

# Embracing the Power of Business Intimacy



Keys to building Deeply Connected  
High Value Business Relationships

By David Craig Utts  
CEO, BeaconPoint Leadership

## A FOCUS ON “BUSINESS INTIMACY” IS THE FOUNDATION OF VALUE CREATION

Deepening your business relationships requires that you **move toward developing a deeper intimacy** with your clients as well as those with whom you work. I do not use the term “work intimacy” lightly here. I know some feel that intimacy is out of place in the business environment, but without intimacy you cannot have the type of relationships required to succeed at a high level in today’s business world. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines intimacy as “a state of familiarity or closeness.” Clearly business intimacy is unlikely to be as deep as it is in your personal relationships, but strengthening relationships in business requires you to move towards greater closeness and familiarity with others. Keith Humphrey of Core Context Consulting coined the phrase “Business Intimacy”, describing it as follows:

***“Business intimacy is a term to describe these deep structure conversations that connect the underlying dynamics of the business organization with the underlying dynamics of client as a person.”***

Keith Humphrey  
Core Context Consulting

In my experience, it is when the other participant in a relationship reveals what is most important to them, both personally and in their business, that you are able to understand their deeper concerns they only reveal to those close to them. As trust grows and deeper concerns are shared, you are in a powerful position to truly help your clients and those in other key business relationships in profound ways. As you support those deeper issues successfully your connection to that person is made even deeper. Problems that seemed at one time intractable melt away and the quality of your work grows exponentially.

### **Making a commitment to deeper “business intimacy” leads to:**

- **Longer term, more profitable business relationships.**
- **The development of deeper value and innovation**
- **Greater retention of your best people**
- **Stronger alignment of what you do with what you are most passionate about doing**

### **It’s Time to Stop Trying to Influence Others**

Before I go on, let’s distinguish business intimacy from influence. The “power of influence” is one of the hottest business topics today. Influence is a hot seller on Amazon.com and people are flocking to courses on the topic. I myself have been part of this problem: I designed and occasionally still deliver a course entitled “*Influence Without Authority*.” What a silly title! But in this title resides the actual problem we face when we attempt to influence. It is time to ask ourselves why we focus on influencing others. To put it briefly, we crave influence because:

- Hierarchically structured organizations are not built in a way to foster connection; without connection our ability to make trusted commitments is hindered
- Service providers are too often so enamored of their own offerings that they do not take the time to truly connect and listen to prospects; traditional sales training focuses on influence as a means to artificially create connection
- Those attempting to do their jobs within organizations struggle to get the ear of upper management, who too often place themselves above their staffs; upper management sends those below to influence programs in order to make them more effective at getting their work

done, not realizing that it is their own orientation that is a major reason things are not getting done well

The goal of any business relationship is to be a force that grows value exponentially. A focus on influence works against this goal. People aiming to influence are attempting to get their own needs met, a focus that separates rather than bringing people closer. With a focus on getting closer, more intimate, more honest, and more aligned, amazing things can happen. The focus in organizations of any size must be on building genuinely closer relationships. The old adage “pay me now or pay me later” applies. Take time to connect, deeply listen, and explore outside of your comfort zone. It may take longer to achieve a result, but when you do you will have built a foundation that will help you solve future challenges in far faster and more innovative ways.

Relationships are the central element that allows business to happen. Your best relationships will always have some degree of intimacy built in. It is intimacy that allows for long-term connections that truly matter. If you only see your business relationships as a means to an end or are focused on some personal gain over creating a win-win, then it does not make sense for you to open up more than you have to. If, however, you recognize the value in developing deeper relationships, then it is the only worthwhile journey. The focus must be to sharpen your discrimination and to take greater and greater risks in relationships, while managing these risks so that you gain greater and greater confidence in your competence. The rest of this paper provides a map that will make it possible for you to accomplish this.

### **High Value Intimate Relationships Defined**

Let's start by defining what has to happen to grow greater intimacy in your business relationships. Fundamentally, **high-value intimate relationships have the following qualities:**

- A foundation of mutual trust and respect
- A clear purpose and alignment around mutually high-value outcomes that serves the highest interests of each party
- The ability to be authentic with each other as well as brutally honest in service of achieving outcomes *and* deepening the relationship
- A willingness to work through rough times by learning and forgiving rather than blaming
- The desire to deepen the relationship for continued benefits and expanded possibilities

Whether you are trying to enhance the value in a client relationship, coach your direct reports, align with a member of the senior team, a peer, or even a competitor, these qualities are the foundation of your success. Outcomes may be different depending on the context of the relationship (e.g., client, supplier, employee, etc.), but the mindset and skills required to build a high value intimate business relationship are the same across all contexts. But while it is easy to define these qualities of such relationships, your attitude towards intimacy has everything to do with making them happen. This is true in our personal relationships, but for a number of reasons it is more challenging in our business relationships.

In personal relationships the focus tends to be on the enjoyment of the connection itself and all that connection brings to our lives. In our personal relationships we often share common values and interests. These values and interests are many times what bring us together. Ultimately, we maintain these relationships because of the personal connection and the common bonds we share. In business relationships we are certainly brought together around something common: we decide to work for a particular organization, go after particular clients, hire particular people for our team because of their skills, and so forth. Rarely, however, do we focus on building the same kind of connectivity as we do in our personal relationships. In fact, the business outcome, not personal connection, is the primary focus. There is no question that certain levels of intimacy are not



appropriate in business relationships. Yet consciously developing some level of personal connection or “business intimacy” is critical to the value-creation process.

Given this, seeing how one builds authentic, robust, and productive relationships is highly valuable. As I share the following model and process it is important to emphasize the critical nature of your own personal attitude as you engage this material. “The map is not the territory”, as they say, but the map is useful preparing for a trip and useful again if you get lost. Given that, let us examine an integrated approach to building high-value intimate business relationships.

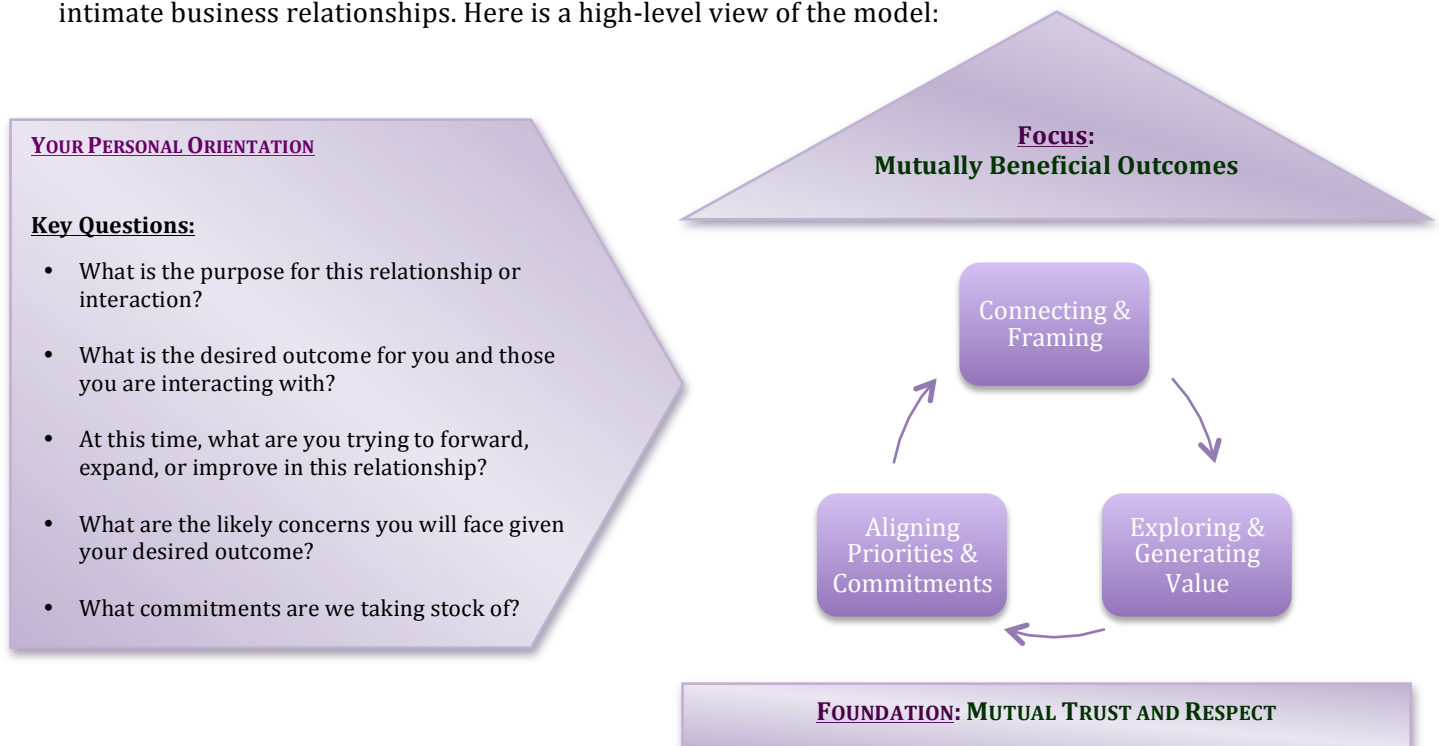
## I. Powerful Engagement – A Model for Deepening Trust and Strengthening Alignment

What follows is an overview of a complete and proven model for engaging others. Again, the goal:

- To create and deepen intimacy and trust
- To foster an environment of mutual respect
- To generate win-win, high-value outcomes

It is important to point out here that relationships are held together by two very important elements, conversations and commitments. In my experience, when business conversations are authentic and open, the commitments made are of higher quality and ultimately when action is taken it meets or exceeds expectations. On the other hand, when conversations are shallow, the ensuing commitments tend to be of far lower quality, meaning they do not even meet, let alone exceed, expectations. Inauthentic conversations, then, lead to lower performance and satisfaction in relationships.

My primary focus here is to develop a conversational model that mirrors the actual flow of conversation. Again, there is a natural order to this that starts with our attitude toward the conversation. When you understand this flow and the steps contained in it, you are able to engage in such a way so that you can exceed expectations, have the highest level of client satisfaction possible and vastly improve the performance of those who work with and for you. Understanding the iterative steps of conversation is essential in gaining greater mastery as a builder of high-value intimate business relationships. Here is a high-level view of the model:



## **Attitudes Build High-Value Intimate Relationships**

Again, creating high-value intimate relationships with our clients, our peers, and our teams requires a deep commitment to building intimacy as well as tremendous courage to speak our truth, listen to others and work through what we have to so we can create alignment towards high-value outcomes. This all begins with our attitudes towards others.

At the highest level our attitudes toward others involve two elements:

- What **our intentions** are for the relationship or conversation we are entering
- Where we are placing **our attention** as we enter the relationship or conversation

If your intentions are anything less than creating a mutual, high-value outcome, you are starting off on the wrong foot. If you have this attitude, where you are placing your attention directly impacts the outcome of the relationship or conversation.

Are we attending to the problems in the relationship or previous conversations or are we paying attention to the desire to raise value and deepen trust? Are we attending to our lack of confidence when interacting with this person or standing in a commitment to the purpose for coming together? Our attention is akin to a flashlight. Where we shine the light will determine how powerful we are in the interaction.

Fundamentally, what you must do to build high-value intimate relationships is shift your focus away from your own agenda towards the highest-value mutual agenda as best you know it. One of the key goals must then be to ensure that everyone in the relationship is aligned with this higher purpose and goal. Such an alignment allows for a much higher-level conversation that sets the stage for exponential value being created for all concerned. Where there is alignment on purpose and goals, confidence is fostered because you are advocating a shared direction, rather than your individual agenda. This also allows you to push back if others sway in a new direction based on a personal agenda. It allows for “tough love” if things get off track.

Answering the following questions will assist you in adjusting your attitude toward any interaction:

- What are the purpose and primary outcomes for this relationship and how is this interaction supporting that?
- How would I assess the level of mutual trust and respect in this relationship? What must we do to improve this?
- Are we aligned on this purpose and the outcomes? If not, what needs to happen to generate alignment?
- What is the current status of our commitments?
- What is my sense of what the other person(s) want from the relationship and from this interaction?
- Given the purpose and goals with which we have aligned, do I have any concerns that must be addressed to move us forward?
- Is there anything not being talked about that must be examined?

Taking time to answer key questions such as these allows us to be intentional in our approach and to consciously develop high-value partnerships. Ultimately, the key is being more conscious about our approach to engaging before we actually do engage.

Finally, it is important that you distinguish between the types of resentments you may hold towards others. One of the biggest diseases in organizations that hold us back from deepening value is harboring resentments. Resentments are generated in two ways:

- Commitments have not been met
- Expectations have not been met

If a commitment has not been met you have the right to respectfully raise this and determine how to get things back on track. Again, this is why it is so critical to be aligned on your purpose and high-level goals. When you are, there is no need for resentment, just a conversation to get things back on track. Just as you do in your personal relationships, if commitments continually break down then you need to consider if you will continue in the relationship. It may simply not work out. However, in most cases if you are able to have authentic, courageous conversations about what has to happen to get things back on track, you usually can move things in the right direction. But if you instead silently harbor resentments it will be impossible to do this.

It is an entirely different story if you have expectations that are not being met, without corresponding commitments. For example, if your partners are not meeting your personal standards of quality or are approaching your conversations in ways you deem ill-prepared, you have no right to complain because there are no commitments. However, in such cases you do have a right to request that things be done differently. You can express your concerns in the context of achieving the purpose and goals and negotiate an approach that supports you better. Such conversations will strengthen the relationship because they deepen understanding. In any case, holding resentments are a waste of time and cause most of the unnecessary drama we face in business and in life. The key is to always let go of destructive thoughts and shift your focus so you are always looking for value.

### **The Context for Engaging Others**

The context for relationships involves three elements that we must look to deepen over time. At a high level, these elements include:

#### **1. Mutual Respect** - which involves:

- Valuing another's value and contribution.
- Honoring the unique contribution someone has brought historically to the relationship
- Being able to suspend our opinion and taking the time to understand another person's perspective during the decision making process – even if it runs counter to yours.

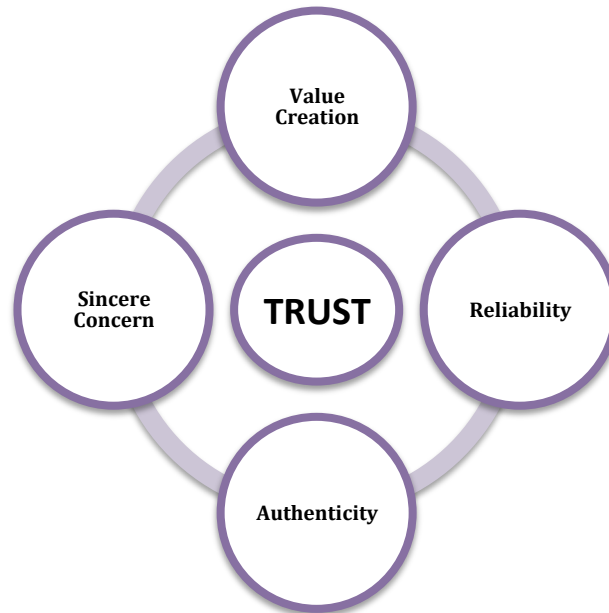
When we come from love, it is far easier to embrace respect. Many times respect requires that we have compassion for behaviors that we do not understand. The key is remembering that we are all human beings, trying to do our best. The challenge to compassion in business is a “critical” or “judgmental” mind. If you find that you make a lot of judgments and criticisms of others you engage in business you have two choices:

- Do not engage in a business relationship with them
- Look at what you must do to engage respectfully and with compassion

Ultimately, judgment and criticism have no value. They lead to weak relationships and poor results. Releasing judgment is essential if you expect to be successful long term. As you lean into love, respect, compassion and value-creation, you set the course for a highly successful and fulfilling experience in your work.

## 2. Mutual Trust

Trust is one of those words that are thrown around a lot, yet it is often a word without a shared definition. Having a shared definition around trust is helpful because without one we can do little about improving trust in our important business and personal relationships. We offer a definition of trust that contains the following four primary elements that must be well balanced to foster trust:



**Value Creation** generates the opinion in another that you can bring value that will support us in mitigating our concerns and/or forwarding our priorities. This ability to create value is experienced in the confident presence as well as the skills, experience and track record of success that you bring to the business relationship.

**Sincere Concern** involves generating a belief or opinion in the other that when we are engaged with them in conversation or through the work we do with them, that we have genuine interest in supporting their outcomes as well as ours.

**Authenticity** has to do with generating the opinion in the other that what we say is consistent with what we think. In short, we are viewed as being honest and as a person who says what they mean and mean what they say. There are no hidden agendas, omissions, or double meanings.

**Reliability** means that we manage our promises well. We are seen as someone who follows through on his or her promises or we provide enough notice if we have to change our commitment.

There are two ways to leverage these elements of trust. First, we can consider what we must do in our key relationships to foster the elements. Second, we can use the elements to assess the current state of trust in the relationship in order to build a strategy to repair or deepen trust.

## 3. Clarifying Mutual High-Value Outcomes

Ultimately, we are assessed in our relationships through the value we provide. But we also are seeking value in return. Taking the time to create a mutual understanding of both sides of the value proposition is central to generating a long-term, high-value relationship.

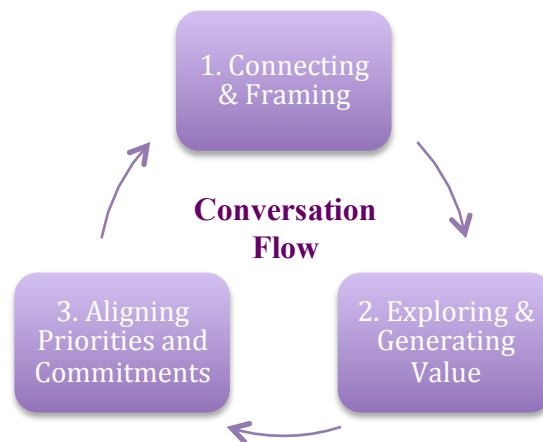
This area focuses on the following understandings:

- Strong partnerships, and all relationships for that matter, *must* be oriented around mutual high-value results
- The agreement around these mutual high-value results provides the starting place for all conversations we have with our partners. When there is strong alignment here we truly have a lot of leverage in our relationships
- Great things come to pass when there is a strong context of respect and trust as well as agreement around the most important outcomes

It is important to point out that this value proposition can change over time. This is why it is essential that we stay close to our clients and colleagues so we can pick up any shifts in their assessments of the value proposition. If we do not pick up such shifts it can lead to a weakening of the relationship at best and the loss of the relationship at worst.

### **The Natural Flow of High-Value Conversations**

High-value interactions have a natural flow. When we know how this flow works we can leverage underlying principles that will increase the effectiveness of every interaction. This flow breaks down into three stages as follows:



Each stage involves distinct though related skill areas. For each stage, we will clarify both the focus of the stage and the primary skill sets involved. It is also important to point out that each stage builds upon the previous one. For example, we are able to explore far deeper issues in an interaction if the connection we have with the other person is strong enough. If on the other hand, there is a weak connection or rapport, the other person will typically not be willing to answer more intimate questions. Let's take some time to flesh out each stage.

#### **STAGE 1: CONNECTING AND FRAMING**

Connecting and Framing are very important in building an initial level of trust and gearing an interaction towards a win-win outcome. Our level of connection to another person has everything to do with how comfortable they are in opening to us. In most cases, the ability to make this connection is driven by hidden expectations and the intertwining of the emotional states of both parties. To be more effective at influencing and motivating others, one must take personal responsibility for understanding potential expectations and concerns as well as for the emotional context that gets created. In addition, understanding how rapport is established and lost is essential. Once a strong connection is made it sets the stage for powerful dialogue and for generating commitments that serve both parties. As we begin the conversation or relationship we must take the time to align outcomes and agendas.



### **Focus During the Connecting and Framing Stage**

- Be honest with your concerns and considering the most likely high-level concerns of those you will interact with
- Leverage both the verbal and nonverbal to build a connection that communicates respect and trust: understand what rapport is and how to establish it
- Take time to frame the conversation around an agenda that sets specific outcomes for the dialogue

### **Primary Skill Sets for the Connecting and Framing Stage**

- The ability to shift focus and bring your full presence to the interaction
- Setting a context and agenda for the interaction that will serve the most important outcomes
- The ability to consciously generate and maintain rapport
- Framing the conversation and setting an agenda that serves a mutual high-value outcome

The clearer the frame and the stronger the rapport that is developed, the more open and honest the communication will be. If this is done well, possibilities can be opened that enhance the abilities of each party to contribute to the other.

### **STAGE 2: EXPLORING AND CREATING VALUE**

Exploring is ultimately where value creation begins to take shape. Within the context of a properly connected and framed dialogue, you must be willing to take the time to explore another person's or party's concerns as well as to give them an opportunity to explore yours. The frame of the conversation is essential to help focus the exploration.

Here it is critical that we ask deep questions that will review the most important needs, opportunities, and challenges the person with whom we are engaged is facing. In fact, the very nature of powerful exploration and powerful questions leads to real value creation. This sets the stage for creating commitments and next steps that will allow the value highlighted during this stage to manifest in action.

### **Focus for the Exploring and Creating Value Stage:**

- Leverage and deepen rapport and connection as necessary to support deeper exploration
- Maintain focus on the desired outcomes and agenda for the conversation. If the other parties get off-topic, the key is to bring them back to the focus and purpose of the present interaction
- Deeply understand the concerns of all parties and align the value you can bring to those concerns
- Uncover the priority concerns that will allow the greatest value to be created in the interaction and through all ensuing commitments

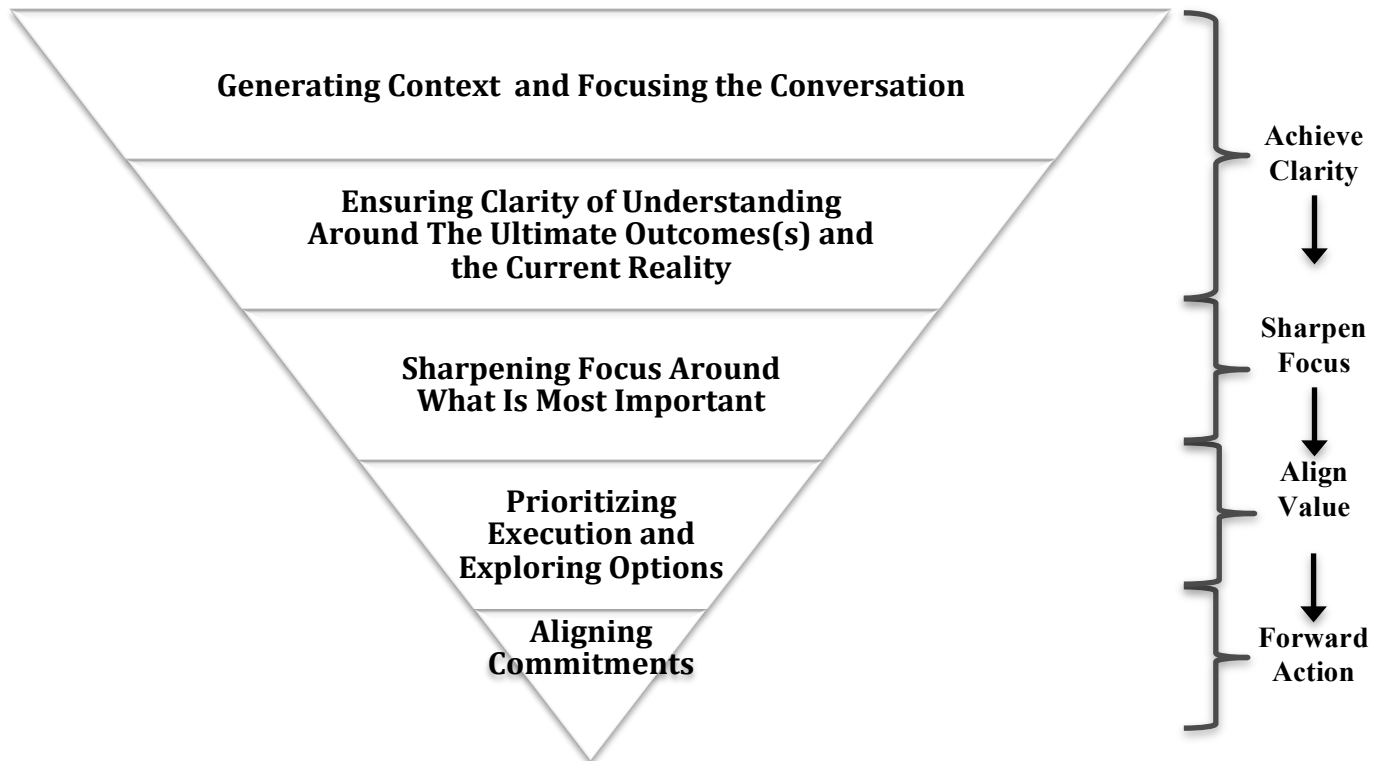
### **Key Skills during the Exploring and Creating Value Stage**

- The ability to ask powerful questions to uncover deeper concerns and needs
- Understanding how to uncover the deeper values and aspirations of the other based on their concerns and needs
- Beginning to connect the deeper values and aspirations with possible solutions

## **Exploring and Creating Value Key Tool – Questioning Strategy**

### **The Question Funnel**

Below is a graphical representation of a powerful questioning process that supports deeply powerful conversations during the Exploring and Generating Value stage. The purpose of this questioning strategy is to deepen mutual understanding and to move us towards generating high-value commitments that accomplish our mission as well as address key opportunities and challenges. If your questioning strategy is effective, you will experience a strengthening of alignment between parties around understanding and solutions. Becoming masterful in using this strategy will deepen your influence in the vast majority of your relationships.



In many communication courses we are told to ask more open-ended questions than closed. This is true, but not very useful. We have all had the experience of asking an open-ended question we wish we could take back because it takes the conversation in a direction that does not serve high-value outcomes. Following this flow will assist you in moving towards alignment and increase positive momentum.

#### **1. Setting Context and Focusing the Conversation**

These questions focus the conversation powerfully by setting clear context, stating a definitive purpose and establishing an agenda for the conversation that forwards this purpose.

##### **Central Questions:**

- What result(s) do you most want to gain from our conversation today?
- What do we need to cover to ensure we achieve this outcome?
- What would you most like from us (or me) during this conversation?

## 2. Ensuring Mutual Understanding of the Ultimate Outcome and the Current Reality

These questions ensure there is a shared view of the current state of affairs as well as the ultimate outcome that the conversation is meant to move forward.

### Central Questions:

- What is the ultimate outcome you are aiming for?
- Can you tell me more about what you want to accomplish?
- What are the most important results you are looking to achieve?
- What assets do you have in place to support this?
- What are the biggest obstacles you face in achieving this?
- What have you done thus far to move this forward?
- What kinds of resources/support do you feel you require to accomplish this?

## 3. Sharpening Focus Around What Is Most Important

These questions uncover the deeper value the individual is looking for from the accomplishment of the stated objective and the resources they are seeking to achieve this objective. If this is done well you are revealing a person's underlying decision-making criteria, the criteria they are using to assess value around the outcome as well as from you.

### Central Questions:

- What is most important about (state the outcome or result they most want to create)?
  - ➔ If you achieve this what would be most valuable about that?
  - ➔ And if that is achieved what will that ultimately give you?

These questions need to be asked interchangeably several times to get to the heart of the value. Some people feel that asking these over and over again interchangeably might become irritating to the other or too confrontational. But as long as you have established strong rapport, the other person will respond well to this part of the conversation because the very nature of these questions engage what the person most cares about accomplishing. These questions will only feel confrontational to the other person when poor context has been set and there is little or no rapport.

## 4. Prioritizing What Is Most Important

These questions ensure that you are focusing on the most important issues and approaches before generating commitments.

### Central Questions:

- While it seems A, B and C are important to attend to: which would you say are most important in making this decision (or moving forward or dealing with the issue or some other formulation)?
- How can I best support you in moving this forward?

## 5. Confirming Mutual Commitments

### Emphasis:

To confirm we know what is to be done, by whom and to ensure that the measures of success and conditions that must be fulfilled to satisfy the commitment.

### Central Questions:

- Given what we have agreed has to get done:
  - What has to happen to get this done?
  - Who can get X done by Y date?
  - What support or resources do they need to ensure it will get done?
- What has to happen for you/your/our team to be fully satisfied we have delivered on this?
- What has to happen for this to fully meet your expectations?
  - Is there anything else? (This is an important follow up question for the two bulleted questions above - keep asking this till you understand all expectations)
- By when must this be done?
- Is there anything that could get in the way of fulfilling this request on time?
- Is there anyone else, not in this meeting, who must be satisfied with the results?
- Do we need to do anything else to clarify and/or confirm clarity on this commitment?
  - If so, what is that? (e.g. confirming document or email or ?)
- When do we need to meet next to assess progress and determine next steps.

The key in this strategy is not to actually ask all these questions. The goal is to ensure that the right context is set for the desired outcome and that everything is explored to ensure you are creating commitments that forward momentum based on the overarching purpose. There is an art form in this strategy. As you work with the Business Intimacy model you will learn to let go more and more and trust yourself. Again, trusting yourself comes back to your personal attitudes. If you have the right attitudes, you will find increasing success in engaging others.

### **STAGE 3: ALIGNING PRIORITIES AND COMMITMENTS**

It is important to remember that any agreement is a part of a process aimed at achieving the desired results. Over time you might determine that the process used to achieve these results needs to be changed to achieve the desired outcomes. Even more important, due to changing business conditions the concerns or needs that precipitated the commitments may need to be re-addressed.

This stage is built from the questions above for “Confirming Mutual Commitments” above

## **Focus during Aligning Priorities and Commitments**

This stage is typically overlooked in organizations and has a detrimental impact on trust. Many think if they follow through, it is enough. However, your reliability and the value you add are determined by how *others* view your success. Aligning Priorities and Commitments involves:

- Deepening your relationship with your manager, colleague, client, or key stakeholder
- Discovering other business issues or concerns that are top-of-mind for them
- Opening doors to new business opportunities
- Strengthening the perception that you are creating value
- Building leverage for the future, in which you may need to bring difficult news in key relationships

## **Primary Skill Sets for Aligning Priorities and Commitments**

- Moving towards the commitment process at the right time
- Understanding and utilizing the elements of effective mutual commitments
- Leaving the interaction by confirming next steps as well as a follow-up plan that forwards action based on the original frame and agenda or what emerged from the dialogue that was most important
- Using appropriate processes to confirm the commitments once the conversation ends

## **A Final Word on Engaging A Model To Build Intimacy**

As with all good models, the stages of this model provide a powerful overview of the relationship building process. To understand any process it is initially useful to break the process down to parts. However, it is important to point out that while this model appears linear and step-by-step, the relationship process is highly dynamic.

As we noted earlier, if your ability to engage a person in one stage is not working, step back. For example, if you find you are trying to reach commitment and you feel resistance, we suggest stepping back and confirming your understanding of the person's concerns. If you are finding resistance here, you will likely have to step back and examine your connection.

Also, the state of your existing relationship will determine at what depth you have to go in a particular stage.

- Fairly new relationships will likely demand a lot of attention on Stage 1: Connecting and Framing as well as Stage 2: Exploring and Generating Value. Similarly, this may apply to relationships where trust and respect are not high.
- In your stronger, more trusting relationships, you might be able to jump quickly to Stage 3: Aligning Priorities and Commitments
- You may also have to back up in the process several times in a conversation or you might enter an interaction towards the end of the flow

To leverage this model we suggest utilization of our "Building High Value Partnerships" assessment tool to determine your strengths and pitfalls. From here, focus first on your strengths and see how the model and tools can help you leverage them. Then, look at areas of needed improvement and create new habits that will support you in developing the kind of relationships and partnerships that will enhance your success.



## Conclusion

This paper provides a high-level look at what we must do to generate and maintain high-value intimate relationships. Such relationships are rooted in mutual trust and respect and guided by mutually high value outcomes. Our ability to manifest such relationships requires focus on three primary points:

- Clarity and focus on our vision for Ideal Business Relationships
- Being strategic in how we build our networks
- Leveraging a proven model for engaging our relationships

Building high-value relationships is an inside-out game. When we have clarity about what kinds of relationships we want to generate and maintain, our subconscious mind can support us in almost miraculous ways to draw “Ideal Business Colleagues” to us. By showing up at the right places and at the right time, we can fill our pipelines and grow our businesses powerfully. Finally, by becoming masterful in conversation we can powerfully influence others and ensure that those we wish to build high value relationships with remain connected to our businesses and to us for the long term.