Connect and Thrive

Create a Connection Culture to Win at Work (and Life)

Michael Lee Stallard

Human connection is a superpower. It helps individuals and organizations thrive.

That's how UCLA neuroscience professor Matthew Lieberman describes it in his book *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect* and in a TED talk he gave in October 2013.

Connection is a bond people feel with others that promotes affection, trust and cooperation. Connections can be tight, as with family members and close friends, or loose, as with acquaintances.

Connection is a universal phenomenon. The French phrase "esprit de corps," for example, literally means "the spirit of the body." The Japanese call connection "ittaikan," which means "to feel as one body of people." In Kanji, it is "一体感" (一 = one, 体 = body, 感 = sense or feeling of). In certain countries in Africa, "ubuntu" refers to one's connection to the community. Cohesion, unity, social capital, and attachment are just a few of the words and terms that describe the phenomenon of connection.

The opposite of connection is to feel unsupported, left out, or lonely. Connection has been found to improve decision-making, creativity, energy and resilience, whereas disconnection makes people vulnerable to dysfunction and premature death.

Most people don't recognize connection as a superpower—yet—and therefore miss out on connection's benefits. In your defense, you may be living and working in cultures that have conditioned you so that you don't see, feel, or experience connection as much as you ought to in order to live your most productive, enjoyable and life. If connection isn't obvious to you, this manifesto will be an eye-opening wake-up call.

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Today's Connection Deficit

A lack of connection today is a contributor to the alarming decline in the mental and physical health of Americans under 50. A 2013 National Research Council and Institute of Medicine report found that, in comparison to their peers in 17 wealthy nations, Americans under 50 now have the lowest average life expectancy. The report noted "when compared with the average for other high-income countries, the United States fares worse in nine health domains: adverse birth outcomes; injuries, accidents, and homicides; adolescent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections; HIV and AIDS; drug-related mortality; obesity and diabetes; heart disease; chronic lung disease; and disability." Disconnection, feeling unsupported, left out or lonely, has been shown to contribute to many of these adverse health outcomes.

The decline of connection makes it less likely individuals and organizations will thrive. It also makes it more likely they will be dysfunctional. When people feel disconnected (i.e. unsupported, left out and/or lonely), they are vulnerable to stress. And stress is on the rise as the pace of change speeds up and competition increases in today's hyper-competitive global marketplace. The combination of rising stress and declining psychological resources results in a volatile mix.

Short-term stress is manageable for most people, but a sustained period of stress is extremely unhealthy. During a state of "stress response" the human body reallocates resources, including blood, glucose and oxygen, to bodily systems that it expects to use for "fight or flight," including the heart, lungs and thighs. At the same time it reduces those same resources going to other bodily systems, including parts of the brain, the digestive system, the immune system and the reproductive system. Sustained periods of resource denial result in feelings of ill health and damage the under-resourced body systems. After just a few hours of stress, the body begins reducing the amount of blood, glucose, and oxygen to the brain, which begins to alter the structure of neurons in the hippocampus, a part of the brain's limbic system that is involved in learning and memory function.

The combination of stress and disconnection also diminishes the wellness and wellbeing of individuals because it triggers unhealthy behaviors. When people feel unsupported, left out or lonely, they often turn to coping behaviors to make them feel better. These behaviors run the risk of becoming obsessive and addictive because cessation produces the unpleasant sensations of withdrawal that may include anxiety, depression, feelings of emptiness, irritability, lethargy and/or numbness. Furthermore, several types of addiction require increased frequency and/or involvement to produce the desired pleasure so that the addictive behavior crowds out time for activities necessary for physical and mental health, wellness and wellbeing.

The lack of connection contributes to both substance addictions and process addictions. Substance additions are behaviors that attempt to manipulate pleasure by ingesting products into the body. These addictions include dependence on alcohol, tobacco, mood-altering legal drugs and illegal drugs as well as eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia, overeating and binge eating. Process addictions are pathological behaviors that involve mood-altering events that produce feelings of pleasure. These addictions include dependence on busyness and work, exercise, gambling, love/sex/pornography, online and/or mobile device activities such as gaming and/or social media, and shopping. People who struggle with loneliness and addictive coping behaviors are more likely to commit suicide.

Although this may sound bleak, I'm optimistic. Young people today place a very high value on connection. The global marketing firm McCann Worldgroup surveyed 7,000 individuals around the world between the ages of 16-30 years old. The results were startling: *more than 90 percent of those surveyed rated "connection and community" as their greatest need*. As the researchers put it "to truly grasp the power of connection for this generation, we can look at how they wish to be remembered. It is not for their beauty, their power, or their influence, but simply for the quality of their human relationships and their ability to look after those around them."

Three Cultures: Connection, Control, Indifference

Culture in a group (e.g. family, team, department, organization) is the predominant way of thinking, behaving, and working. There are three types of cultures relevant to connection: connection cultures, "cultures of control," and "cultures of indifference."

In cultures of control, people with power, influence, and status rule over others and as a result the others feel left out. Cultures of control are environments where people fear to make mistakes or take risks. They are stifling. They kill innovation because most people are afraid to speak up. You may feel micro-managed, unsafe, hyper-criticized, and/or helpless.

In cultures of indifference, people are so busy they fail to invest the time necessary to develop healthy, supportive relationships. In these cultures, many people struggle with loneliness. Leaders in these cultures don't see value in the relational nature of work. Cultures of indifference are predominant today. Working or living in this type of culture, you may feel like a cog in a machine, unimportant, uncertain and/or invisible. Feeling consistently unsupported, left out or lonely takes its toll. People lack the psychological resources to cope with the normal stress of modern organizational life and turn to unhealthy attitudes and behaviors, many of which, as described above, are addictive and destructive. Both cultures of control and of indifference sabotage individual and organizational performance.

A distinguishing feature of both cultures of control and cultures of indifference is a focus on task excellence alone. Leaders may be openly dismissive of the need for relationship excellence. Some may give it lip service and occasional attention, or they may see its value but not know how to bring it about. Everyone in an organization needs to intentionally develop *both* task excellence and relationship excellence. Both are essential to achieving *sustainable* superior performance. It's the connection culture that produces relationship excellence.

In a connection culture people care about others and they care about their work because it benefits other human beings. They invest time to develop healthy relationships and reach out to help others in need rather than being indifferent to them. This bond among people overcomes differences that historically divided people. In this type of culture there is a sense of connection, community and unity that makes you feel included and energized, and spurs productivity and innovation.

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Core Elements of a Connection Culture

There are three core elements in a connection culture. The first element is Vision (or what can also be described as "inspiring identity"). Vision exists in a culture when everyone is motivated by the mission, united by the values, and proud of the reputation. When people share a purpose or set of beliefs it unites and motivates them. Vision produces shared identity.

The second element of a connection culture is Value (or what can also be described as "human value"). It means that people are truly valued as individuals, not merely for what they produce. Value exists in a culture when everyone in an organization understands universal human needs, appreciates the unique contribution of each person, and helps them achieve their potential. Value produces shared empathy.

The third element of a connection culture is Voice (or what can also be described as "knowledge flow"). The element of Voice exists when everyone in an organization seeks the ideas and opinions of others, shares their opinions honestly and safeguards relational connections. In a culture where Voice exists, decision-makers have the humility to know that they don't have a monopoly on good ideas, and they need to seek and consider the opinions and ideas of others in order to make the best decisions.

When people's ideas and opinions are sought and considered, it helps meet the human needs for respect, recognition and belonging. "Being in the loop," so to speak, makes people feel connected to their colleagues; being "out of the loop" makes people feel disconnected. Voice produces shared understanding.

I've written about a wide variety of leaders who created connection cultures, including Bono of the rock band U2, Coach K of the Duke Men's Basketball Team, Frances Hesselbein when she led a turnaround of the Girl Scouts, and CNO Admiral Vern Clark of the U.S. Navy.

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One of my favorite examples is Pixar. Ed Catmull, the president of Pixar Animation and Walt Disney Animation Studios, formed Pixar as an antidote to the disconnection that is the norm in Hollywood and in Silicon Valley where independent contractors come together for a specific project and then disband upon the project's conclusion. In contrast to the independent contractor model, Pixar keeps the team together so that they build connection among them.

Catmull has described Pixar's culture this way: "[Pixar has] an *environment* that nurtures trusting and respectful *relationships* and unleashes everyone's creativity…the result is a vibrant community where talented people are loyal to one another and their collective work, everyone feels that they are part of something extraordinary, and their passion and accomplishments make the community a magnet for talented people…" (italics mine).

The element that sets Pixar's culture apart from others is its intentionality about creating a culture that fuels connection and creativity. In most organizations only 25 percent of employees—the managers and the stars—feel connected to their organization. At Pixar, the percentage of employees who feel connected is certainly much, much higher than the norm.

Typically, the overwhelming majority of employees feel that senior management does not value their contributions. Not so at Pixar. Catmull says that great movies are made from the "tens of thousands of ideas" that go into them from beginning to completion. As such, *everyone* needs to contribute their ideas and opinions, *everyone's* work matters and everyone makes a difference in the quality of a film. Catmull emphasizes that the environment must be safe to tell the truth. With that view emanating from the top, it is not surprising that Pixar employees are more engaged in their work than employees of the average organization. And because they are more engaged, Pixar employees put more effort into their work, are more trusting and are more cooperative—all factors that affect productivity, quality and innovation.

Contributing to connection across the organization is Pixar University, the in-house professional development and employee education program that offers numerous courses related to filmmaking, the arts, health and other topics of interest to Pixar employees. Employees can take up to four hours of classes each week. In class, participants develop acquaintances across the firm, further strengthening their ties to the organization. Pixar University's crest bears the Latin phrase "Alienus Non Dieutius," which translated means "alone no longer."

It's more than what leaders do that matters. Just as important is who leaders are. For Ed Catmull, "inclusive" is not mere rhetoric or the occasional action. He deeply believes in it. John Lasseter, Pixar and Disney Animation Studio's Chief Executive Officer, does too. They, in turn, select leaders who embrace these values, such as the team of director Brad Bird and producer John Walker (who worked together on *The Incredibles*).

Some years ago, I met with John Walker at Pixar's headquarters in Emeryville, California. Listening to Walker, it was clear to see that he embodies the values of connection. He has the sort of bridge-building personality that helps people amicably resolve conflict and keep them feeling like a part of the community. During the course of our conversation, Walker told me how they gathered the entire team of more than 200 people who worked on a movie at least once a week so that the extroverted artists and their more introverted technical counterparts came

together as a community. In the meetings, people were informed about the film's progress and encouraged to think about how to solve the present set of issues facing the team.

Today Ed Catmull describes himself as being focused on culture—a "day-in, day-out full-time job," he says. In his outstanding book *Creativity Inc.: Overcoming the Unseen Forces That Stand in the Way of True Inspiration*, Catmull relates the time he missed something that threatened Pixar. Following the release of *Toy Story*, production managers no longer wanted to work at Pixar. Although they were proud of the film, they felt disrespected and treated like second-class citizens by the creative department. Catmull was stunned. After all, his door was always open. He preached that everyone should be respected and have a voice. He walked the talk. How could he have missed this? Why didn't they say something earlier? What happened?

With additional investigation, Catmull discovered the artists in creative as well as the technical staff viewed production managers as micromanagers and obstacles to creating great animated films. As it turned out, production managers were requiring all communications to go through the chain of command. This created what I describe as a "knowledge trap." A knowledge trap is a source of disconnection based on relationship failure. Examples include internal rivalries, silo behavior, decision-makers who lack the humility to seek and consider ideas and opinions of others, and isolationist behavior. At Pixar, the creative department was reacting to the sub-culture of control created by production managers.

To fix the situation, Catmull and Lasseter gathered the company and made it clear that going forward decisions made needed to respect the chain of command but "anyone should be able to talk to anyone else, at any level, at any time, without fear of reprimand... people talking directly to one another then letting the manager find out later was more efficient than trying to make sure that everything happened in the 'right' order and through the 'proper' channels."

Although it took time for people to adjust to more open communications, by the time Pixar completed *A Bug's Life*, production managers were viewed and treated as first-class citizens. They felt connected. With the change, "we had become better," said Catmull.

In 2006, Disney bought Pixar to boost its struggling Walt Disney Animation Studios unit and to help improve the culture. Catmull and Lasseter were appointed to lead the unit as president and CEO, respectively. At Disney, they discovered a culture where the creatives were not valued and felt disconnected. With encouragement from Catmull and Lasseter, Disney Animation leaders created a culture where everyone felt connected, especially in the areas of value and voice. With the change, Disney began to produce hits such as *Tangled* and *Wreck It Ralph*. If any doubt existed that the Disney magic was back, it was shattered with the 2013 release of the blockbuster movie *Frozen*. Having earned well over a billion dollars in revenue at the box office in its first six months, *Frozen* became the highest-grossing animated feature ever and moved into the top-10 worldwide highest grossing movies of all time.

Five Reasons Connection Cultures Need to Be a High Priority

Gallup research has found that in nearly all organizations, levels of employee engagement and connection are highly dispersed. In other words, in the vast majority of organizations you will find a mix of connection cultures, cultures of control and cultures of indifference. One location may have all three present. This shows that most leaders are not intentional about developing connection and connection cultures.

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Drawing on research and my experience working with organizations, I see five reasons why people should make creating connection cultures a high priority, especially given the evidence that shows connection is weak today within organizations and in society-at-large:

REASON #1 | **Individuals in organizations who feel connected perform at the top of their game.**

The research presented in chapter five of *Connection Culture: The Competitive Advantage of Shared Identity, Empathy and Understanding at Work* establishes that people who feel connected experience superior wellness and wellbeing. They are more enthusiastic, more energetic and more optimistic. They make better decisions and they're more creative. They also live longer.

REASON #2 | **Employees who feel connected give their best efforts.**

Employees who feel connected care about achieving results so they exert additional effort and persevere. Disconnected and disengaged employees show up for the paycheck and give the minimum level of effort that is required in order to keep their jobs.

REASON #3 | **Employees who feel connected align their behavior with organizational goals.**

Because employees who feel connected care about achieving results, they are more likely to align their efforts with their supervisor's and organization's goals. Research has shown that nearly one in five employees works against his or her organization's interests. Organizations with greater connection, therefore, experience a higher percentage of employees pulling in the same direction.

REASON #4 | **Employees who feel connected communicate to help improve the quality of decisions.**

Disconnected employees are less likely to communicate information decision-makers need in order to make optimal decisions. Employees who feel connected, because they care about their organization's performance, are willing to speak up and share information that decision-makers need to hear even if they would rather not hear it.

REASON #5 | **Employees who feel connected actively contribute to innovation.**

Innovation is greater in organizations that have employees who feel connected. They actively look for ways to improve the organization and they contribute to the marketplace of ideas in an organization, which is a major contributor to creativity and innovation. A marketplace of ideas is important because innovation frequently occurs when ideas from different domains are combined or synthesized. This cognitive process has been described as "integrative thinking," "blending" and "connecting the dots." When a robust marketplace of ideas exists, people have more ideas to potentially connect that will result in new products, services, processes and businesses.

Connection Begins with You

There are people who know they need more connection yet fail to act. And they eventually regret it. Don't let that become your story. Be intentional about developing the habits of attitude, language, and behavior that connect and work to develop a connection culture in your organization. Start local and see how it grows from there.

As you become an intentional connector at work, how is the level of connection in your personal life changing? Keep the formula Vision + Value + Voice = Connection in mind and consider how it applies to your family, your neighborhood, the community organizations you are involved in, and other areas of your life then take action to increase connection in those spheres as well.

Mark this day, begin connecting and just watch what happens. You will see that connection impacts more than the bottom line. **As you experience greater peace, hope and joy that come from having an abundance of connection in your life, you will have discovered wealth of even greater value.**

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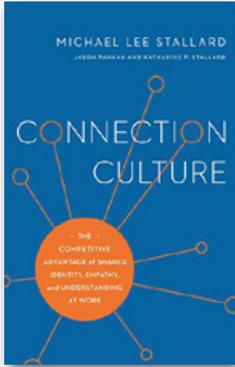
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Michael is president of E Pluribus Partners, a co-founder of ConnectionCulture.com, and co-developer of the Culture Quiz. He speaks, teaches and consults for a wide variety of business, government, education and healthcare organizations. Michael is the primary author of *Connection Culture: The Competitive Advantage of Shared Identity, Empathy* and *Understanding at Work*, *Fired Up or Burned Out: How to Reignite Your Team's Passion, Creativity and Productivity* and he has contributed to many other books and leadership publications worldwide. Learn more at www.MichaelLeeStallard.com.

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