MICHAEL S. ERWIN | WILLYS DEVOLL

# LEADERSHIP IS A RELATIONSHIP

## How to Put People First in the Digital World

WILEY

# Praise for *Leadership Is a Relationship*

"Mike Erwin hasn't just studied leadership—he's lived it. In this book, he and Willys DeVoll highlight how the connections leaders forge matter every bit as much as the visions they deliver."

**—ADAM GRANT**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Think Again* and host of the WorkLife with Adam Grant podcast

"*Leadership Is a Relationship* is both timely and timeless, and makes a strong case for why it's so important for us to positively influence the people we lead and love. This book's message is one that we all need to hear, and challenges and empowers us to put people first amid the relentless pace of life and the distractions we all encounter in life today."

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"This book offers accessible ideas and effective methods for anyone looking to grow as a leader. Mike and Willys share real-life examples to help underscore the benefits of relationship-based leadership in your work—and life. *Leadership Is a Relationship* can help you cut through the noise of navigating an increasingly challenging digital world and instead focus on the strength of your connection to others."

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"This excellent book reinforces what I believe to be the most crucial senior leader skill: building and developing relationships. As a four-star combatant commander, this is where I spent the vast majority of my time and how I principally contributed to our mission. A must-read for all leaders, and especially those with large, diverse organizations where you depend on others for success."

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"This book serves as a powerful guide on how to become an effective leader by building authentic relationships with others. Our business has always placed an emphasis on family, employees, community, and connection. *Leadership Is a Relationship* provides impactful strategies and tactics that will help any business continue to foster growth for future generations."

— **JENNIFER YUENGLING**, vice president
of operations at Yuengling and sixth-generation brewer

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*For everyone who puts people first*

# Contents

# Introduction: Relationships Under Siege

This is a book of stories. Let's start with one of yours.

Remember the last time you went out to dinner with someone, whether it was a single companion or a rollicking party of old friends. You sat down at the table, and then what happened? Humor us for a moment: close your eyes and recall that scene as vividly as you can. Try to imagine every little detail, from what you ordered to the decor of the restaurant to the clothes that your fellow diners wore.

Once you've got that picture, think about how you all engaged with each other. What was the conversation like? How much of your attention did you give to your companions? Did someone pull out their phone and place it on the table? (Maybe that someone was you. Don't worry—this is a safe space.) Did anyone glance down at a smartwatch during the meal, checking something that clearly wasn't the time? Did a member of your party look up from their lap and say, without any context, "Oh my goodness, you have to see this," before showing you a video of a squirrel riding a remote-control car? Did someone forget what the rest of you were talking about because they were busy watching muted sports highlights on the TV over the bar?

Maybe your meal didn't include any of these scenes. It might have been an elegant combination of good food, good company, and good conversation, all uninterrupted by outside distractions. For many, many people in the developed world, that wouldn't have been the case. The siren song of phone-sized distractions proves so attractive, so irresistible, and so ostensibly harmless that we as a culture have largely accepted such interludes into our time with others. Even if it isn't in particularly good taste, the occasional phone-check during a dinner out is now thoroughly unremarkable. "Everyone" does it.

Who can blame us? Digital distractions are really, really appealing. They give us a little hit of satisfaction, and it's hard not to indulge ourselves. They often claim to give us information that's time-sensitive and important.[1] They're (mostly) socially acceptable, too. And because they're both seductive and accepted in social situations, digital distractions are a large and growing presence in our interactions with other people.

Dinner out is just one way to think about how deeply digital distractions have embedded themselves into our lives. Think about the family dinner, the car ride with a sibling or co-worker, the quick errand to the convenience store around the corner. Spaces that used to require face-to-face conversation—and that therefore used to kindle our relationships with both loved ones and strangers—are now opportunities to check on emails, tweets, tags, DMs, sports scores, hot takes, the newest deal on denim . . . you name it. Beautiful phones and almost ubiquitous internet access have opened virtually every event to extraneous information. Our grandparents often experienced situations in which they had to either shoot the breeze with the folks around them or make the uncomfortable choice to sit in silence. In those

same situations today, we can effortlessly learn what the Canadian prime minister is doing or watch on-demand highlights from last night's basketball games. The old carve-outs for sociality—for relationship-building—are open to distraction. The siege on relationships is well underway.

The average American spends more than four hours a day on their phone.[2] The digital economy has given us amazing stuff. Some of the world's most brilliant content creators, software engineers, and behavioral economists spend each day making your phone an even more compelling option for your time and attention. We can't get enough, and for many of these tech products, we can't get enough of communicating with each other. There's a beautiful humanity to that. Life in the Information Age engages the best parts of us, from our curiosity and energy to our creativity and desire to love. It's no wonder that in less than one generation, we've completely reshaped the inputs of our experience—with the universe at our fingertips, smartphones have become a pillar of society.

Seductive digital offerings don't just take time away from the time-tested actions that build relationships. They also pull a clever sleight of hand. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and other social network products promise human connection in radical ways, and at radical scale. Their marketing and communications strategies sell their apps as pioneering ways to be "more connected" to people around you and around the world, and they allow us to communicate with people we'd never meet otherwise. But their actual goal, their *raison d'être*, is something else entirely. They're built to hook you on their universe of connected apps, maximize the amount of time you spend on their platforms, and remove you from social interactions in the physical world. The

better they are at doing so, the more ads they can show you, and the more money they can make for their shareholders. A former Facebook executive told a group of business students that "the short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops we've created are destroying how society works," before letting them know that he doesn't allow his kids anywhere near social media.[3] Every minute that you spend staring at a screen instead of talking to a friend is a minute in which tech companies can show you more revenue-generating ads. Your face-to-face time is their next business opportunity.

Are smartphones the end of our social lives? Of course not. When we say that the modern attention economy has laid siege to relationships, we aren't suggesting that we're a few years away from all living in abject isolation. Instead, relationships are under siege because meeting, getting to know, and caring for other people has never required more deliberate intention. As the technology scholar Dr. Sherry Turkle notes, the mere presence of a phone *even if we're not interacting with it* changes the kinds of topics that people talk about. If we see a phone, we tend to talk about less substantive things, and we tend to report less connection with our conversation partner.[4]

We're feeling the consequences of that watering-down. Turkle describes how the college students she studied yearn for more time together and completely divorced from phones. Young people appreciate much of what technology offers, but also wish that it were less invasive in their relationships:

> I interview college students who text continuously in each other's presence yet tell me they cherish the moments when their friends put down their phones. For them, what counts as a special

moment is when you are with a friend who gets a text but chooses to ignore it, silencing his or her phone instead.[5]

As we've gotten superficial access to billions of people around the world, technology has clawed our attention away from those around us. We might be able to communicate with everyone, but it's difficult to get close to anyone.

## Relationship Complexity

With new distractions and methods of communication, relationships exist in several different realms: the Facebook friendship, the Twitter reply, the Instagram like, the WeChat thread, the group text, and, you know, the old-fashioned, face-to-face conversation or lengthy phone call. Our not-so-distant ancestors had a couple of ways to communicate with friends and loved ones, and they weren't available at every hour of the day. We, on the other hand, can't even name all of the different options we have for sending someone a message—and each of those channels requires a different style of communication. Speaking a tweet in actual conversation would be bizarre, and the style of an Instagram comment is a whole lot different (and emoji-laden) than what you might send the same person in a handwritten note.

Let's call this dizzying phenomenon *relationship complexity:* relationships have become much more complex as a direct consequence of the number of communication channels, styles, and expectations that the twenty-first-century economy has produced. Even the most earnest, compassionate, and energetic person has a more complicated social landscape today than they

would have just 10 or 20 years ago . . . let alone 50. Although it's hard to say exactly how much more convoluted relationships have become, the proliferation of information tech has upped complexity by orders of magnitude.

Complexity itself isn't bad, but relationship complexity is very hard to manage on a daily basis. As creatures that didn't evolve beside such overwhelming stimuli, we're understandably struggling. The United States is just one of several developed countries with a well-documented epidemic of loneliness and weakened relationships. The 2020 Cigna Loneliness Survey, one of the most-cited measures of sociality in America, found that 61 percent of Americans are lonely.[6] That figure comes from before the pandemic. As Covid-19 shut the world down and forced us to stay in our homes, it also illustrated just how far technology still is from effectively replacing face-to-face relationships. Unlike other kinds of disasters and heartbreaks, the pandemic was cruelly well-suited to threaten our relationships. Shared spaces, from schools to gyms to community centers to restaurants, shuttered. Many haven't and won't return. Weddings, funerals, and bedside consolation for the sick—age-old rituals of connection—became impossible. A huge number of jobs became remote positions. It's important to reiterate this particular torture of the pandemic: on top of all of its monstrous tolls, it exponentially accelerated the trend away from communal, face-to-face experiences and toward physical and emotional isolation. What the smartphone created, the pandemic amplified.

As we dive deeper into our own personalized digital worlds, social and political polarization continue to rise and threaten not only our social institutions, but also our sense of common

purpose. And, of course, understanding and adapting to technological innovation is hard because technology just keeps changing. With the convergence of both the overstimulation and pandemic crises, we're beginning to appreciate in vivid detail just how much 24/7 information overload has affected us.

It's disingenuous to present the problem du jour as both terrifying and unprecedented. The old "kids these days . . ." quip highlights the very real phenomenon of recency bias—as humans, we tend to overstate the importance of what just happened, and the threat of technology's intrusion into our personal lives is no exception.[7] Without panic or hyperbole, we want to convince you that the conditions of modern, plugged-in life pose a powerful but nonetheless addressable threat to creating and growing relationships. The average American already watches TV four times longer each day than they spend socializing and communicating with others.[8] Our everyday interactions and pastimes are filled with devices and systems that didn't exist even 15 years ago, and compelling new inventions hit the market more than ever.

The history of humanity is rife with challenges, many of which we've overcome. We're not interested in fear-mongering or hand-wringing. These particular challenges to relationship-building, though, are new and distinctly ours. We can surmount them, but first we need to understand and define them.

## Connecting in the Digital Economy

Modern connectivity has also muddied the border between work and personal time, as many workers experienced during the pandemic lockdowns. We don't switch off our psychological

attachment to digital distractions when we walk through the office doors or begin a Zoom meeting—we love to check our devices, whether we're in the bedroom or at our desks. That becomes a serious problem when it hurts our ability to do the complex work of communicating with our colleagues.

Remember the dinner story at the beginning of this chapter? Let's think about the work version now. Recall a typical one-on-one conversation from your working life. How often is the conversation interrupted by you or your co-worker checking a device?

Willys worked with a senior executive who scrolled on his phone throughout conversations with his direct reports, and even with people who'd just received offers to join the company. There are few better ways to imply that you couldn't care less about the person you're talking to. The leader who doesn't diligently avoid distractions will, however unknowingly and with whatever generous intentions, sacrifice strong team relationships for the illusory thrills of a smartphone. That's a recipe for compromised performance in the short term and an isolating lack of meaningful relationships over time.

However you feel about talking to someone who can't be bothered to put down their phone and look you in the eye, this kind of distraction-addled talk is simply less effective than focused conversation. Information is lost, and so are potential relationships. In the early years of the iPhone, the late Stanford communications professor Dr. Cliff Nass pioneered research on the psychological effects of multitasking. He began with the hypothesis that people who did lots of things at once—like switching between browsing Facebook, scrolling through Instagram, scanning the news, and writing a research paper, all with

music streaming in the background—became good at doing lots of things. Like most activities, those who practiced regularly would build skill. His research, however, convincingly pointed in the opposite direction:

> The people we talk with continually said, "Look, when I really have to concentrate, I turn off everything and I am laser-focused." And unfortunately, they've developed habits of mind that make it impossible for them to be laser-focused. They're suckers for irrelevancy. They just can't keep on task.

This phenomenon wasn't fleeting, either:

> Our brains have to be retrained to multitask and our brains, if we do it all the time—brains are remarkably plastic, remarkably adaptable. We train our brains to a new way of thinking. And then when we try to revert our brains back, our brains are plastic but they're not elastic. They don't just snap back into shape.[9]

Nass wasn't sure whether this frenetic, lack-of-focus effect was permanent or just a sticky flavor of temporary. He did find that the self-proclaimed multitaskers weren't really multitaskers at all: they were just constantly distracted people, and they never did anything with full concentration. Much of Nass's research came before 2010. Constant distraction as a sociological phenomenon has skyrocketed since, with more powerful devices, more hypercolorful screens, and more years of fully funded attention engineering.

Distracted people are a fixture of the modern workplace, but the structure of work itself has also changed dramatically over the past generation. The kinds of work that exist, the skills

that fetch the highest pay (or any at all), and the physical environment of the average workplace all look very different than they did even in the early 2000s.

Many of the changes to professional life are clearly positive, and that's partially thanks to a slate of creative, productive, and diverse new jobs. The artist who creates in geographic obscurity until they find a niche following online didn't exist until very recently. The same goes for people in economically ravaged places: the decentralization of work and the democratization of creative tools have exponentially increased the number of people who can develop and display their talents. Any forward-thinking firm can now make a tempting offer to a skilled person in a faraway area: work for us and stay right where you are. Keep your home and lifestyle, and collect the high compensation that we'd pay to a similar candidate who lives in a much more expensive city. Just make sure that you have a fast and reliable internet connection, and enjoy the benefits of remote work.

But pandemic lockdowns showed us that the liberation of remote work also makes everyday sociality much more difficult. Early in the pandemic, the health journalist Jamie Ducharme talked to people frustrated by how inadequate video chats felt:

> Jessica Pflugrath, a 27-year-old freelance writer and editor who lives alone in Brooklyn, New York, has been relying on video chats to stay connected with her friends, but she says they bring a nagging feeling of unease. The ebb and flow of an in-person conversation doesn't always translate to video, and she doesn't like the pressure of having to be "on" all the time; she also doesn't like how easily digital conversations lend themselves to distraction. "There's a lack of feeling present with people, in general," she says.[10]

That's not surprising. For thousands of years, our species evolved around close interaction with each other. Our ancestors studied each other's body language, tone, and energy to understand their social standing and the subtle cultural information that was necessary for everyday survival.

The richness of an in-person interaction depends on the innumerable factors we perceive from our companion's cadences, facial movements, posture, smell, touch, and proximity. This is true throughout the animal kingdom, in fact: as we learn more about both ourselves and our relatives in nature, we begin to build a more vibrant picture of the myriad methods animals have for understanding each other.[11]

When we communicate in ways that don't capture these subtle, nonverbal inputs, we lose a lot of what our brains want to know about others. We lose the stuff of great poetry and salient memories—the way your dad wrinkled his face right before telling a joke, the little tap on the shoulder an important teacher would always give after a job well done—and we lose a treasure trove of subconsciously processed, vital information about the behavior and beliefs of others. All of these tiny pieces of information gradually form attachment to another living being. These are the fundamental bits that become a relationship.

If we want to create a world where people can work remotely, be productive, and enjoy flourishing social lives, we need to find ways to translate these little details to physically distributed work. Mindlessly scheduling video calls won't cut it. Clever leaders can make it work, and the pandemic inspired widespread experimentation with remote relationship-building. We have to recognize the value of relationships, engage with other people,