

Building and Using Relationships During COVID-19

By Ed O'Neil, PhD, MPA

Last week, a person fairly new to a leadership role asked me the most disarming question. I had shared my formula for leadership — Vision times Task times Relationship ($L=V*T*R$) — and he asked how to build relationships. My first thought was, “Really?,” but the question made perfect sense. He is trained in a highly technical scientific field and has been very successful paying attention to the big picture (vision) and working hard on the details (task). He is new to the organization and has not spent any time meeting people in person since he started during this period of agency-wide telework. How do you start building relationships in such a situation?

Here are five things to do to build relationships, particularly when the options for a drink after work have been limited.

1. **OUT** — An acronym for **Open Using Trust**. A lot of our social interactions are derived from what we learned on the savannah when we wore loincloths. We are very focused upon meeting someone on the question of whether or not they will see us as dinner. If you don't make eye contact, don't have an open face and smile, don't take a minute or two to exchange pleasantries, and have defensive body language; they will, without being aware of it, decide that maybe you are not trustworthy and they should be careful and start unconsciously sending the same rejecting signals. The spiral down has started — the dance will continue throughout that first encounter. On the other hand, you will build good things if you affirm when you can, nod positively at their good suggestions, and compliment when it is deserved. Not everyone will turn out to be trustworthy and, by the way, you won't either. The risks of opening with trust are minimal — you won't be dinner, and you will soon know if your entreaty to trust is being accepted and reciprocated by your new partner. This is hard in the age of COVID-19, because you can't offer a handshake, but a wave and a smile over Zoom is just as important — maybe more so now.
2. **Be authentic and connect** — This is tough, particularly when we are connecting via screens and technology. Some folks are quite comfortable in themselves and inviting others in. Many of us are not. Of course, those overly extroverted kinds do have propensity to overshare, which can be just as harmful to a new relationship. So how about some balance if you are a big-time personality? Leave some space for others, but still be yourself. If you are on the quieter side, take the chance to listen carefully (you will anyway), then instead of nodding, push yourself to ask a question about what was just said. It gets easy with practice. These things are very hard now, but one thing that seems to be working is dedicated “social”

About the Quick-Takes Series

This miniseries, part of the [Medicaid Leadership Exchange podcast](#), provides guidance to help Medicaid leaders during the COVID-19 crisis. The series, which includes companion videos and tip sheets, is developed in partnership with the National Association of Medicaid Directors and the Center for Health Care Strategies through support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. For more information, visit www.chcs.org/quicktakes.

time or, better, an activity like office trivia or share your pet, which can create space for letting the personal connection grow and boost the authenticity of the connection.

- 3. Act to build** — For most of us, relationships do not grow on their own. They need a little care and feeding. After you have met someone and feel as if you would like to build the relationship, take two minutes to think about what you know about them and jot down a few notes on a page that you will continue to update. Read a paper they have recently written and send them a question, or read more about a part of the agency they run and send along an inquiry about something they do that is of interest to you. Make the notes and comments brief and to the point. If they mentioned something they are interested in and you run across a person or resource that speaks to that interest, introduce them. In another time in this early stage of a relationship, we might have asked them to lunch. You can still do it, but by Zoom and it might even be better at the end of the day with a glass of something. Do this only with real questions that you have about their work or discussion points that might help you in your work.
- 4. Be positive** — It is hard to take this stance these days, but if you are building relationships and reputation in an organization, it is essential to be positive in a realistic and informed manner. Be happy with the success of others. Give out more credit than may be deserved. Always talk about “our” work, not “mine.” Be genuinely curious, not judgmental. You should have opinions, and ones that are good and strong, but your job is to bring everyone into alignment toward a positive goal. These small things are important. You want to be seen as a person who proactively solves problems in a positive and collaborative manner, not one that pushes over people leaving a trail of collateral damage.
- 5. Be a servant leader** — Developing the qualities of [Robert Greenleaf’s great concept of the servant leader](#) builds stronger, deeper relationships at work. If I see my role as leader to be a servant to the interest of my colleague, I will strike a powerful basis for our relationship. [Adam Grant](#) makes a convincing case that in the long run, giving builds leadership and success more than taking. Another deep-seated human quality is to be understood or seen by the other. We encourage this by approaching the development of reciprocal relationships with understanding of the other and a willingness to give our share, and perhaps more. In return, we each benefit from connections that grow and serve our interests. In these challenging times, all of this can be enhanced by strengthening your [listening skills](#). Beyond just listening though, today’s challenges demand that we act on what we are hearing and follow up with deeper questions and concerns.

Just know there are a lot of things that might distract us from connecting and building relationships — don’t let them.

About Ed O’Neil

Ed O’Neil, PhD, MPA, is the owner of O’Neil & Associates, a management consulting and leadership development firm focused on change and renewal in the health care system. He was previously professor in the Departments of Family and Community Medicine, Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of California, San Francisco, and director of the Center for the Health Professions, a training institute that he created in 1992. His work across three decades has focused on changing the US health care system through improved policy and leadership. To learn more, visit www.oneil-and-associates.com.

About the National Association of Medicaid Directors

The National Association of Medicaid Directors supports Medicaid directors in administering the program in cost-effective, efficient, and visionary ways that enable the over 70 million Americans served by Medicaid to achieve their best health and to thrive in their communities. To learn more, visit www.medicaiddirectors.org.

About the Medicaid Leadership Institute

The *Medicaid Leadership Institute*, an initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation led by the Center for Health Care Strategies, helps Medicaid directors develop the skills and expertise necessary to successfully lead their state programs in an ever-changing policy environment. To learn more, visit www.chcs.org/medicaid-leaders.