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# Building Relationships:

*Leadership is a  
People Business*



# BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS: LEADERSHIP IS A PEOPLE BUSINESS

*By InnerDrive*



## WHY RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

Leadership in schools is not just about strategy, vision or execution; it's about people. At its core, leadership is a relational act. Strong professional relationships are the very foundation upon which high-performing school cultures are built. They are what enable the trust, collaboration and psychological safety that are essential for successful teaching and learning.

In a world increasingly focused on outcomes and efficiency, it's easy to overlook the human side of leadership, which is dangerous as building relationships is not a soft skill; it's the infrastructure of improvement. As Viviane Robinson (2011) aptly states, *"relational trust is the glue that holds everything together."*

## WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Research consistently shows that the quality of relationships between leaders and their teams is one of the strongest predictors of engagement, performance and wellbeing.

- **Transformational leaders** are noted for their ability to build strong emotional bonds with staff, which enhances teacher motivation and performance (Bass, 1985). This style of leadership, often contrasted with purely transactional approaches, moves beyond simple compliance to genuine commitment and shared purpose. Staff are motivated not just by rewards or punishments, but by a sense of shared mission and a personal connection to their leader and the school's vision.
- The concept of **psychological safety**, introduced by Amy Edmondson (1999), is particularly relevant in schools. It describes a climate where staff members feel safe to take risks, ask questions, and admit mistakes without fear of embarrassment or punishment.

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This is foundational for professional learning and pedagogical innovation as it normalises learning from failure and fosters a culture of continuous improvement.

- Bryk and Schneider (2002) found that schools with high **relational trust** among staff, parents and students were far more likely to successfully implement and sustain reform efforts. Their research identified four key components of trust: respect, personal regard, competence and integrity, and suggested they were the building blocks of a cohesive and effective school community.

## HOW IT GOES WRONG

Despite its importance, relationship-building is often neglected. Here is how it can go wrong in a school context and the negative consequences that follow:

- 1.** When school leaders focus solely on tasks, data and compliance, relationships become transactional. Staff subsequently feel like cogs simply fulfilling a role rather than contributing to a shared educational mission.
- 2.** Trust is built through consistency and relationships erode when leaders say one thing and do another or treat people differently based on status or favour.
- 3.** Poor self-awareness, reactive behaviour under pressure or an inability to empathise with staff and student concerns can quickly damage relationships. Goleman (1995) suggested that most effective leaders are all alike in one crucial way: they all have a high degree of emotional intelligence.
- 4.** Relationships are dynamic, requiring continuous attention and when leaders are too busy to check in, listen or show appreciation, people feel invisible. Over time, this leads to broken trust, disengagement and relational attrition (Wilson and Cunliffe, 2022).

## HOW TO GET IT RIGHT

Strong relationships do not happen by accident; they're built through intentional practice. Below are four evidence-informed strategies which support their development:

### 1. Develop and Display Emotional Intelligence

Actively develop your self-awareness and empathy by taking time to reflect on how your mood and communication style impact others and consciously adapt your behaviour. Pause before reacting and then take the opportunity to ask clarifying questions. This measured approach models the emotional regulation that is vital for building and sustaining strong relationships.

### 2. Create Psychological Safety

Encourage openness, curiosity and respectful challenge in meetings and professional development sessions. Explicitly state that it is safe for teachers and other leaders to voice concerns, ask questions and admit when they need support (Edmondson, 1999). Relationships are strengthened when leaders frame mistakes as learning opportunities, actively invite dissenting opinions and celebrate bravery and vulnerability.

### 3. Be Present

Make time for meaningful interactions with both staff and students by being visible, engaging in informal conversations and actively listening during interactions. Ask genuine questions about personal and professional interests and show people they are seen and valued as individuals, not just as employees or pupils.

### 4. Model Trust and Integrity

Be transparent in your decision-making processes, follow through on your commitments and, crucially, own your mistakes. When leaders live their values and demonstrate vulnerability it builds trust and creates an environment where others feel empowered to be honest and take collective responsibility for the school's success.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Leadership is not a solo act. It is a shared journey and the quality of your relationships determines the quality of the experience. The best leaders do not just manage people; they connect with them. They understand that influence is earned through trust not authority, that loyalty is built through empathy not control and progress is sustained through partnership not pressure. In the end, leadership is a people business and people remember how you made them feel long after they've forgotten what you said or did. So, if you want to lead well, start by leading relationally.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Articles

How to Build Psychological Safety in the Workplace – Harvard Business School Online <https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/psychological-safety-in-the-workplace>

Dr. Daniel Goleman Explains the History of Emotional Intelligence  
[www.6seconds.org/2024/02/29/goleman-emotional-intelligence/](http://www.6seconds.org/2024/02/29/goleman-emotional-intelligence/)

### Books

Bradberry, T., & Greaves, J. (2009). *Emotional intelligence 2.0*. TalentSmart.

Giles, D. L. (2018). *Relational leadership in education: A phenomenon of inquiry and practice*. Routledge.

Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. (2002). *Primal leadership: Realizing the power of emotional intelligence*. Harvard Business School Press.



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