



Who's Got Your Back
Why You Need
the “Lifeline Relationships”
that Create Success
and Won't Let You Fail
Keith Ferrazzi

Lifeline Relationships

Behind every great leader, at the base of every great tale of success, you will find an indispensable circle of trusted advisors, mentors, and colleagues. These groups come in all forms and sizes and can be found at every level and in nearly all spheres of both professional and personal life, but what they all have in common is a unique kind of connection with each other that I've come to call *lifeline relationships*.

These relationships are, quite literally, why some people succeed far more than others.

There's a good chance that you've already experienced the power and potential of lifeline relationships at some point in your life. Imagine some of the attributes of the best bosses you've ever had—the kind of boss who encourages you, who gives you space to grow, who appreciates your efforts, who doesn't micromanage but guides your development with wisdom, and who handles your slip-ups with firmness, understanding, and candor. Or think back to that good friend or family member who dropped everything to be there for you at a critical juncture in your life and didn't let you fail. Picture that associate you had at work who took a risk for you, and whose influence still touches you today.

If you've ever had an important person or group of people in your life who've shepherded you in the right direction—even if you've had just a taste of it—you know what I mean.

A Call to Action

Each one of us is a salesperson, leader, and entrepreneur, seeking answers. All of us work hard at our jobs and careers—and I include stay-at-home parents in this category. We're all entrepreneurs of our own ideas, whether we own our own companies or work for someone else. We're all leaders in our own lives—with our colleagues, with our employees, with our kids, and in our communities. Each one of us is a salesperson of ourselves and our opinions, if not of business products and services. And most of us come up against personal and professional problems that are just too big to solve alone. If we want to be as successful as we know we can be, we need the help of others.

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So whether you're running a country, a business, or a household, you can't know everything you need to know to be successful—no one can. We need the advice and feedback of people we trust. It's why mothers instinctively reach out to other mothers for advice on schools and doctors. It's why parents talk to other parents about schools, curriculums, student activities, social events, dating, teenagers, and the like. It's why the most successful teams surpass each team member's wildest individual dreams. It's the reason presidents create "kitchen cabinets." Reaching out to and connecting with others doesn't show up on the syllabus of most business schools. But one day it will.

Here are eight things that are clear as day to me:

1. Life coaching, with its hazy self-helpish title, comes in for more than its fair share of ribbing in the media and elsewhere. But look past the snarky skepticism and you'll find a nearly \$3 billion market of executive, life, and career coaches. And it's growing at a clip of 25 percent a year! A massive industry has emerged suddenly to fill a relationship vacuum. As a society, we're crying out for more community, more help, more advice and support. As individuals, we're looking for lifeline relationships anywhere we can get them, even if we have to buy them. This is an issue that's not going away.

2. Most organizations remain entrenched in the status quo. And the status quo is often a hierarchical structure where communication is downward, linear, and one-way, from management on down. But real, candid communication—communication that spawns open, honest relationships—is nearly impossible if based on such one-way communication.

Top-down directives might have been fine when employees were factory cogs and work was all about efficiency. But most of us no longer do cog-like work. In the information age, success is less about efficiency than effectiveness—that is, the ability to get the right things done, rather than just the ability to do things right.

Those who have a few close, deep relationships are able to get the feedback, perspective, and input that are the lifeblood of effective decision makers. The better you become at building such relationships, the better you'll be at what you do, and the more value you'll bring to the table, whether you work inside or outside an organization.

3. A seismic shift is now under way as passionate individuals, empowered by technology, come together to form ad hoc “tribes” capable of tackling all manner of projects. The Internet has provided the tools for sharing and cooperating on a global scale.

Everywhere you look, you can see people coming together around shared interests to work together, to make change, to take action. The potential to transform the workplace, society, and the economy is revolutionary.

4. The Internet is an important tool, but it's not *the* answer. There's an explosion of new sites available to help connect people. Ning, Meetup, Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook... the list is endless. There are now countless ways to coordinate and connect us, but "connections" are not lifelines. Online, we have more "friends" than ever, but we're still damn lonely. In 1985, the average American had three people in whom to confide matters that were important to him, according to a 2006 study in the *American Sociological Review*. That number has now dropped to two. More than 25 percent of Americans admit they have no confidants at all.

5. Considering the vacuum of skilled, effective frontline management in companies today, executives, managers, and employees who are proactive in finding a team of advisors to help give them feedback and coaching, accountability, and support are the ones who will flourish in today's challenging environment. They'll also save their companies a lot of time and money by being more knowledgeable, perceptive, productive, and *innovative*. Lifelines are prepared to take risks and speak openly with each other, fueling the creative interchange from which new ideas spring.

6. Most people want more out of work these days than just a paycheck. Heck, most of us want more out of life. Like no other time in history, people are taking the search for meaning in their work more seriously.

There is no easier or more effective way to gain that meaning in our jobs, and find work enjoyable again, than creating lifeline relationships. In his book *Vital Friends*, author Tom Rath cites research from the Gallup Organization that attests to the fact that people who have a best friend at work are *seven times more likely* to be engaged in their jobs. Yep—that's *seven times*. Not only are these people more joyful and more apt to innovate, take risks, collaborate, and share bold new ideas, but their customers are more engaged as well. In fact, if you have close friends at work whom you

respect, your employee satisfaction level increases by 50 percent (you're happier with your benefits as well as your paycheck).

And that happens to be good for your employer, too. A study of fifty-five high-performing global business teams at fifteen global firms conducted for a 2007 *Harvard Business Review* article, "Eight Ways to Build Collaborative Teams," found that deep social bonds were the major predictor of team success. The other two? Formal initiatives to strengthen relationships, and leaders who invest the time to build strong relationships with their teams.

But companies spend little effort to promote these kinds of friendships and relationships as of yet. Every one of those companies, though, is a tribe waiting to happen, a group of people hungry to be transformed by a few lifeline relationships.

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7. For business, an initiative is not common sense unless it makes dollars and cents.

There are a handful of forward-thinking companies that formally encourage employees to establish lifeline relationships. For the rest, their inattention has a price: According to a 2004 study by Deloitte Research, the annual cost of worker disenchantment in the United States is a stunning \$350 billion, and approaches half a trillion dollars globally. American companies invest \$50 billion annually in leadership training. A report published by the consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton (now Booz & Company) pointedly summarizes the situation: Senior executives in every industry and every region lament their organizations' inability to execute. As firms grow in scale and scope in

a global environment of increasingly rigorous stakeholder demands, the cost of complexity necessarily rises and the capacity to align and adapt invariably diminishes.

In other words, as far as leadership training is concerned, the loss outstrips the investment seven to one. Which confirms my opinion that most leadership training completely misses its target. According again to the Gallup studies, only 18 percent of people work for organizations that provide opportunities for social bonding in the workplace. A few companies have created outright rules against employee “fraternizing.” But more firms unwittingly discourage teamwork and mutual support through misguided policies.

Companies and individuals who reject mutual support are going against the grain of research—and pure common sense.

8. And finally, *mama knows best!* Consider my mother’s card club back in Latrobe. It was originally made up of eight women meeting regularly every month; for the past forty-three years they have shared their dreams for their families, their joys and struggles in their marriages, their frustration in making ends meet. When I called Mom to ask her about her group, she told me they were just talking about how angry they were over the growing size of the empty space at the center of a roll of toilet paper—not exactly what I was expecting!

Of course, they did much more for each other than commiserate over the price of paper goods. The ladies helped each other through cancer, heart disease, and the deaths of two members, “Aunt” Rita and “Aunt” Ruth, giving and receiving love and support from each other around the card table.

Point is, look around and you’ll see the imprint of powerful peer-to-peer support everywhere. From FDR’s and JFK’s kitchen cabinets to church basement support groups to the larger-than-life examples of successful bosses and their high-performing teams on the covers of national magazines, we saw groups helping to provide support and advice to improve the lives of others, every day.

A Personal Testimonial for Lifelines

Years ago, after I published my first book *Never Eat Alone*, I had plenty of relationships in my life—but not plenty of *lifelines*, people I could really open up to, share my fears and failures and goals and dreams with, and ask for help. I had started to think that, because I was the boss and people looked to me as an expert, I was supposed to be the one with all the answers. But I didn't always have them. The really powerful relationships I *did* have—my family, some intimate friends I've had for years—couldn't deliver the kind of insight and feedback on my career and life that I most needed to hear. I needed people I trusted who understood my professional goals. I had those people in my life, too! I'd just never asked for their help. I was too afraid I would come across as weak or flawed; I was frankly embarrassed by some of my behaviors. Why risk undermining other people's perceptions of me by admitting my weaknesses? But inside I knew I was fooling myself if I thought they didn't already see it for themselves.

Starting with three core relationships, I built the protective tribe I needed to support me, push me farther, and hold me accountable to change. Those relationships changed my life. They improved my business. They made me feel secure and grounded despite a world of constantly shifting parts.

Four Ways Lifeline Relationships Will Help You

Here are four ways I believe lifeline relationships are critical:

- 1.** To help us identify what success truly means for us, including our long-term career plans.
- 2.** To help us figure out the most robust plan possible to get there, through short-term goals and strategies that would tie us into knots if we tried to go it alone.
- 3.** To help us identify what we need to *stop doing* to move forward in our lives. I'm referring to the things we all do that hold us back from achieving the success we deserve.
- 4.** To have people around us committed to ensuring that we sustain change so that we can transform our lives from good to great.

Attract Lifelines, Starting Now

Too many people make the mistake of thinking serendipity, chemistry, or some kind of magic is required to bring these deep, trusting relationships into your life. Here's what I know from experience, in my own life and through many years of working with corporate executives and their teams: You can usher more lifelines into your life, starting today. In fact, these relationships are best built by design. Life is too short, the need for change too urgent, to sit around waiting for an angel.

Ready to take a first step? There are four core mind-sets—which can be learned and practiced—that form the behavioral foundation for creating the deep trusting relationships that create success.

→ **Generosity.** This is the base from which all the other behaviors arise. This is the commitment to mutual support that begins with the willingness to show up and creatively share our deepest insights and ideas with the world. It's the promise to help others succeed by whatever means you can muster. Generosity signals the end of isolation by cracking open a door to a trusting emotional environment, a “safe space”—the kind of environment that's necessary for creating relationships in which the other mindsets can flourish.

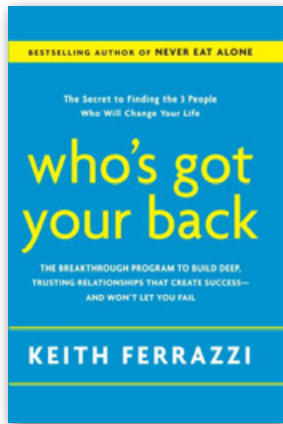
→ **Vulnerability.** This means letting your guard down so mutual understanding can occur. Here you cross the threshold into a safe space after intimacy and trust have pushed the door wide open. The relationship engendered by generosity then moves toward a place of fearless friendship where risks are taken and invitations are offered to others.

→ **Candor.** This is the freedom to be totally honest with those you confide in. Vulnerability clears the pathways of feedback so that you are able to share your hopes and fears. Candor allows us to begin to constructively interpret, respond to, and grapple with that information.

→ **Accountability.** Accountability refers to the action of following through on the promises you make to others. It's about giving and receiving the feet-to-the-fire tough love through which real change is sustained.

Let's get something straight: The concept of reaching out to others for support isn't about changing who you are. It's about enlisting the help and advice of others to help you *become* the best *you* you can be. 📖

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Get more details or buy a copy of Keith Ferrazzi's [Who's Got Your Back](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Keith Ferrazzi is the author of *Never Eat Alone: And Other Secrets to Success, One Relationship at a Time* and *Who's Got Your Back: The Breakthrough Program to Build Deep, Trusting Relationships That Create Success—And Won't Let You Fail*. He is the founder and CEO of the training and consulting company [Ferrazzi Greenlight](#) and a contributor to *Inc.*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Harvard Business Review*. Earlier in his career, he was CMO of Deloitte Consulting and at Starwood Hotels and Resorts, and CEO of YaYa Media. He lives in Los Angeles.

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