

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS THAT ENABLE NEXT-GENERATION LEADERS

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The CEOs and other senior leaders my colleagues and I interact with at Passages Consulting are wringing their hands over the search for qualified leaders to succeed them. Many have concluded that quality “future potentials” are rare. However, their cynicism couldn’t be more inaccurate. Current research demonstrates that the view that current leaders have no competent and capable pool of qualified successors is an illusion. In one study, 40 percent of the 200 professionals polled reported that their companies were unsuccessful in encouraging collaboration between younger and older workers, thereby undermining younger employees’ ability to move into broader leadership positions. These statistics are compounded by the numerous stories of the failure of integrity and character that are strafing the media. The emerging generation of leaders is being asked to

take the reins from incumbents they are trusting less and less. Consequently many are saying “no thanks” to the opportunity, and this is baffling the current generation of leaders.

I set out several years back to better understand leaders’ relationships and organizational effectiveness. What I learned surprised me. CEOs and other senior leaders believed that the leadership crisis was about a lack of future leaders. I found no shortage of leaders. In fact, I found an abundance of them. Enthusiastic, eager, outrageously smart, these women and men are hungry for the chance to put their fingerprints on the organizations in which they work. They’re dying to lead—but with one catch: they have no desire whatsoever to lead as they have been led. And most of today’s incumbent

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leaders aren't able to recognize these emerging leaders and their immense potential.

Listen to this commentary from an emerging leader named Andy:

I'm not interested in being someone's project, or being cloned. My boss just thinks that if I become more like him, my career will be fine. What he doesn't get is that I have no interest in having a career like his—not in the slightest. He's trashed his family and he's 50 pounds overweight—why would anyone want to pursue that?

On the other side, Amanda, a seasoned executive, told me this about young leaders she is mentoring:

I am continually amazed by the levels of entitlement these kids show up with. Some of them think that just because they walked in the door I owe them a job. At the slightest hint of sound advice or development feedback they act as though I don't know what I'm talking about.

Both perspectives are true in part. But neither is entirely true. I believe we can step back and have a different conversation—one that respects and leverages the differences across generations and builds relationships that unite and transform organizations.

Leadership is not something one does *to* someone else. Rather, it is something one does *with* someone else. History, literature, and academia have done us a disservice by focusing on leaders as heroic, stand-alone individuals. True leadership is not a solo act.

We must begin to engage the notion of leadership as a *relationship*. More often than not, it is a complex port-

folio of relationships, each one distinctive and complex in its own right. Leadership is built by continually investing in ever-deepening relationships.

Our research identified at least six relational patterns that distinguished distressed relationships from transformational relationships. (See Table 1.) I am not suggesting that these are *the* relational patterns of high-performing relationships. This list is more about starting a new conversation than being the final word.

Six Relational Patterns That Unleash Leadership Capability

1. **A level playing field.** No matter how much we say that command and control is dead, rank still has many privileges that leaders don't want to lose. Listen to Lisa, an emerging leader, talk about how she experiences her boss's use of rank.

He comes in the door expecting everyone to stand at attention. He parks his fancy car right in front in the visitors' spot, and issues edicts as though no one has anything to do but serve him. Oh, he's never mean about what he asks for. In fact he's quite polite and nice. That's what makes him even harder to take. I wish he knew how to be "one of us" instead of working so hard to be the "big cheese."

I think what we've ended up with is a "kinder and gentler" set of often well-intentioned command-and-control leaders. The leaders who truly know how to engage those around them in a common pursuit of great performance appear to be few and far between.

Incumbent leaders have the courage to exert influence in the service of helping an organization grow and flourish, even if it means disappointing others. Emerging leaders have the desire to ensure that authority is used well and justly, even though decisions and outcomes might take longer to land. We must learn to embrace both views as complementary, not opposing. Not all incumbent leaders are benevolent dictators self-servingly presiding over others. And not all emerging leaders are recalcitrant rebels, intent on overthrowing authority structures they feel are constraining their free expression.