



BEING RELATIONAL

**The Seven Ways
to Quality Interaction
& Lasting Change**

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Chapter 3

Being Engaged

Common sense tells you that you can't interact, you can't negotiate, you can't have a conversation, you can't relate to another person unless you engage with them. It is the *sine qua non*, the first thing involved in being relational. But so often you don't engage. Habitually or unconsciously you may exhibit one of the following behaviors:

- You avoid the uncomfortable subject or avoid the other entirely.
- You are sleepy, mentally idle, or disinterested in other people.
- You are distracted, preoccupied with some other thought, thing, or stimulus.
- You are present, but closed to any other perspective than your own.
- You are rigid and impenetrable: you stonewall others.
- You are impulsive and strike out to push other people away, to crush or swat others aside.

To be engaged, we invite you to focus on the quality of the interaction itself. Take a close look, a micro-focused look, at daily interactions. Take a look at how you interact with other people. If you regularly, habitually, fall into any of the above behaviors and coping strategies, you are not engaged. These may be habits that protect you, but they are barriers to engagement with others. You can change that if you want to.

This is an opportunity to become conscious of the choices you make when you are not engaged. You can pause. Take a breath. Activate your self-observer. Observe your behavior coming on. Use that part of your consciousness that is able to look at your patterns, your habitual way of proceeding, to discern your path more deliberately. Make space internally for the energy of your thought patterns and feelings before you move into action. Locate where they show up in your body with a brief body scan. Pause to be curious about that place inside your body where the energy of your habit manifests somatically. Make mental note of it, be curious about it, attend to it. Then shift your attention to a different part of your body that is not activated. This will provide you with a fresh physical resource. Now shift your attention back again to the place in your body that is tight or reactive, feel your habitual ways asserting themselves. Feel them affecting your body. Give yourself space on the inside for this physical quality to calm down before acting out of habit, exercising a sort of forbearance that comes from the discipline of a focus that allows a relaxation of your habits of mind. This is a centering practice that we will discuss in greater depth later, but you may need to be aware of your own personal reactivity before you engage with another. For you see, being relational is not a sequential process. It is not a step one, step two

kind of thing. Being relational is being all seven ways at once, with each way coming to the front of your consciousness in different moments as you discern your path. Being relational

can also mean being just one of the ways at any given moment in time. For instance, you may have many experiences where it is simply enough to be self-aware as you engage.

So, when you have shifted your mental attention internally and provided oxygen to your body and to your brain from intentional breath work before acting out of habit, you are more focused and you are now able to engage. Engaging is a deliberate act. It is an act of ease once practiced, but it is never habitual. It takes commitment to be engaged and live relationally. The acknowledgment of another, pausing in your life to be fully with another even for a second, is such a simple act, yet it can take so much awareness and courage to do it. You know how to be engaged; you do it all of the time when it's comfortable and you want to. Much of it is common sense, but ask—am I aware of my habits when I am on autopilot? When I am in a difficult situation? It is those times that provide the greatest opportunity to take a close look at your behaviors, change some habits, and establish new ones so that you can be engaged more than you ever have been. You may need terminology—some words to hold in your consciousness to anchor you and remind you to be engaged. Words like *present*, *attentive*, and *interested*.

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Being Engaged is Being Present

You have had the experience of talking to another and you just know they do not hear a word you are saying. They are not present and their non-presence triggers a habitual conflict response in you. Being present means that you are physically, mentally, emotionally, right there *with* the other person. You know when someone is present with you and reciprocally they know when you are present with them. It takes effort. Your effort is an act of generosity on your part, giving of yourself. Being relational means you do it anyway, even if there is apparently no gain to be had for yourself in doing it, nor any discernable reciprocity from the other in that moment. Being relational means you do it anyway because you believe in the benefits it will provide to yourself and to the other person.

You are ready to offer a genuine smile and let others know that you see them; they are not invisible. A simple nod, eye connection, and “Good afternoon.” This includes your colleagues when you walk down the hallway at work, your housemate or your family when you walk in the front door, tired as you might be after a long day, “Hello everyone! I’m home. How is everybody?” Or if you are the one at home, preoccupied or not, in a different part of the house or not, and a family member enters through the front door, you say “Hi, son!” or “Hi, sweetheart!” And it includes an obnoxious ex-spouse or a sour-puss neighbor, “Hello, Charlie.” Yes, it takes effort. When you give it, whether returned or not in that moment, there is a quality of dignity and honoring of self and other, we are both important. We inhabit the same space, the same planet. It matters and, as we are beginning to understand through quantum physics, it shifts energy positively—relational reciprocity.

In choosing to be present, you prefer face-to-face. You take the time to visit with someone rather than just sending a message. You use email and texts for routine factual and supportive messages, but you don't use them to engage in any important discussion with another person, especially if there is an emotional component or a difference that emerges. If you can't meet in person, you pick up the phone and make a call. You know that firing email and text messages back and forth, though it feels safe, only escalates conflict. The illusion of safety is false. So much is lost when communication is not in person—tone of voice, eye contact, gestures, body language, and the intangible yet potent quality of just being in the presence of another human being.

Being present means you show up. Your face is in the place. You have the courage and you put in the effort to get yourself physically there to interact with the other person. You also take care of yourself so that you can be physically present—avoiding excess in drink, and making sure to get the sleep you need, for instance. You don't make yourself sick with the lifestyle you lead, being hard on yourself by shoveling in a diet of too much or too little—too much food, too little food, too much medication, too much high living, too much work. It's hard to be engaged, present, and deeply attentive when you are in excess.

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You don't duck out, avoid and evade. You aren't on the couch at home, or lying in bed or AWOL from work or home with some excuse because you can't deal with someone or something. You are not fading into the woodwork; you are not a wallflower. You

are not pretending you are doing something else, hoping no one says anything to you or that you are not called upon. You take the phone call; you make it to the meeting—even if you fear that you might be outed or criticized, or that it might be a waste of time and you have much better things to do. In fact, you *ask* for the meeting and you work to make it happen. That makes for some long days, but you do it anyway because you are committed to being engaged.

And while you are physically present, you are also mentally present. This may be much harder. Being present mentally requires concentration. You are awake. You are alert and open to what unfolds, open to reality as it really is. You know your body and your mind and you know what you need in order to be awake. If your brain is fuzzy and you are sleepwalking through your day, you can't be engaged. This doesn't mean that you are manic, always on, wired, or hyperactive. You are awake and alert when you are with others—in a way that lets them know that you are with them, that you are present.

Being Engaged is Being Attentive

Part of being present mentally and emotionally, in the sense of *being there* for others, is being attentive. When you are with others in a situation where you are expected to be mentally present, you make it a point to give your attention to them. Often it's easy to show up and then mentally check out and be somewhere else entirely. If you are nodding and saying “Uh-huh” reflexively, habitually, without awareness of what you are nodding and saying “Uh-huh” to, then you aren't attentive. Or if you say “Uh-huh” dismissively because you are in tunnel vision for getting what you

want and the other person is just getting in your way, you aren't attentive to the other. Either way, you sow the seeds of conflict with others with your lack of attention.

If you are automatically saying "No" or reflexively thinking "That's ridiculous. Stupid. Here we go again," you also are not attentive and you are sowing the seeds of conflict with others with your lack of attention. As we will discuss ahead in *Being Centered*, when people feel dismissed, they will push back stronger, or go elsewhere to be against you. Keeping this in mind is good motivation for you to give others your attention in the moment of interaction. But giving others your full attention is never easy. It can drift away in a daydream or be lost in an instant as you react to a distracting stimulus. Focusing your attention is in many ways the fundamental skill of being relational. It takes mental discipline; it takes effort.

So . . . when engaged with others, you ignore your cell phone. You close your laptop, your tablet or any other device dividing your attention. Your eyes focus on others, noticing their expression, their eyes, mouth, posture, and gestures. You stop thinking. You make mental and emotional space for the other to enter your experience. You don't analyze, interpret, or prepare to respond. As Stephen Covey suggests, you seek first to understand others. As Eckhart Tolle suggests, you are in the Now. With your full attention given, you can listen to others.

Being Engaged is Listening, Reflecting, and Asking Open Questions

As mediation and conflict transformation trainers, we have been teaching the art of listening for over two decades. Listening

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isn't just a skill. Like presence, it too is more of an attitude, one of curiosity and openness—but there are definitely practices that can make you a better listener.

First, you recognize the challenge associated with the mere process of verbal communication. Yes, your brain is processing the words and working to comprehend them, working to follow what another is trying to communicate to you, but you can lose track while processing their stream of words, and the thoughts of others may not be clear or very well expressed. Verbal communication is complex and difficult and often it simply is not done well. Not everyone can spontaneously roll out perfectly formed sentences. Indeed, most people cannot speak clearly at all, especially when you slip out of gear into the experience of conflict or challenge. The words you choose may not communicate the meaning to another that you intended. You express ideas that are not complete. So you are aware that you may fail to communicate your intended message clearly to another. Rather than blame them for not understanding, you allow for the possibility that others may not be doing any better than you are.

Leaving aside the complexity of the content you intend to communicate, the mere process of verbal communication itself is inherently messy. So more is needed to listen effectively—to understand others and to help them be understood. When others feel understood, they are more likely to be able to understand you—relational reciprocity.

As mediators, the skills associated with effective communication are our stock-in-trade. Three practices that are particularly

helpful are **listening attentively**, **reflection**, and **open questions**. All three are elegantly simple, but can be hard to do. Here's how. Listen attentively: suspend what you think, feel, and want to say. Be aware of your own impulses to either: agree with, align with, give advice to, or tell others what to do; or your impulse to disagree with, dismiss, and put them down. These impulses come from your personality, your life experiences, and your own personal reactivity. They may assist you in other times in your life, but they are barriers to listening attentively. Remember relational reciprocity. There is a huge pay-off to having enough discipline to suspend your judgment and assumptions, and even your good advice. When you listen attentively, the other person will experience you in the way they most yearn for you to experience them: fully as a human being. They will be more likely to hear and experience you in the way you most desire.

To this quality of listening, add a reflection. As you listen deeply, you must focus closely on the other person's words and listen to what they are saying exactly, including their emotional expressions and intonations. When they finish their thought, reflect back both the facts and the feelings they conveyed using their exact words, not yours. Why do this? Because it shows the utmost of respect for the speaker to not get in their way. It communicates that you are with them, by their side, neither behind them nor ahead of them, honoring their story and fostering their empowerment. To reflect another in this way allows that person to edit, to change, to modify, or to retract what they were saying. It is a vehicle for clarity and understanding. When

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clarity emerges, there is a relief—an opening, a stronger chance for mental understanding and potentially compassion. Your interaction is strengthened. Whether you are strangers or intimately familiar with each other, the quality of your relating to each other is strengthened.

Be sure to stay in the listening attentively mindset and reflect back exactly what they said, without an edge or your bias or interpretation or spin. That can be very difficult if you are used to reframing others' ideas into your own words. You are not paraphrasing. You are not agreeing, advising, interpreting, or reframing. **Allow them to edit and to change what they said.** Listen deeply again and offer another reflection. Do this again. When the other person has calmed down a bit, you can then **ask an open question:** “What else is important?” “What else do you want to tell me?” “What else do you want me to know or understand?” An open question is one that does not seek a particular answer, a ques-

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tion that does not call for a yes or no response. It is not a leading question. It has no content agenda and is not trying to steer the conversation to what you want. Be amazed at what is said, including thank you, even from someone you thought did not like you or was your adversary. The yearning to be understood, and thus connected, is deeply hard-wired, in our cellular structure, and held by all human beings. The best part for you in choosing to be engaged is that because you also want to give of yourself to the other and are committed to the effort to do so, you now have

a much better chance that the other person will now be able to listen to you. And if not right at that moment, then set a time for later, and be committed to it, because you are genuinely interested in others. You are curious.

Being Engaged is Being Interested

Being engaged, present, and attentive involves adopting an open attitude. That open attitude is based on curiosity and interest in other people, even in casual conversation. “Tell me, how are you, and how are the kids?” “Tell me about your summer.” “Tell me how your aging parents are doing.” “How did the meeting go with so and so?” Or to the stranger in the next seat on the airplane, “So, where are you headed today?” Or if someone else asked you first about how you are, or about *your* life, *your* summer vacation, taking care of *your* aging parents, and so on, and you share what is on your mind, then your relational attitude of interest in the other person informs you to follow up with the same genuine inquiry to them, “*And how about for you?*” Being relational is attending to yourself **and** others. You may be thinking, *Okay, so that’s nice, but isn’t that just making small talk?* It may be no more than chit-chat, but it is not idle or wasted. It might be what used to be referred to as good manners. When it is intentional because we are committed to living relationally, interest in other people builds capacity through connection and civility. We are interested in and care about the quality of the interaction, however brief, with the other person. We are not just politely filling time or simply

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exchanging pleasantries. We are genuinely interested and we want to create an open space for the exchange of humanity. We care about building and strengthening relationships, both old and new, in the moment, whether with someone we see regularly or with someone we will never see again. Both are equally important when living relationally.

But what about the difficult interactions? Being engaged with the person who appears to be against you? Your enemy? Your attitude of curiosity will serve you well there also. So, if it is a heated debate around the kitchen table or the board room conference table, you pause, check in within yourself, notice what is tight or pounding or racing (heart, belly, neck, head), breathe to provide new oxygen for clear thinking, then, with self-awareness and purpose, you offer your views and ask, “So what do you think about this?” or “I’m interested in why you said that.” or “While I might see this differently than you do, I see you care deeply about this.” or “When you say that, I want to understand why it is important to you.” **You suspend your judgment of others and remain open.** Open to getting new information. Open to gaining better understanding of others. Open to looking for opportunities for empowerment and recognition shifts—based on your understanding of the Transformative Theory of Conflict. It’s being strong enough to be vulnerable, open, welcoming to others, even when our viewpoints are different or our interactions are unpleasant. When you intentionally approach others in the posture of openness and receptiveness, there is a physical quality about the stance. When you are calm and strong and open, the other is much more likely to respond to you in a more positive, more relational way—building a positive, constructive cycle of interaction, relational reciprocity.

They might not respond in this way initially, but they are much more likely to if you maintain your attitude of openness and curiosity than if you do not. As for handling those who respond back to you negatively, there is more ahead on dealing with others who are not engaged in a way that promotes quality dialogue.

So, following these methods and attitudes for being engaged—being present, attentive, and interested—is critical to quality interaction. But your ability to be engaged is very much affected by your ability to avoid being sidetracked by your reactivity and your habits in aligning with others. So, now let's look at how, while you are engaged, you can also be centered.

Questions for Your Consideration

In exploring Being Engaged, consider the following questions. If you are not sure about your answers, go back and visit the chapter.

- How do you slow down a difficult conversation so that you can avoid defending and reacting?
- What is your approach when you know that someone wants to talk to you and you don't want to talk to them?
- What do you do when you get an email that upsets you?
- What do you do to make sure that you are present and attentive when you are with someone?
- How do you respond to someone who says something to you that you think is completely false or outrageous?

- What do you do when you sense that someone you care about may be angry or upset with you, but they haven't said anything to you about it?
- What reasons do you have to be interested in the life of another person if you can't imagine ever having any kind of relationship with them personally, professionally or otherwise?
- How can you show others that you are interested in them?