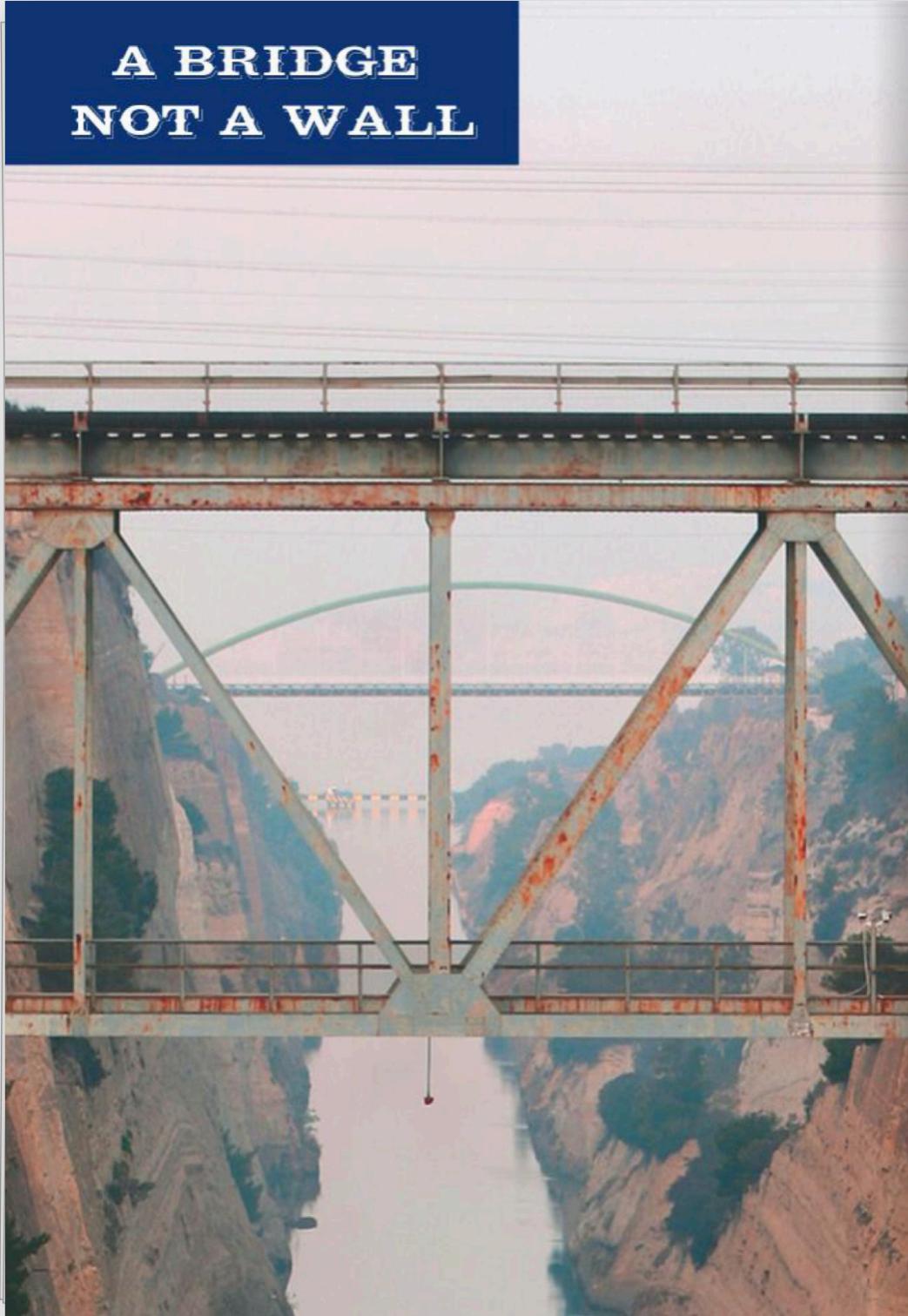


A BRIDGE NOT A WALL



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SUMMARY

Going to college places people into new communities almost overnight. New roommates. New classmates. New professors. New expectations. These environments create opportunity—but they also create tension.

When differences surface, people instinctively respond in one of two ways: they build bridges, or they construct walls. Bridges create connections between people. Walls create distance between them. Growing in your leadership means deciding to build bridges, not walls.

This lesson challenges individuals to become bridge builders—people who connect across diverse backgrounds and opinions, manage conflict with maturity, and choose understanding over isolation. In a divided world, this skill is no longer optional. It is essential.

**“We build too many walls
and not enough bridges.”**

— Isaac Newton

Walls serve a purpose. They protect. They separate. They create boundaries. But they also limit movement. They block visibility. They hinder conversations. The thing about walls is, they're easy to build.

Bridges can be quite the opposite. They take effort. They require intention. They are more time-consuming and costly to build. However, bridges allow people to move toward one another—forming a connection that can even bear the weight of difficult truth.

College is one of the first environments where this choice becomes unavoidable.

People arrive at college with different beliefs. Different backgrounds. Different stressors. Some are fully funded by family support. Others work twenty or thirty hours a week just to stay. Some students are navigating college as a continuation of privilege. Others are carrying the weight of expectation for an entire family.

Misunderstandings are inevitable. The real question is not whether conflict will occur. The question is how it will be handled.

Will we see differences and put up walls—or build bridges?

WHY WALLS ARE EASIER

In construction, walls can be built very quickly. They require little effort. They do not cost a lot. We need walls. They make people feel safe from the outside world, blocking out weather and other elements you wouldn't want in your home.

When people feel misunderstood, dismissed, or threatened, they typically put up walls. Silence replaces curiosity. Labels replace listening. Assumptions replace connection.

A study by the **Pew Research Center** shows that social polarization increases when individuals interact primarily with those who share a similar background and beliefs. Over time, that separation hardens perspectives and can reduce empathy—even among well-intentioned people (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Bridges, on the other hand, feel risky. They require humility. They demand intentionality. They force people to remain present when it would be easier to withdraw. And yet—bridges are where real leadership, relationships, and connections happen.

Psychologist Gordon Allport's **Contact Theory** suggests that meaningful interaction across differences—when grounded in mutual respect—reduces prejudice and increases understanding.

Later studies confirmed that people who practice intentional connection, bridge building, develop stronger empathy, better communication skills, and greater emotional maturity. These principles provide a practical framework for choosing bridges over walls in everyday relationships (Allport, 1954; APA, 2019).

FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR BUILDING BRIDGES

1. **Be Curious, Not Judgmental.** Curiosity builds bridges faster than judgment.
2. **Listen Longer.** Understanding often takes place after the urge to interrupt has passed.
3. **Believe the Best in Others.** Offense is seldom given, often taken. Believing the best in others helps create connection.
4. **Stay Present During Uncomfortable Moments.** Relationship growth rarely happens in comfort zones.
5. **Value People Over Problems.** When given the choice of being right and being kind, choose kind. You can always go back and be right later.

THE BENEFITS OF BUILDING BRIDGES

When people practice bridge-building consistently, several outcomes emerge over time:

- Stronger Relationships Across Differences
- Greater Emotional Intelligence
- Reduced Conflict Escalation
- Increased Sense of Belonging
- Long-Term Influence and Credibility

Pause here. Take a few minutes to allow each person to share one thing from the lesson above that stood out to you. What made you choose that part?

REFLECT AND RESPOND

“BUILDING BRIDGES”

Take some time individually to write your answers to these questions. Afterward, the group should spend 5-10 minutes sharing and discussing their answers.

- 1. In your opinion, what causes individuals to build walls instead of bridges?**

- 2. When conflict arises, what signals indicate a wall is going up?**

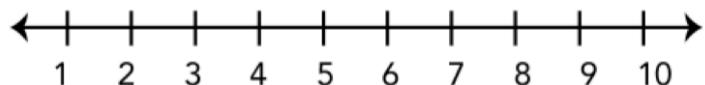
- 3. How do background, responsibility, or stress influence the way people respond to tension?**

- 4. Can you recall a time when choosing understanding changed the outcome of a situation?**

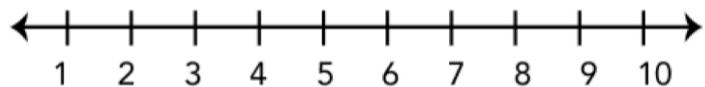
SELF ASSESSMENT

Rate Yourself (1, never true of me – 10, always true of me):

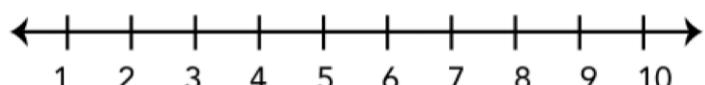
- 1. I seek understanding before forming conclusions.**



- 2. I remain engaged during uncomfortable conversations.**



- 3. I work to preserve relationships during conflict.**



Pause here. Take a few minutes to share why you rated yourself the way you did in each of the above.

CASE STUDY: **JORDAN'S GROUP PROJECT**

Jordan worked evenings at a grocery store to help cover rent. Mornings were spent in class. Afternoons were reserved for studying—when energy allowed. Knowing this, it's easy to understand why Jordan might feel more stress than his classmates. And how it might affect his work.

One February, in a group project, tension surfaced quickly. Two group members assumed Jordan was disengaged. Messages went unanswered. Meetings were missed. Frustration grew. Quiet resentment followed among everyone in the group. A wall was forming.

Instead of withdrawing and taking the easy way out, Jordan decided to take an intentional step toward building a bridge. It required him to be vulnerable, but he chose courage. Jordan explained to his group that he came from a single-parent home. His mom was working overtime to help get his younger siblings through high school. Working for Jordan was not a luxury; it was a necessity. He explained how difficult it was for him sometimes to keep up, but promised he was doing his best. He asked for grace instead of resentment.

The response surprised everyone. Members of his group opened up about their own struggles, but also recognized that their situation was different. They didn't understand what it was like for Jordan, but they were willing to listen.

The group adjusted their meeting times and shifted workload responsibilities. In a moment of building a bridge, respect for one another began to replace assumption about one another.

The project didn't become perfect overnight, but the walls preventing them from connecting came down. Jordan didn't lose influence that day. Jordan built a bridge and everyone got better.

REFLECT AND RESPOND:

In what ways can you relate to Jordan? What struggles have you had connecting with others in the past? How could you take the time to build a bridge with those around you?

TAKE ACTION

This week:

- Identify one relationship that could benefit from some bridge building.
- Take a small step toward connection—ask a question, listen longer, clarify an assumption.
- Where might a wall feel easier right now? And what would it look like to start building a bridge instead?

**“Leadership is not about avoiding differences.
It’s about navigating them well.”**

— John C. Maxwell