

Connect

What's in it for me? Learn how to build exceptional relationships.

Relationships exist on a continuum. On one end, you have contact without any real connection. In the middle, you feel connected but may desire more closeness. And on the other end, you have full connection; you feel seen, supported, and accepted for who you truly are – not the Instagram version of yourself.

This is the realm of exceptional relationships . . . and they don't have to be the exception.

These blinks explore the hallmarks of exceptional relationships, which are taught in the popular Stanford MBA course Interpersonal Dynamics. They show how to cultivate core behavioral competencies, master your emotions, and productively engage in conflict. By committing to learning about yourself and others, you can move beyond superficiality to develop truly meaningful connections.

In these blinks, you'll discover

the costs of silence; why “constructive feedback” is a misnomer; and how conflict is key to growth.

Exceptional relationships require a growth mindset – and hard work.

Think about the relationships in your life – your bonds with friends and colleagues, family members, and romantic partners. Maybe you're not sure if they're “exceptional” material, but you'd like them to go from casual to personal, from competitive to collaborative, or simply from dysfunctional to functional.

The authors have spent their careers teaching thousands of students and clients how to build and maintain robust relationships in a variety of settings. The role of interpersonal know-how can range from increasing well-being in your personal life to being fundamental to professional success. You won't, don't need to, and can't develop an exceptional relationship with everybody; these deepest, most authentic connections demand time and effort. That's not to discount less-intense relationships, which provide other things we need and crave – things like intellectual stimulation, social interaction, and fun. But, as the authors point out, not every dessert can be a chocolate soufflé. The key message here is: Exceptional relationships require a growth mindset – and hard work. The following blinks highlight the six hallmarks of exceptional relationships, as well as the competencies and behaviors required to achieve them. Keep in mind that exceptional relationships aren't an end state. Just like living, breathing organisms, they constantly change and develop – and, as such, they need a lot of TLC.

The key in building and keeping up your relationships lies in learning how to learn – or adopting a growth mindset. This involves honing several behavioral characteristics. The first is letting go of the idea that you know best. Second, be willing to try new things and risk making mistakes. Third, embrace mistakes as learning opportunities rather than a reason to be embarrassed or give up.

Keep in mind that your efforts might not always yield your desired goal. It takes two to tango, and if the other person isn't ready – or doesn't want – to meet you on your level, the relationship won't progress. That said, your efforts are bound to fail if you don't put in the work. You need to take an active stance and put what you learn into practice; doing will help you personalize the lessons and reap their full benefit.

So before we begin, choose four to five relationships that you'd like to deepen. As we go along, ask yourself how the content of each blink relates to those relationships. Keep a journal to document your thoughts and process – experiences pay off the most when you reflect on and try to understand them.

Good luck!

When it comes to self-disclosure, more is usually more.

Keeping up false fronts can be exhausting; behind our social media facades of “crushing it,” we’re often very anxious. No one wants to be judged or look weak. But the thing is, editing and putting a spin on who we actually are not only strips us of our ability to be authentic – it also leads others to fabricate their own stories about us. We’ll come back to this in the next blink. Being authentic doesn’t mean you have to reveal everything about yourself to everyone. It means sharing, genuinely and wholly, the parts that are important to a specific relationship. Authentic self-disclosure results in the first hallmark of an exceptional relationship, which is that both people can fully be themselves.

Here’s the key message: When it comes to self-disclosure, more is usually more. Of course, there’s a risk of oversharing in any given interaction, but there’s also risk in holding your cards too close. The other person will probably reciprocate this behavior, causing a relationship to stall. The authors propose the “15 Percent Rule” to address this dilemma. Imagine three concentric rings. At the center is the Zone of Comfort – these are things you feel totally safe doing or saying. As you move outward, the next circle represents the Zone of Learning, which is where you’re unsure of how the other person will respond. The outermost ring is the Zone of Danger; this consists of things you wouldn’t ever utter or do, given their likely negative repercussions. To avoid landing in the danger zone, test the waters by expanding your comfort zone into the learning zone in increments of just 15 percent. With each success, wade in another 15 percent. In practical terms, this might mean confiding something slightly risky to a friend. Instead of an innocuous remark like, “Sometimes I worry about what others think of me,” it might be more specific: “The other day, I commented on your eating habits and have been worrying about what you thought of me ever since.” Of course, the number “15” is subjective – a 15 percent move for you might seem low risk for another person and drastic for a third. The rule is simply a tool to help you consider your choices. When sharing, both facts and feelings are important, since they reveal different pieces of information about you. Cognition denotes what is, while emotions tell how important it is. Facts are usually easier to share, but feelings can put a blurry picture into focus. And when expressing feelings, be aware of the language you use. The phrase “I feel,” for example, can be used in both a constructive and a detrimental way. Saying “I feel upset by your comment” is different from, and more useful than, saying “I feel like you want to dominate this conversation,” which sounds like an accusation. The difference is subtle, but the significance is anything but.

Vulnerability arises from strength, not weakness.

The second hallmark of an exceptional relationship is that both of you are willing to be vulnerable. Now, there’s nuance in the concept of vulnerability. Simply revealing personal things about yourself isn’t really vulnerable if you know how others will react – there’s no risk involved. Sharing when you’re unsure about the reaction to your disclosure, however, brings others closer. The key message is this: Vulnerability arises from strength, not weakness. This brings us to the third, closely related hallmark of an exceptional relationship, which is trusting that self-disclosures won’t be used against you. People often worry that disclosure, especially regarding perceived “defects,” will make them seem weak. Leaders, for example, may think sharing anything that rattles their superhuman exterior will hurt their stature. But, in general, nothing could be farther from the truth. It takes fortitude to self-disclose. Your peers will recognize, and admire, this – and use your disclosure as a model for their own transparency. While vulnerability invites closeness, silence does the opposite. The less we reveal, the more others will draw conclusions in order to make sense of what they see. By being reticent with self-disclosure, we actually lose control of how others perceive us. And once people see us a certain way, we often end up acting the part, creating a negative feedback loop of false fronts. The cost of all this is isolation – in terms of both our relationships and our sense of self. In your own behavior, you may recognize the slippery slope of made-up stories about another person eventually becoming reductive labels. To counter it, try creating a different narrative about that person. This might introduce enough uncertainty to drive you back to square one: naive curiosity and an open mind. Speaking of curiosity, when dealing with self-disclosures, you’ll need to tread a fine line between being curious and being intrusive. No one wants to feel like a specimen under a microscope. To sidestep this potential pitfall, you need to meet people where they are. But how? Well, by disclosing first, you’re more likely to build trust, gain acceptance, and receive reciprocated vulnerability in return. Meanwhile, you can help build conditions in which others feel more comfortable being themselves. Steer clear of sympathy and advice, which are rarely useful; it’s not often that people want to be pitied or told what to do. Instead, behaviors like listening actively, suspending judgment, using open-ended questions, listening for emotions, expressing empathy, and showing acceptance will encourage others’ full expression.

“We’re so accustomed to disguising ourselves to others that in the end we become disguised to ourselves. - François de la Rochefoucauld”

People can change - with the help of behaviorally specific feedback.

Have you ever told someone that a behavior of his bothers you – only for him to keep repeating it without seeming to learn? It's easy to jump to cynical thinking: "That's just the way he is." But that's not quite fair, or true. While personality is very difficult to alter, no one's born with genes for being rude or self-involved, which are behaviors. When you jump to the conclusion that a certain set of behaviors defines a person, you're doing him an injustice. Instead, try discerning the elements that perpetuate his behavior patterns. The key message here is: People can change – with the help of behaviorally specific feedback. Transforming habitual behaviors is possible, but it's not easy. Organizational theorist and MIT professor Richard Beckhard defined the conditions under which people are more likely to change. Essentially, someone's willingness to change has to be stronger than his resistance to change. Let's break this down. Your willingness to change is composed of dissatisfaction with your current behavior; vision, which means you see the benefit in changing your ways; and first steps, which indicates your belief that you can adopt new skills. In order for change to happen, these three variables must be larger than the resistance. If changing a behavior sounds daunting, it's because it is – at least at first. Say you play tennis. Maybe you started out with a weak backhand and so have always compensated by switching hands to play your forehand. But your coach knows this is hurting your game, and asks you to play backhand. At the beginning, this'll feel uncomfortable, ineffective, and totally frustrating – until, with practice, your new habits replace old ones and become routine. Keep this process in mind regarding your own behaviors. Conversely, when giving feedback on others' behaviors, be aware that you'll probably encounter some resistance. Defensiveness is a biggie here. You can minimize it by giving behaviorally specific feedback. This means you only comment on the other's observable behavior and present your reactions to it – don't fall into the trap of thinking you know the other person's motives and intentions. To continue with the tennis analogy, make sure to provide feedback that stays on your side of the net. Feedback can elicit strong emotions, especially when it contains a grain of truth, but there's no such thing as "constructive" or "negative" feedback – all feedback is just data. Still, in some cases it may be best to pause, or consider temporarily shifting, your feedback's focus. This isn't to say you should back down from your position. Instead, acknowledge the value in the other person's struggle. Feedback starts conversations; it doesn't end them.

"Seeing feedback as data that informs and expands our choices – not a requirement for change – makes it easier to hear and consider."

Appreciate the power and range of emotions.

Own your emotions or they will own you. We've all heard the adage, but it can be difficult to follow in today's world. Emotions are often discredited in the workplace and schools, where the emphasis is on reason and logic. As a result, when we do express our feelings, we tend to downplay their intensity. And since we're so used to numbing ourselves, we often don't recognize what we're truly feeling – whether good or bad. As Brené Brown notes, "When we numb anger, sadness, and fear, we also numb gratitude, love, and joy." Here's the key message: Appreciate the power and range of emotions. Ignoring our emotions isn't healthy— and when we try to mask our feelings, we tend to leak them anyway. Our tone might become sharp, or we'll unconsciously utter an expression of contempt, which will probably increase dysfunction in a relationship. Also, not dealing with grievances can lead to escalation. The authors define "pinches" as little things that bother us – for example, when someone makes a joke at our expense. We may object, or maybe we'll just let it slide. However, if a pinch does get under our skin and isn't dealt with, it'll fester and grow into a problem that's impossible to ignore, or what the authors call a "crunch." This is when emotional explosions happen. Humor can be used to raise, and defuse, pinches before they blow up, but it can also backfire because of its ambiguous nature. The only sure path to resolution is to understand our own needs, and to say them out loud. The ability to be honest with each other is, in fact, the fourth hallmark of an exceptional relationship. Our emotions signal what's important to us. And the more emotions we feel, the more likely it is that there's something deeper going on. But in order to tap into their wealth of insight, we first need to cultivate self-awareness. Here, somatic responses like a change in heartbeat, fluttering in our stomachs, tightness in our throats, or damp palms can offer important clues. Another way to foster self-awareness is to pause in the midst of a conflict – instead of resorting to logic, try asking yourself, What am I, or they, really feeling? Be aware that anger is an especially difficult emotion to decipher. That's because it's a secondary emotion, often used to hide more vulnerable feelings like rejection or envy. It's important to note that, in any given situation, we have many choices for how to respond. Having belief in our ability to act in the world is what social scientists refer to as "having agency." It's never that we can't do or say something; it's that we choose not to. Sometimes, saying nothing is the best course of action – but that, of course, is also a choice.

Conflict can lead to deeper, more resilient bonds.

The Japanese word kintsugi, or "golden repair," refers to the art of mending broken pottery. A mixture of lacquer and powdered gold, silver, or platinum is used as the glue, creating shimmering lines that highlight the breaks.

In being repaired, the broken object becomes arguably more beautiful. A broader philosophy is embedded in this approach: damaged objects have a history that should be celebrated rather than covered up. The same holds true for relationships that have experienced “breaks.” By picking up the pieces and repairing them with care, your resulting relationships will be stronger than ever. The key message is this: Conflict can lead to deeper, more resilient bonds. Tricky issues can be raised and resolved with four problem-solving stages that incorporate the behavioral feedback model. Dealing with conflict productively is the fifth hallmark of an exceptional relationship, so let’s dive in. First, get the other person to take the issue seriously. This could mean telling your partner how her behavior is affecting you, or mentioning that her actions aren’t in line with previously discussed goals. You could also ask whether you’re doing anything to affect her behavior; acknowledging your role can help others take responsibility for theirs. Second, get her to share fully what’s going on with her. You can never assume you know exactly what the other person is thinking – problems are often complex and multilayered, and maybe the issue you’re concerned about isn’t really the main or most contentious one. The third stage is arriving at a mutually satisfying solution. Resist the temptation to settle for the minimum just to end a difficult conversation; really make sure both people are satisfied. Be aware that this might take a while and involve more than one conversation. Finally, determine what repair work needs to be done. Has the process resulted in hurt feelings or saying things you regret? Start with a simple but heartfelt “I’m sorry.” By putting aside your pride and extending an olive branch, you can soothe figurative bruises and encourage reciprocal vulnerability. There’s a caveat: you have to genuinely mean it! Beyond an apology, letting your partner or colleague know how much you value her and the relationship can also go a long way – as can checking in with her the next day. You probably won’t immediately feel comfortable with conflict; as we know, long-standing habits are hard to rewire. But if you focus on becoming competent with confrontation, the rest will follow. New behavioral pathways will result from practice and persistence, so keep trying – and honor your process. In the end, “the only mistake is not learning from your mistakes.”

Relationships are rarely linear, but they’ll keep growing if you face your fears.

You’ll know your relationship has become exceptional when you and the other person don’t have to hide important parts of yourselves and can deal with major issues – even if it feels scary.

After all, fear is the enemy of growth. Just consider conflict – something people often avoid not only because it’s uncomfortable, but because they fear the arguments and accusations will result in irreparable damage. But turning our backs on conflict only increases the chances of the thing we fear most: permanent deadlock. The key message here is: Relationships are rarely linear, but they’ll keep growing if you face your fears. That said, no one can change overnight. Building an exceptional relationship will often be a “two steps forward, one step back” situation. At points, this might mean returning to an earlier stage to reassess whatever agreements you made in the past, or having a meta-level discussion along the lines of, “Can we talk about why we can’t talk?”

When our feathers are ruffled, we often get stuck on what a person is doing wrong, but it’s important to acknowledge, and encourage, progress – in ourselves and others. And that’s the sixth and final hallmark of an exceptional relationship: you are both committed to each other’s growth and development.

Being committed doesn’t always mean being nice in the traditional sense. Challenging someone can be a compelling sign of support. Showing tough love is difficult when we feel it’ll put the relationship in jeopardy, but not being tough can be harmful. It could, for example, validate a behavior you think is wrong. This ties into distinguishing between empathy and agreement. It’s important to show that you understand how the other person is feeling – not to say they’re right if you don’t think that’s the case. As the Greek philosopher Plutarch noted, “I don’t need a friend who changes when I change and who nods when I nod; my shadow does that much better.” So view being called out on a behavior as a chance to learn, not a reason to put up your guard. By showing you the impact of your behavior, the other person is committing to your relationship and helping you grow. Those who care about you accept you, with all your flaws – and, in doing so, can help you accept yourself. Just as fear can limit you, you’ll find that the risks you take throughout the process of building and maintaining an exceptional relationship can free you. Ultimately, an exceptional relationship is about a different way of being. When you experience a deep sense of safety and honesty with someone else, there’s a paradigm shift, and the opportunities for growth are infinite.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: Building an exceptional relationship isn’t easy – but the payoff is huge. While it won’t literally require blood, sweat, and tears (OK, maybe a few tears), discomfort and conflict are inevitable. Promote honest self-disclosure on both sides by fostering key competencies like self-awareness, vulnerability,

and empathy. Use the feedback model to resolve tricky issues, making the relationship even stronger than before. Ultimately, with perseverance, you'll find yourself in a positively reinforcing cycle of learning and growth – allowing you not only to connect profoundly with other human beings, but to enjoy the freedom of being the best, fullest you. Actionable advice: Set specific learning goals. As with everything, you'll find that some of the competencies you've just learned will naturally come easier, while others will be harder to integrate. Instead of trying to tackle everything at once, focus on the ones that are most important to you and utilize the 15 Percent Rule. On the flip side, notice whether there are ways you tend to curtail or trap yourself. Being aware of what's working, and what you want to work on, increases the likelihood of spotting real-life opportunities to test your skills – so whip out that journal and reflect! Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with Connect as the subject line, and share your thoughts!