

Is Personal Achievement Replacing Healthy Relationships?

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2009, published in the *Houston Home Journal* on April 11, 2009

Have automatic teller machines, e-mail, and internet shopping cut you off from human connection? Have hectic schedules and stress-filled days contributed to separation between you and your spouse, kids, extended family, friends, and neighbors?

The temptation to forego human contact in order to pack in more objective-achieving tasks is great. Instead of walking to a colleague's office for a face-to-face conversation, you send an e-mail. Rather than answer your home phone, you let the recorder screen your calls. You carry a cell phone to stay connected, but you always check to see who's calling before you answer.

Advanced electronic technology is combining with a quest for personal freedom to choke out "human moments." That's the name psychiatrist Edward M. Hallowell has given to encounters where two or more people are physically present and offer each other their emotional and intellectual attention.

Hallowell shares his insights from his personal practice and his role as a member of the Harvard Medical School staff in his book *Connect: 12 Vital Ties that Open Your Heart, Lengthen Your Life, and Deepen Your Soul*. He explains that you (and those in your organization) may feel anxious or disconnected because emphasis on personal achievement seems to be replacing personal relationships.

Hallowell urges readers to "make time for connectedness." Involvement with something greater than self, including person-to-person interaction, promotes longevity and personal happiness. His "twelve vital ties" include marriage, family, friends, work, beauty, the past, nature, pets, ideas and information, institutions, religious concerns, and self-knowledge.

For many people, "achieving" and "connecting" are the two most powerful experiences in life. Think about what commands your attention. Where do you focus your energy?

"Connecting" is what occurs every time you interact with somebody. It may be responding to a request, chatting over lunch, comforting an ill friend, or offering words of appreciation. "Human moments" require energy, but do not have to be emotionally draining or personally revealing. To make a human moment, just set aside whatever you are doing and give your undivided attention to the person. Mental activity is stimulated, and both of you begin to think in new and creative ways.

"Achieving" is whatever activity moves you toward accomplishing an objective. It may be generating a memo, researching a problem, writing an article, or organizing your desk. Achievement for its own sake has become a kind of idol in our society. For too many of us, the daily objective is marking off more "to do" items than we add.

Hallowell contends that our society is increasingly obsessed with "achieving" at the cost of lost opportunities for "connecting." He points out that individuals who are wealthy, famous, or powerful but lack deep friendships often live (and die) with regret and loneliness. On the other hand, anyone who succeeds at relationships, who has mastered the art of giving and receiving love, reflects back later in life with satisfaction and gratitude.

So, Mr. or Ms. Leader, what does all this have to do with you? How can you possibly have time to fill your day with "human moments" when there is so much to be done? E-mail and phone messages are far more efficient than walking to someone's office, right? You've mastered the art of multi-tasking--what's wrong with checking your e-mail messages while you're talking on the phone?

I can't comment on the appropriateness of your balance of achieving and connecting, but your colleagues can! Are they encouraged when they cross paths with you? Do they speak favorably of you to their friends and family? Do they seek you out, or do they avoid you? When there's a problem, do you engage them as a competent ally, or do they feel chastised, betrayed, or irrelevant?

If any of your team members feel lonely, unsettled, or disconnected at work, take a look at the balance in your culture between "achieving" and "connecting."

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