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Why Connect?

Attention Management

Does this sound familiar? You're sharing an idea in a meeting when a sinking feeling washes over you that *no one is paying attention*. A quick scan of the room confirms it. Some people are distractedly thumbing BlackBerry devices under the table. Others have dashed out to take phone calls. Still others are fidgeting with text messages. The few who are not ignoring you are so impatient that they cut you off and talk over you.

Engage or Be Ignored

That's what happened to David, an emerging leader at a global consumer product company. It was happening in everyday conversations, but it really upset him when it occurred during a presentation.

David was puzzled, thinking what went wrong? He'd spent endless hours preparing for his big moment—gathering information, confirming facts, and painstakingly creating dozens of difficult slides. He had immersed himself in preparation.

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Yet, when he stood in front of his audience to deliver the message, he lost them at hello.

David experienced the most common communication breakdown facing business professionals today: he *failed to connect*. He didn't manage his audience's attention. As a result, he had no chance to *convey* his message so they'd clearly understand it, or *convince* others to make decisions and take action.

Chances are this has happened to you today, in a conversation, a phone call that wasn't returned, or even an ignored e-mail. In this chapter, you'll discover the first step for communicating at your highest performance level in a distracted, attention-deficit world. You'll learn how to capture people's hearts and minds so you don't lose their attention or drive them to distraction.

Make It a Habit

Have you noticed that some people are natural connectors? They seem to attract attention like magnets. Why? The world's top communicators make connecting a habit.

The difference between the masters and the rest of us is that they've learned to make connecting *automatic*—they do it every time, with every person. They make engaging people and managing their attention a priority.

Perhaps you have the gift—this power to draw attention. If not, don't worry. Connecting is a learnable skill. It's not like singing ability. You can learn to be an A-list connector even if you've spent your whole life skipping this step and ending up ignored or tuned out.

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Connecting is the ability to engage and manage people's attention in today's busy world. It's changed profoundly. It's no longer enough to make contact. Now you must give people *what they want and value* in order to earn their attention, or they'll tune you out. Connecting used to be a "nice to have" competence, but it's now a make-or-break skill. That's because there's been a monumental power shift in communication. The listeners now hold the power. It's as if they hold the remote control and you're just one of many TV channels. They have options, so if you want to be Must-See TV, you must connect smartly.

The people you're communicating with can zap you at any moment with their internal remotes, lured away by more appealing distractions such as e-mail, text messages, cell phone calls, or Web surfing. People have become so impatient in our fast-faster-fastest world that they don't even wait for you to finish a sentence—they cut you off and talk right over you.

Today's Make-or- Break Skill

Our attention-deficit world also encourages people to disconnect from in-person conversations:

- Have you ever been talking with someone when their cell phone rings and they choose to answer it and leave you hanging?
- Has the person in the next cubicle ever shot you an e-mail instead of walking over to talk to you?
- Are people keeping you at arm's length with e-mail and text messages instead of returning calls or talking face-to-face?

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Blame the lure of instant gratification. Think about it: we're now conditioned to get what we want, pronto. For example, there's GPS, speed dating, instant messaging, quick weight loss surgery, spray tans, ten-minute whitening strips—the list is endless. You don't even have to pay professional dues anymore, with shortcut shows like *American Idol* around to catapult you to the top. We've become a shortcut society.

That means you have to win people over in a hurry as attention spans shrink. It's vital to connect with people on their terms. So how do you do this? Simple: *Give people what they want and value right up front.* That's my definition of smart connecting: Give people what they want and value so you keep their attention.

Biggest Blunders: Self- Absorption and Aimless Schmoozing

Think of a time when you failed to engage someone. Why did you fail to connect? There are countless reasons. Among them, perhaps you:

- Took too long to get to the point
- Chose the wrong method
- Didn't focus on the person
- Failed to grasp their true resistance
- Misjudged what they wanted or valued
- Lost your head and came across badly
- Sugarcoated a subject or demoralized someone
- Weren't specific enough
- Used a one-size-fits-all approach

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All of these scenarios cause tune-out in today's short-attention-span, self-absorbed society. What's the solution? Give people what they want and value, quickly. If you simply zero in on what matters most to your audience, they'll reward you by paying attention. Like Tom Cruise in the movie *Jerry Maguire*, you'll have them at hello.

Now that you realize connecting is critical in our instant-gratification society, it's time to start putting this attention-grabbing rule to work so you can advance toward *conveying* important information and *convincing* people to act. The first section of the book will focus on smart connecting strategies and techniques that you can start using today to manage the attention of your audience, enabling you to perform at your highest level and make your ratings soar.

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