

## **Be a Constructive Leader:**

### **Overcome Divisions to Joyfully Connect People and Accomplish More**

Donald W. Mitchell

In explaining success, some people are quick to assert that “It’s all in who you know.” But how many act on that observation to get to know more people? Relatively few, I believe. More often, this statement serves merely as an excuse to explain why the speaker hasn’t accomplished more.

But should you seek out people just for what they can do for you in making you more successful? It doesn’t sound like a commendable idea, does it?

What should you do instead? Let’s look at lessons from how some leaders have approached starting and building relationships.

Many people believe that business leaders should focus on organizing employees to meet sales and profit goals that reward shareholders. In recent years, we’ve seen some terrible mistakes (mortgage brokers putting people into homes they couldn’t afford), business failures (investment banks that sold virtually worthless securities), and moral lapses (Enron, WorldCom, and RiteAid) while being that kind of leader. As a result, leaders and those who followed and depended on them have often paid terrible prices (jail time, broken careers, lost jobs, and devastated savings).

Most people have had the opportunity to follow another kind of leader, one who helps them develop more than they otherwise would and who enriches their lives in many unexpected ways. After experiencing such a leader, people generally wish that this kind of constructive leadership was more available to them.

Let me give you an example of the kind of leader I mean. One of my college roommates, Jim Federico (whom I called “Fed”), had an amazing knack for meeting people who were much different from him, and he took great pleasure in their company. Just as soon as Fed met someone new, he wanted everyone he knew to meet his latest acquaintance. I was often the beneficiary of his relational largess and continue to enjoy spending time with people Fed introduced me to over 40 years ago.

You would think that after a few years of meeting great people from different backgrounds, all of Fed's friends would have been delighted to follow his lead and reach out to others on their own. That was far from the truth because Fed was constantly expanding our horizons well beyond our comfort zones. In fact, we all resisted his desire to have us reach out as much as we could.

This stretching to get to know more and different kinds of people was very good for me, but I didn't realize it at the time. I just knew that Fed would keep heckling, prodding, and cajoling me until I gave in and did what he wanted me to do. In a weak moment, I would eventually give in and head off with Fed to meet someone new and start another interesting relationship.

In the process, he broke me out of the comfortable intellectual cocoon of college life. I was usually meeting people who had little or nothing to do with our college such as Mike, the barber, would lecture us on how to run our lives and cut our hair for free if we couldn't afford his services. Joe, the bartender at blue-collar Whitney's, regaled us with funny stories that kept us humble and would lend us money whenever we were between parental checks. Through Fed, I also met waiters who wanted to know about my family, ditch diggers who were philosophers, and caring small business proprietors who taught me about serving the public.

It was like joining an extended family filled with loving aunts, uncles, and cousins. What we had in common was our connection to Fed. He was like an ambassador who could bring peaceful relations to any two feuding nations.

When Fred's friends and acquaintances were together and Fed wasn't around, we would shake our heads and say things like, "That Fed is quite a guy, isn't he?"

I wasn't surprised when Fed later became a state senator and represented his district faithfully to make many important reforms. I learned that his success was tied to an unusual political base that included owners of Chinese restaurants, labor leaders, municipal employees, and graduates of our college and his old high school. In a state better known for illegal payoffs than public good, he was a shining example of what a public official should do.

I was reminded of Fed recently while watching videos of Dr. Graeme Codrington, a Ph.D. graduate of Rushmore University who also serves as an associate professor at the online school. Dr. Codrington likes to ask “Why not?” when considering whether people who appear to have little in common should connect to one another. He sees the potential for all of us to draw closer to others who aren’t like us and to accomplish more. He brings three powerful perspectives to his kind of constructive leadership:

1. He explains different generations to each other and points out what each has to gain from the others.
2. He describes how working relationships could be changed in ways that would benefit everyone and all would be treated with respect and consideration.
3. He shares his young daughter’s concerns for the environment and follows her leadership in a one-family boycott that attempts to reform company practices through e-mails and letters. In his speaking and consulting, he encourages companies’ leaders to understand that they must be concerned about more than sales and profits this quarter.

Listening to Dr. Codrington, I sensed his deep love for everyone and his instinct for finding common ground and developing the potential for helpful collaborations among those with disparate backgrounds. In the videos of his audiences, I saw a deep appreciation for his caring about them and his helpful ways of championing views that are hard for employees to bring up with bosses.

These are messages that many people are sharing in a variety of forums. What’s different about Dr. Codrington? People strongly resonate to him and his way of sharing information. Using an approach that is at once powerful and playful, he laces his presentations, books and resources with dry humor and deep insights. His message not only is inspiring and memorable, but also has lasting influence. As examples of his appeal, Dr. Codrington is often recognized as the best speaker at a conference and was acclaimed as Speaker of the Year 2007 by the Academy for Chief Executives (UK).

His passions for helping people and doing things better are contagious. Students relate well to his vision and enthusiasm. He teaches

business subjects at four different universities. Imagine how much better his students will perform as business leaders by learning from his perspective.

Why does he enjoy his work?

“The ability to interact with other cultures and learn from people around the world is a great privilege. I love that I need to keep learning, and that everything I read and learn gets immediately tested by some of the cleverest businesspeople around the world, and I get instant feedback by helping them implement -- or critique -- what I present to them.”

Where do his insights come from?

“A white man, born in Africa, living in London, working on every continent with people from almost every country...this is a recipe for a global worldview. I am tremendously grateful for my background and the experiences that have shaped me. I have a diverse academic background which includes my Rushmore business doctorate and four other degrees in faculties as diverse as Commerce and Sociology. A near-photographic memory allows me to speed read about 10 books a month and as many magazines a week. But, above all, I love trying to understand what makes people tick, and am fascinated by people who see the world in different ways.”

We can all learn from Fed and Dr. Codrington. The immediate benefit is that we will learn more. The lasting benefit is that we will accomplish more . . . and be more pleased because of the caring and compassion that infused our leadership activities.

What are the lessons for you?

1. Seek out people who are as little like you as possible in culture, education, age, experience, and outlook.
2. Set a good example by treating others with respect, interest, and enthusiasm.
3. Listen to and learn from other people’s perspectives. Do your best to see the world through their eyes, understanding that they feel just as “normal” as you do.

4. Do not merely treat people the way you would like to be treated – rather, spend time listening to them and understanding how they would like to be treated.

I wish you well on you journey to greater connection.

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Donald W. Mitchell is a professor at Rushmore University. For more information about ways to engage in fruitful lifelong learning at Rushmore to increase your effectiveness, visit

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