



Leadership Can Be Lonely, But We Can't Do It Alone Four Essential Relationships for All Leaders

Leaders, by definition of the role, can't lead alone, even though their roles may sometimes feel very, very lonely. Warren Bennis, a leadership scholar and thought leader, wrote, "Leadership is never exerted in a vacuum. It is always a transaction between the leader, [their] followers, and the goal or dream."

Yes, leaders need followers, and they also need people to confide in, people who are invested in their development and success, and people who offer shared experiences and different perspectives. We often hear that leadership, especially executive leadership, can feel like a very isolating experience; leaders often find themselves called upon to make major decisions without sufficient information and support. When leaders intentionally build meaningful relationships with coworkers, coaches, mentors, field professionals, and friends outside their organization, they tend to lead more confidently and competently. *So, which connections are critical to our success as leaders? Based on research and the advice of many leadership experts, we offer four crucial relationships for leaders.*

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RELATIONSHIP ONE PROFESSIONAL FRIENDS OR CONFIDANTS Gallup, a cross-sector organizational research company, has found [twelve make-or-break factors related to employee engagement](#). One of those factors is having a 'best friend' at work. Leaders need someone at work who shows up when they need help, offers support and empathy when they are struggling, celebrates with them when they succeed, maintains appropriate confidentiality, and genuinely cares about them as a whole person. Investing in these quasi-professional and quasi-personal relationships is well worth it. [Research shows](#) that leaders who have meaningful work relationships tend to be more successful and satisfied on the job.

RELATIONSHIP TWO COACHES OR MENTORS Having someone to go to, provide advice, and share wisdom and expertise is a powerful tool for leaders, particularly leaders who want to hone their impact at the executive level. While there are usually [differences between the roles of mentors and coaches](#), including focus, duration, and type of support provided, both offer leaders a 'yeah, I've been there' perspective that can be incredibly valuable to problem-solving, skill development and decision-making in challenging situations. [Researchers have also found](#) that when organizations invest in coaching and mentoring, they tend to enable leaders to direct more productive and high-performing teams.

RELATIONSHIP THREE NETWORK CONNECTIONS From almost 20 years of facilitating Leadership Institutes, we have seen the long-term impact that building and maintaining connections and networks can have on the motivation and success of leaders. Field connections outside the workplace remind leaders that they are part of something bigger than themselves and link them with others experiencing similar, even shared, challenges and stressors. Networks [encourage innovation, resource exchange, and collaboration that improve work satisfaction, organizational outcomes, and systems performance](#). Experts also note that strong professional networks are extremely helpful as leaders move forward in their careers and consider future opportunities.

RELATIONSHIP FOUR NONWORK FRIENDSHIPS Because the work disability sector leaders do is often tied to their passion, life purpose, and even identities, it is easy to center our time and relationships around our work life; it's also not an entirely healthy practice, [according to research](#). Experts recommend connecting with at least one or two groups that have nothing to do with your work; hobby-based classes or clubs, sports leagues, places of worship, volunteer groups, and more are great places to start. Because work inevitably will be a source of both fulfillment and significant stress, relationships outside of work [can act as a buffer](#) and re-ground us in joy, friendship, and meaningful connection.

Experts consistently agree that solving many workplace challenges, such as building leader/follower trust, improving accountability, enhancing communication, and more, requires relationship building. Organizations need leaders who value connections and have the skills to know and care about other people and their success. To lead with sustained passion, energy, and enthusiasm, we must invest our time and energy in building a few types of meaningful relationships. It's our connections to others that can make us great.