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The Art of Connecting

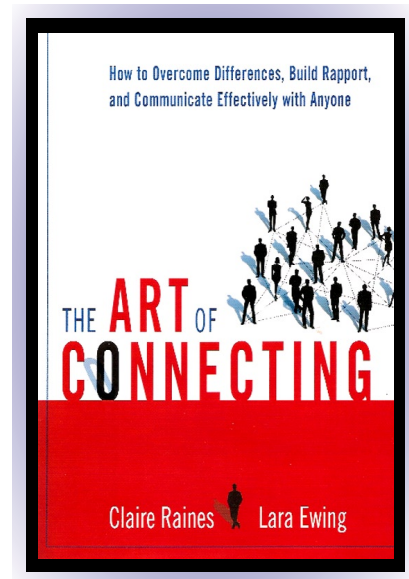
*How to Overcome Differences, Build Rapport,
and Communicate Effectively with Anyone*

Claire Raines and Lara Ewing

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Reviewed by Leslie Johnston

Introduction

As the global marketplace and e-commerce result in greater intersection across cultures, time zones, races, and religions, we are increasingly called upon to connect across our differences. Business results will depend upon the ability to communicate effectively across cultures and adeptly forge these essential connections. What authors Claire Raines and Lara Ewing have found through interviews, focus groups, and interactions is that, even in the face of profound differences, there is always something that connects us. To bridge the gaps that separate people from different backgrounds—whether ethnic, perceptual, generational, gender, or cultural in nature—it is necessary, however, to have a strategy.

THE TITANIUM RULE

People who are masters at connecting with others from whom they differ do not have a universal approach. They each have their own unique style. However, they are all masters of what the authors have defined as the *Titanium Rule: Do unto others according to their druthers*.

The Golden Rule—Do unto others as you would have them do unto you—means that we treat others in exactly the same way that we would want to be treated, and it works best when the people involved are all from very similar backgrounds. But the Golden Rule can cause a “disconnect” when people are from different backgrounds and have different preferences. Masterful connectors, on the other hand, tune in to individual preferences.

Practicing the Titanium Rule requires two sets of behaviors. First, we must get to know people as individuals to learn their “druthers” or preferences. Are they logical or emotional? Are they casual or formal? Are they leisurely or focused? Are they spontaneous or disciplined? If we are observant, it is easy to learn people’s druthers because clues are all around them in the environments they create. This can be accomplished by watching mannerisms, listening to the words they choose, and noticing how they are dressed, for example. How do they approach projects? How do they make decisions? How do they organize their schedules? Valuable information about druthers is available from observation. Once we have some ideas, even if they are guesses, about the preferences of the people we are attempting to connect with, we can adjust our words, style, body language, and tone of our voices to match their druthers.

The Titanium Rule is based on the concept that *people connect via similarities*. The way to connect is to identify and to acknowledge our similarities. While there are many things that we cannot change (our ethnicity, our skin color, our birthplace), we can find many ways in which we are similar. When we make the attempt to match with people, whether it is their tone of voice, language pattern, expectations, values, or beliefs—we are increasing our similarities and beginning the process. Practicing the Titanium Rule, therefore, requires a shift in thinking. It requires empathy, awareness, and understanding. It also involves (this is the second set of behaviors) finding ways, based on what we know about another person, to make

Key Concepts

Being effective at connecting with others from whom we differ requires a certain set of beliefs and expectations. These beliefs, or core principles, are the following:

1. **There is always a bridge** – Masterful connectors believe that if they persevere, they will certainly find common ground based on universal human experiences.
2. **Curiosity is key** – When we are curious, our attention is directed outward, which increases the chance that we will find a bridge.
3. **What you assume is what you get** – If we think that we already know everything that we can know or should know about a person or a situation, those limited expectations will come to pass.
4. **Each individual is a culture** – Quick categorizations and generalizations based on appearance only lead us back to assumptions and prevent us from learning what makes a person unique.
5. **No strings attached** – Although we may genuinely be reaching out to communicate, others may not reciprocate immediately; however, the groundwork for later, successful, relationships is being established.

* * *

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stronger connections by adapting, experimenting, and changing the way we do things.

All people, regardless of the different environments they operate in, hold a common set of basic operating

principles. *They believe there is always a bridge.* They believe that, if they persevere, they can find common ground with all people, no matter how different they are.

Curiosity is also key. When we are curious about something or someone, our attention is directed outward (it is impossible to be curious and judgmental at the same time), and we are more likely to identify the bridge.

Conversely, *what we assume is what we get.* If we assume that we already know everything that we can know or that we need to know about a person or situation, then those limited expectations will come to pass. Masters of connection approach each person they meet, no matter how different, expecting the best and anticipating how they can benefit and what they might learn from that person. They presuppose that they are dealing with a good person who has valuable contributions to make and important things to say.

Each individual is a culture. Cultural, ethnic, and racial categorizations are at best broad and can exacerbate differences. Relying on traditional identifiers only leads back to assumptions and generalizations and prevents us from learning what makes an individual unique. While a person's faith and country, for example, may be

important, pursuing clues about an individual's family, beliefs, education, personal style, and tastes are also key elements in making a connection. Each of us is truly a

There's always something, even if it's only that we both root for the same football team or enjoy the same kind of coffee or watch The West Wing.

culture unto ourselves. And when we do reach out, we should do so with *no strings attached*. Although we may be intently pursuing communication, those we are trying to reach may not immediately reciprocate. It is still important, however, to lay the groundwork for building a successful relationship later.

THE CORE PRINCIPLES IN DETAIL

In the business world, we are very often thrown together with people with whom we seem incompatible. When we focus on differences, it is easy to forget that we are all human, and that there always common, universal human experiences that we have all been through and feelings that we have experienced. People who connect successfully in the face of differences have a fundamental belief in commonality; they assume that there is always *something* that they have in common with those with whom they are working or communicating. In these situations, we need to step back and ask, "Where is the bridge in this situation?"

In human interactions, people put forward information about themselves in hopes of finding a bridge. The authors call these pieces of information *offers*, which invite others to connect. Sometimes offers are accepted, and sometimes they are blocked. It bears a great deal of similarity to improvisational theater where actors create coherent scenes without rehearsals. What pulls the performance together is that the actors "accept" what each other "offers." The basic principle is "Yes, and . . .," which implies accepting offers and building on them.

If, for example, someone said, "Everything I look up in this manual confuses me more," a blocked response to this offer might be, "Are you going out for coffee this morning?" Acceptance of the person's offer might be something like, "Last week, I read a whole chapter and knew even less when I was finished reading." And, a response to the offer that builds on it might be something like, "I know what you mean. Have you read this one? It seems clearer." When we

About the Authors

Claire Raines is a leading expert on generations in the workplace and is the author or coauthor of five previous books on the topic, including *Generations at Work*, which was considered by Business Book Review as one of the top business books of 2000. A speaker, consultant, and workshop leader, she has been widely featured in the media.

Lara Ewing consults to senior leaders and multinational, multicultural executive teams and has developed leaders throughout the world in performance and communication for thirty years. She has worked with clients such as American Express Bank, Baptist Hospital Systems, Citicorp, Diners Club, and Hewlett Packard. A specialist in individual and team senior leader effectiveness, she has worked in eighteen countries on five continents.

believe that there is always a bridge, we search harder for those “Yes, and . . .,” opportunities; we know that we can go to universal human experiences to find one.

Roger Fisher, the well-known negotiations expert from Harvard Law School, reminds us that the most basic strategy for building long-term relationships is to be unconditionally constructive. This means that, no matter what others do, we are constructive in our response. It means keeping in mind where we are trying to take the interaction. Instead of judging or feeling self-righteous or trying to decide who is right or wrong or who is to blame, we stay focused on the outcome we want. Believing that there is always a bridge gives us persistence. When we realize that it is not *if* we connect, but *what* we can connect about, we do not give up. Eventually we will find a bridge.

Curiosity—an eagerness to learn—sets us up to be successful in connecting with others. It directs our attention outward. It is a resourceful state of mind, in which it is almost impossible to be depressed, afraid, angry, judgmental, or intolerant; it is an optimistic frame of mind. *Psychology Today* has reported that curiosity is one of the top five qualities of people who are most satisfied in life. Curiosity leads to flexibility, which is essential not only for connecting, but for survival in today’s complex and constantly changing business world. Connecting with people and cultures that are different gives us more choices and makes us more flexible.

Our assumptions shape our outcomes. Most of us are aware that our expectations affect our own behavior, what

Rather than sequential steps, the pathways are choices that you might use at any stage of the conversation.

we call self-fulfilling prophecies, but what many people do not know is that one person’s beliefs can contribute to another’s outcomes. When we meet people, if we assume that we will not get along, we probably will not. Or, if we assume that people are not very bright or very sociable or interesting, they will not have anything bright or interesting to say.

When we meet people, we make assumptions about them and we communicate those assumptions to them in “cues” (words, actions, body language, etc.) to which people respond by matching those cues, and therefore, our assumptions prove to be true. If we think someone is clumsy and slow, we may pass the coffee to them and speak to them

very slowly and carefully. In response, they nervously take the coffee, and may even spill a little. They hang on our words, confused about what is happening, and may look baffled. Our assumptions that someone is clumsy and slow have been validated.

If we use stereotypes to predict behavior, people will fit the stereotype. However, if we assume that the people we meet have valuable and interesting things to teach us, that assumption will come true. If we approach interactions with people assuming that they are worthwhile and interesting people with ideas, observations, and experiences we can learn from, that will happen. Positive intent makes a difference.

While knowing a little about certain aspects of a person—country of origin, race and ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, generational characteristics, or basic tenets of a religion, for example—there is no getting around the need for knowing people as individuals. People are unique; they are cultures unto themselves. When we are attempting to connect across differences, it is important that we not expect immediate reciprocity, which means that we need to go into each interaction being our best selves and with no strings attached.

PATHWAYS TO CONNECTION

The core principles are the internal foundation for successful connecting, the beliefs, assumptions, and expectations that support effective behavior. This is how we begin to make connections. Moving to the next step

requires becoming more specific in our hopes for the connection; it requires taking action, translating principles into behavior to connect across differences. These behaviors are pathways to connection. They are

1. *Clarifying our intentions* – knowing what we want to accomplish from the interaction allows us to focus our attention and guide the interaction in a constructive direction;

2. *Noticing our own reactions* – sometimes our own limiting beliefs and attitudes are hovering just below the surface, and if triggered, they may surface, and we find ourselves labeling or stereotyping others;

3. *Searching for similarities*—common ground brings us together, and finding shared experiences or preferences helps us connect;

4. *Using cues*—picking up on subtle, and sometimes not-so-subtle signals others send, is a matter of using our eyes and ears;

5. *Experimenting and adjusting*—great connections result from continually trying something new, noticing the response, and adjusting based on feedback.

One of the themes that has emerged from the authors' research is that even clumsy attempts to communicate work as long as the *intention* behind the action is a genuine, respectful one, and it also helps if people understand why we want to know more about them. Intention is often communicated indirectly, in tone of voice, facial expression,

and in the sequence and direction of questions. These nonverbal and contextual aspects of a conversation have their own meaning, a kind of “metamessage” about the conversation as a whole. Depending on context and body language, a simple question such as “How do you pronounce your name?” can be interpreted as “Your name is different from what I am used to; it makes me uncomfortable, and you make me uncomfortable,” or it might be interpreted as “I want to know everything I can about you; there’s probably a lot I can learn from you.”

Connecting across differences carries more risk of misinterpretation than communicating with those with similar backgrounds. One way to minimize the risk of misinterpretation is to clearly state to ourselves what we hope to accomplish—what our intention is. If we use everything that we already know about people to help us deliver our intended message (and metamessage), we will increase our chances for success.

Sometimes the barrier that prevents us from connecting is internal. It is in our mental and emotional responses, in our perception of the person or of the group that a person comes from or represents, perceptions that come from beliefs and assumptions that reside deep in the unconscious. Sometimes a “legacy” reaction occurs, a response to a situation that appears out of the blue from an old belief that we think has long ago been discarded. Awareness of an inappropriate reaction can open the possibility of stepping back, of looking at the situation more objectively, and taking

action based on what is really happening. Noticing our reactions can also mean being aware of how our feelings about our own ethnicity, for example, affects our ability to connect with others. Sometimes it is our reaction to *others'* reactions that we have to manage. Making a conscious choice about how to respond to prejudice, for example, gives us more control over the situation.

Connecting across cultures requires self-examination. We can prompt ourselves by asking probing questions. Are the barriers we are encountering buried inside our assumptions and reactions? Do our reactions help or hinder us as we try to reach out to others? When we find

Most of us will never achieve the masterful observation abilities of Sherlock Holmes, but we can improve our skills. As Holmes said on more than one occasion, “My dear Watson, you see but you do not observe.”

unconstructive reactions in ourselves, do we have the courage and integrity to change them? Where we find righteousness and defensiveness, is it possible to observe the situation differently and increase our options for connecting?

Uncovering similarities allows bonds to grow between us, but often we have to look beyond obvious similarities to find points of connection. Assuming that people are similar to one another based on only one element of their background or ethnic group risks violating the Titanium Rule—for each person is a culture. While three co-workers may be female and African-American, for instance, those facts alone do not tell us about them as individuals. We would have to search further for other aspects of them as people.

The people we meet offer signals about themselves and their preferences. Anything that we can observe can be a cue: the formality or the informality of their dress, their posture, or the tempo and volume of their speech. We can learn about their *druthers* from whether they proactively drive the conversation or listen receptively, whether they nod their head or fire questions at us. Deciding to pay close attention to what we see is the beginning of observation. Sometimes cues are readily apparent, and sometimes they are more subtle.

No matter how skillfully we may clarify our intentions, monitor and manage our reactions, search for similarities and use cues to identify preferences, connecting is always a work in progress. Success at any moment is the result of

making an offer, noticing the response, and building the next offer on the basis of what we learned from the previous one. A good principle to keep in mind is, “There is no failure, only feedback.” Flexibility and persistence will eventually make a connection.

POINTS OF VIEW

People who connect well shift perspective so that they can see situations from different vantage points. This is a skill that is particularly helpful when we face obstacles to connecting, when our biases get in the way, or when we have difficulty in understanding someone. When obstacles

The first step in connecting more effectively with other people is to be completely at home in your own body, that is, fully aware of your own feelings, desires, beliefs, prejudices, assumptions, and tendencies.

arise, skilled connectors look for ways around them. They change perspective by mentally stepping out of their own experiences to observe the interaction as if they were outside observers. Or, they imagine what the situation would like look if they were the other person, experiencing it from the other person’s perspective. Having the flexibility to look at a situation from a different angle can often enable us to find more—and better—options for how to approach the situation.

Changing perspective can improve the quality of our interactions. When we become adept at changing points of view, we can shift quickly and often as needed. Each time we move to a new perspective, we gain valuable information and insights, and our judgment improves and becomes wiser. Changing perspective, or point of view, is a mental skill, and as with all skills, we get better with practice.

To use *first person perspective* is to see things as we normally do, from our own point of view. It is who we are, it is what we see, hear, feel, and know. Leaders take the first person perspective when they set a course of action, which they do from their own personal sense of what is right and fitting for the circumstances. The better we understand ourselves—who we are, why we are the way we are, what is important to us, what we like and do not like, and what our triggers are—the better we become at understanding and connecting with others. When we know ourselves, we can teach others about our style and preferences; sharing such information builds trust. This is the reason successful

negotiators reveal *more* rather than less about themselves and their interests as they negotiate.

If we do not know our *blind spots*, the things that others know about us that we are unaware of, we are vulnerable. Blind spots are part of the first-person perspective. Knowing ourselves helps us to be more effective at building bridges with those different from ourselves. When we learn more about our blind spots, which we can do by examining our beliefs and expanding our awareness, we become more fluent in the first-person perspective. We can also increase our understanding of ourselves by becoming more aware of the signals and messages that we receive from our “less-conscious” awareness. These may include nonverbal signals, the feelings and sensations that reside on the edge of our conscious attention such as a

knot in our stomach, a hunch that pops into our head, or vivid dreams that we have. Attending to these messages brings them into focus.

When we shift into *second-person perspective*, we see our situation through the eyes of the other person involved. We can gain second-person perspective by imagining ourselves standing in the shoes of others. We imagine what it would be like to see through their eyes, to hear through their ears, and to feel their feelings, what it would be like to have their experiences, and, as a result, reach the conclusions that they have and form the opinions that they hold.

We can improve our second-person perspective, therefore, by keen observation and by using every cue we receive to enhance our ability to “become” that person. Making the effort to step into another person’s shoes pays off in understanding and in compassion; we improve our flexibility and the range of choices when we “try on” beliefs and behaviors that may seem foreign to us. Stepping into another’s shoes is a powerful technique that can increase rapport and deepen understanding. We know that our second-person perspective is accurate when, faced with the same situation, we would make the same choices and take the same actions the other person would. When we are looking for a bridge, we can almost always find it by changing into second-person perspective.

Stepping out of the immediate situation and looking at ourselves and the people we are trying to connect with as if we were an objective third party can also help adjust

our behavior and improve our chances of being successful. This technique is especially helpful when the situation is very emotional, when we are taking things too personally, or when we are stuck and need to find other alternatives. We can step into the *third-person, or observer, perspective* by imagining how we would see ourselves from a distance. Third-person perspective gives us a rational assessment so that we can coach ourselves to be more effective. Our third-person perspective is working when we can describe each person in the relationship (including ourselves) or situation objectively and when we are not more aligned or partial to one party than another. When we can describe our own behaviors with impartiality and detachment, we have the benefit of the third-person perspective.

WORKING WITH DIFFERENCES IN GROUPS

For those who lead groups of people across any kind of boundary of difference, the task of connecting is even greater. Groups are made up of individuals, and the challenge in connecting is always an individual one, gaining rapport and creating a safe and open environment for participation. A group leader's task is to create rapport with the *majority* of individuals in a group. It is simply not possible to sit down with people on an individual basis and learn their preferences to tailor presentations to them as individuals.

We have to build bridges with what the authors call "bricks of similarity" that apply to many individuals in the group. Finding similarities early in a presentation sets a tone of connection from the start. It may be that all the members of the group have been through a merger or that they share a profession and therefore face similar challenges. In almost every situation, there will be a myriad of similarities upon which to build.

Group members, or audience members, bring certain hopes into a room, whether they articulate them or not. The presenter's challenge is to fulfill as many of those hopes as possible, which may not be as hard as it seems. The critical window for connecting is in the first three minutes. Sincere interest and appreciation communicated in opening remarks convey a presenter's hopes and intentions for the presentation and the value the participants will gain. Presenters should let a group know that they hope

to connect, to learn from the group and from its culture. Expressing a bit of humility in the face of difference helps. Soliciting cultural input early in a presentation goes a long way to buying forgiveness when, or if, a cultural boundary is violated. Humor can also be an effective way of opening this topic, if it fits a presenter's style and if the presenter already has some credibility with the group and its members.

As presenters speak to a group, it is important to watch carefully for cues that indicate how an opening is being

What's important as leaders is the flexibility to confront conflict on one hand and promote harmony on the other. You have to know when to do that within your own style.

received. When feedback (eye contact, facial expressions, and body language) suggests that they are connecting, presenters should continue what they are doing; however, if they feel that they are losing the group, a different approach is needed. These cues are a presenter's guidance system. It is important to learn to read new cultural cues accurately because people in some cultures are much less demonstrative than in others. Cues can differ on the basis of culture, even cultures that appear to have much in common. Learning something about a culture before leading groups in a country is highly recommended. Knowing that there will be new cues to read in a culture helps presenters or group leaders connect more successfully.

The guidelines discussed above can be helpful when leaders or presenters are different from a homogeneous group they are leading. What happens, however, when members of a group are different from one another? In this situation, presenters face the same challenges as when they are the ones who are different from the homogeneous group—for example, connecting well from the start, developing rapport, demonstrating credibility, creating safety for the group in the learning environment, reading and responding to cues, and experimenting with and adjusting behavior on the basis of feedback. In addition, they face the task of helping members connect well with one another and building a cohesive culture through their differences. The challenge will change, therefore, according to the differences among group members. If we take seriously the adage that each individual is a culture, then all groups are composed of people who differ from one another.

There are many ways to help group members unite and bond. The goal is to bring the group members' differences to their attention and to celebrate them. The message the presenter is attempting to convey is, "Isn't it great to have this variety and richness among us?" Presenters should highlight and welcome differences to create a level playing field and a nonhierarchical community.

Leading a group that has a history of conflict or controversy, or when presenters anticipate that conflict is likely to emerge in the group, two of the authors' core principles can be especially helpful in building a bridge between factions: clarifying intention and searching for similarities from the outset will help the group bond around common purpose. The strength of that initial bond can make it safe for group members to explore highly controversial issues and air strong differences in an atmosphere of respect and appreciation.

Building that bond begins with drawing the group's attention to common ground, especially common intentions, early in the meeting. Presenters might choose to acknowledge the differences, and then lead group members to focus on what they share. From this point, a list of working agreements and ground rules for the discussion can be developed that will support the group in airing differences while maintaining respect and goodwill.

In his book, *How Great Decisions Get Made*, Don Maruska has shown us the advantage to be gained from opening such a group with an invitation to explore hopes. He writes that any troubling group situation can be turned around by asking two questions: "What are your hopes for this meeting? Why are they important to you?" In taking this approach, Maruska turns the group's attention away from specific positions on issues to the *intention*, or purpose, behind the meeting or project. Once group members find common ground at the general level, on hopes that they all share, it is easier to come to agreement on specifics. Maruska's strategy capitalizes on the power of seeking *alignment* rather than agreement. Gaining alignment in a group requires the facilitator to take a third-person perspective, staying above the squabble of differing opinions to see what the parties share in common intention and weaving differences into a fabric of common design at the level of intention.

* * *

Notes by chapter, related reading suggestions, and a subject index are provided.

Remarks

Authors Claire Raines and Lara Ewing have based their book on the belief that we all have more in common than we realize. Typically, whether it is meeting an individual or stepping into a group situation with diverse members, we tend to focus on our differences. However, with a genuine desire to communicate and by applying the authors' recommendations, following their core principles and the pathways to connection, we can turn that mindset around to search instead for what we have in common when we approach others, whether in it is in a business or personal situation.

Cues about other people are all around us—if we take the time to notice and become aware of them. The Titanium Rule—do unto others according to their druthers—is a simple, yet powerful premise that can be applied in virtually every business and workplace, and it can be applied immediately. It does not require preparation or study on the part of those who want to communicate and connect. A further value of **The Art of Connecting** is that it addresses both one-on-one interactions with individuals and working with people in group situations. And it also addresses human differences of many types: cultural and ethnic; class; generational and age; gender; and physical disability.

While the stories and examples are wide ranging and can apply to virtually every situation or interaction, readers should note that tips for dealing with specific cultures or groups of people are not included in the book. In the description of these core principles and strategies, or pathways to connection, the authors make a very perceptive analogy with acting and actors. Readers should not, however, interpret following these principles as making us less than authentic, or less than true to ourselves, it should, rather, be construed as only by placing ourselves in others' shoes can we understand their motivations and

their frame of reference. When we do so, we can respond appropriately according to the situation. When we work in a diverse workplace and marketplace, individuals are cultures unto themselves, and there are no pre-written scripts. By paying close attention to what they tell us and show us about themselves, we can learn to function effectively when our culture meets theirs.

Reading Suggestions

Reading Time: 5-6 hours, 240 pages in book

The Art of Connecting is filled with examples, case studies, and learning and assessment activities that allow readers to practice the core principles. It is a practical, fast-paced but readable book that can be read in a reasonable period of time, perhaps even in one sitting. We recommend reading the first five chapters which outline the Titanium Rule, the core principles, the pathways to connection, the three points of view, and working with differences in groups.

Readers can then select from the remaining three chapters as they choose.

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