark:

If you were to calculate the time you spend daily sitting in meetings, calling and emailing co-workers, it likely makes up a significant portion of your adult life. Do this quick assessment of the quality of your relational intelligence between you and the people you spend the most time with at work. It will serve as a benchmark, and something you can return to after you've had time to practice.

## Consider these four qualities:

- **Communication:** How secure do you feel in communicating your ideas, fears, needs, and enthusiasm to the other person?
- **Understanding:** How much ability is there to use the best of your thinking to reach coherence within yourself, as well as with the other person?
- **Learning:** How much do you expand your perspective and explore new possibilities with this person?
- **Trust:** How much safety and growth is there with this person?

**Now:**

1. Identify the three people with whom you currently spend the most time at work.
2. Write their names across the top of a sheet of paper.
3. Put the four qualities above in the far left column, and rate the relational intelligence between you and this person on a scale of 1 to 5 through the lens of each (1 being lowest, indicating continual breakdowns; 5 being highest).
4. Tally the columns.

The qualities listed in the left column enrich relational thinking. We adapted them from the work of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute (JBMTI) at the Wellesley Centers for Women. Their research, combined with ours, posits that people can grow in relationships over the course of their entire lives. A low score (10 or below per person) on the chart above indicates where learning and new approaches are needed. A high overall score (15 or higher per person) indicates a connection that is both rewarding and collaborative.

Each of these people influences the way your brain does or does not grow. You probably know intuitively that spending a lot of time with someone who is frenzied makes you feel anxious. Likewise, when you are with someone who is serene and centered, you most likely feel calmer and more at ease. But we haven't known until recently how profound an effect others have on the way our brains are wired. We either grow or diminish our capacity through those people with whom we spend the most time. So why not yield the greatest result possible? The small ruptures when you are at odds with someone provide the greatest opportunity to become a relational genius.

To start practicing, you'll need to shift a few limiting principles with ones that will increase your relational IQ instead. The practice field is right in front of you. Here are the plays.

# The Relational Intelligence Playbook

**1 You can't change the other person—even for his or her own good. You can, however, grow your capacity to relate to them, to dig in with them.**

You do this by shifting from the noun “relationship” to the verb “relate.” When you think of the relationship between you and another person as a noun—“She’s my boss and our relationship is on the rocks,” or “My colleague and I just don’t click anymore”—it insinuates a doomed and static thing, a noun. You make the relationship into an object, a photograph instead of a movie you are directing. Without realizing it, you relinquish your capacity to influence and navigate how you are creating the film. Consider the difference between saying to yourself, “This relationship sucks,” and, “The way I’m relating to this person sucks.” The former produces a shrug. Your choices are to fight, flee, or freeze. In the latter you are free to discover what adjustments you might make and learn what is the best route toward the other person given the present circumstances. In our experience, it is far more effective to direct your attention to the verb. How are you relating to that person? What effect are you having?

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**Playbook Tip:** *How am I communicating to this person?* In other words, maybe emailing isn't always the best way to communicate. If you have had a difficult email exchange between you, ask them to go for coffee and a talk instead. Or if you've had an uncomfortable phone call or two, try emailing your thoughts instead.

*What effect is my communication having?* If you don't judge yourself and instead stay curious, this wide and wondering state of attention will empower you to discover more about how to be effective with the other person. If you've sent someone a long email, and you're only receiving a short answer back, instead of believing they're being a jerk, ask yourself instead, "What can I try to be more effective in communication with them? My long email didn't work; let me switch to quickly calling them instead." Just because your preference is to write a comprehensive email, it may not be their preferred way of communicating.

## **② You can't make them love, respect, or even like you. You can, however, find a way to respect yourself and how you are relating to the other, no matter what.**

The word "respect" means "to see again as if for the first time." The greatest gift we can give each other and ourselves is a willingness to question our biases, see past our blind spots, and discover each other again. This involves recognizing that relating to another person is an ongoing learning process, rather than following a memorized formula. If things were as simple as a formula, we would all have flawless interactions. Instead, we need to reclaim wonder, which is no small thing. As Sherry Turkle points out in *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, wonder is a rapidly disappearing commodity in our time and "not knowing" is no longer valued.

As soon as you've formed a fixed opinion of someone else or yourself, you've essentially shut them out. If you want your relational capacity to grow, you have to shift from a mindset of certainty to one of discovery. "They're a terrible communicator," becomes "I need to discover

how to tell him what I need for communications." "He is bossy," becomes "I need to discover how to relate to his style and not let it diminish my confidence."

The following certainties will keep you from relating effectively:

- What you consider to be the other person's deficits and faults.
- The ways you believe the other person needs to change or improve.
- The stories you are telling yourself about why you are right and the other person is wrong.

**Playbook Tip:** We frequently hear many of the people we work with say they can't reconcile their differences because the other person isn't worthy of their trust. We respond with the question, "What do you need to do or say so you can trust yourself to grow with this person?" To answer this question think first about the *behavior* exhibited that you don't trust; then consider what would be the most effective way to *express* this to them so they would be open to receiving it; thirdly, what possible action on their part would prevent further erosion.

For example, let's say you don't trust the other person because they don't deliver on time: the behavior you're concerned about is lateness. To trust yourself with them you need to:

1. Express your disappointment, and that it's not ok with you to deliver late, unless you are pre-warned and given legitimate reasons.
2. You know that they frequently communicate with you via email, so you decide to do the same.
3. The action you require is mutual clarity on the deadline, and knowing they will proactively come forward to discuss with you when delays happen.

Perhaps you mistrust someone because they've talked about you behind your back rather than speaking directly to you. In order to trust yourself with them:

1. Express that it's not acceptable to go around you and you need to know they will first contact you directly.
2. Since talking one-on-one seems to work for them, find a few moments where the two of you can talk privately.
3. If they say they tried to talk to you but you weren't available, suggest that if something needs attention immediately that they write to you and put ASAP in the subject line.

We often suggest that leaders create a "No Matter What" list of their relational principles to draw upon in heated moments. Some of our favorites have been: No Matter What:

- I will always take three breaths before responding when I'm upset.
- I will trust myself to walk away if yelling starts.
- I'll keep in mind that what he or she says in the moment doesn't sum up who he or she actually is or who I am.

A Zen expression that describes this practice is "opening the hand of thought." If you reflect for a moment on a time when you were disconnected from someone and not understanding him or her at all, you will most likely find that your mind was a lot like a closed fist. Simply recognizing this enables you to open your attention as you would open your clenched fingers. This enables you to reach and discover how connection can be possible.

**③ You can't prove to the other person that your perspective, needs, and way of doing things are right, or better than his or hers. You can, however, grow your ability to recognize, understand, and value each of your differences.**

When we work with people who believe their differences are irreconcilable, there is no learning or forward movement possible. It is as if their belief has become a wall between them that makes understanding impossible. Sometimes the wall is blank. They don't know why they don't feel understood, or understand the other person. Sometimes it's too tall to see or climb over.

Before understanding, there needs to be confusion. Western cultures assume confusion is a bad thing. Just tell someone that you are confused and they'll jump in trying to solve your problem for you—in their own way. Most people are not comfortable with confusion because they think of it as weakness. Instead they will try to convince others forcefully with their perspective, or move quickly to convergence. Thus learning stops and possibilities are killed off. But confusion is as natural to the human mind as a tide going out is to the ocean. It's a sign that the brain is opening to make way for new information or a new perspective.

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Think of two jazz musicians tuning their own instruments and then reaching in the quest to connect with the other in a new harmony. Think of members of a choir singing within their different ranges while questing to create a coherent sound with the others. The mind doesn't "find" the one right way and close on it. It opens further and further, searching, learning, finding, losing, finding in a new way.

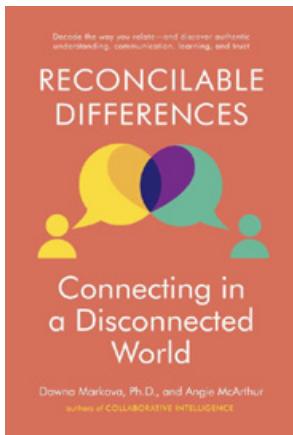
**Playbook Tip:** To begin to recognize, understand and value different perspectives requires that you ask different kinds of questions. It's a natural tendency to ask others "bonding questions" that search for a kind of sameness that could unite you and another: "How old are your kids?" "What's your favorite NFL team?" As long as you can find similarities you feel safe. What can lead you to a relational abyss is not knowing how to ask questions that bridge differences. Grow your relational Intelligence by asking bridging questions, like:

- What is most important to you right now about this?
- Are you open to hearing what's important to me?
- Can you share more of how you came to that perspective?

Practicing these ways of connecting will grow your ability to recognize, accept, and value your own and other people's differences, thereby cultivating your relational intelligence.

There exists a traditional art form in Japan, kintsugi, which creates beauty in the broken places of a ceramic bowl by mending the cracks with gold. Rather than trying to disguise or cover up the break, kintsugi incorporates the damage into its beauty, thereby increasing its value immensely. Genuine curiosity and authentic courage are the gold you already have in your mind. They enable you to reach across the rupture between you and another so you can connect with someone who thinks differently, and enhance the value of the relationship in the process. ☮

# Info



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### About the author

Dawna Markova, Ph.D. and Angie McArthur are the authors of *Reconcilable Differences: Connecting in a Disconnected World*, and *Collaborative Intelligence: Thinking With Those Who Think Differently*. They are the CEO Emeritus and CEO, respectively, of Professional Thinking Partners, an organization that teaches collaborative thinking to CEOs and senior executives around the world.

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