Connection Culture: The Competitive Advantage of Shared Identity, Empathy, and Understanding at Work

By Michael Lee Stallard

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Organizations thrive when employees feel valued, the environment is energized, and high productivity and innovation are the norm. This requires a new kind of leader who fosters a culture of connection within the organization. Michael Lee Stallard's *Connection Culture* provides a fresh way of thinking about leadership and offers recommendations for how to tap into the power of human connection.

If you want to begin fostering a connection culture in your organization, this book is your game-changing opportunity. Stop undermining performance and take the first step toward change that will give your organization, your team, and all whom you lead a true competitive advantage.

Inspiring and practical, this book challenges you to set the performance bar high and to keep reaching. In this book you will learn how to :

- foster a connection culture
- emulate best practices of connected workplaces like those at Pixar and Duke University's men's basketball team
- boost vision, value, and voice within your organization.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Packed with rock-solid evidence, disturbing statistics and moving stories, this short but passionate plea for connectedness at work and in life delivers a wake-up call...Americans in particular have let relationships and community suffer...The few organizations that include employees in decisions, respect them and encourage relationship building and bonding ultimately outpace their competitors. *getAbstract* recommends this quick read to leaders who want to build places where the best people want to work and connect." - *getAbstract*

Review
"Michael Lee Stallard…make(s) some practical suggestions for employers who want to change the culture of their organization."

-Mian Ridge, Financial Times

"At the end of the day leadership is all about the human experience. Connection Culture provides ideas, actions, and pathways that servant leaders can use to not only enhance performance, but more importantly to build a strong culture."

—Howard Behar, Former President , Starbucks International

"Connection Culture captures that profound truth that people come first and provides the framework, language, and practices every leader needs to achieve a sustainable, superior performance. A great leadership guide for leaders at every level."

—Frances Hesselbein , President and CEO, The Frances Hesselbein Leadership Institute

"Michael Stallard provides us with a new language about leadership, a new and important way of thinking for leaders, and all the research and evidence to back his connection strategy. This is more than a great read; Michael's connection strategy is a game changer for leaders."

—Vernon Clark, Admiral, U.S. Navy (Ret), Former Chief of Naval Operations

"Connection Culture lays out a compelling case for a culture of connection in every organization, and provides a framework for leaders who want to apply positive personal values in practice in their organizations and teams."

—John Young, Group President, Global Established Pharma Businesses, Pfizer

"Engaging, while offering real solutions to human challenges that occur in the workplace! As someone who

has researched and published in the field of organizational psychology, I can honestly say that Connection Culture is right on target and a book that every leader should race to get his or her hands on."

—Karla R. Peters-Van Havel

 Chief Operating Officer, The Institute for Management Studies

"As a psychiatrist I have cared for thousands of individuals with anxiety and depression who complained that they did not feel appreciated at work and longed for a sense of importance. Connection Culture addresses this problem and offers good, practical solutions. Every manager needs to read this book—it will foster healthier work environments and make my job a lot easier!"

—Ted George

 Clinical Professor, George Washington School of Medicine

 Senior Investigator, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

"Listening to and engaging staffers in the right way at all levels is the key to driving business forward and is at the heart of Michael's book. Running an organization of some 8,000 people, I have found Michael's experience, guidance, and philosophy helpful in understanding and improving our company's performance on multiple metrics. I hope others find the inspiration in this book that has helped FCB be better at what we do."

—Carter Murray

Worldwide CEO, Foote, Cone & Belding

"Connection Culture grabbed my attention from the beginning and had me jumping on the phone to share its ideas with friends and colleagues. We have to do better as leaders and as teachers of leadership development to be intentional in creating and sustaining connection cultures. Even when you think you've got it all in place (the surveys, training, recognition awards, and celebrations), disconnection creeps in. You must read this book."

—Janis Apted

Associate Vice President, Faculty and Academic Development

The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center

From the Author
Q&A with Michael Stallard

How do you perceive the power of connection that you write about in *Connection Culture*?

Connection is a bond in a group (team, department, organization) based on shared identity, empathy and understanding that moves self-centered individuals toward group-centered membership. We are hardwired to connect. The power comes from how feeling connected makes individuals more productive, more creative, more energetic and generally more effective. This is why the neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman describes human connection as a superpower. The power of connection benefits the organization through improved employee engagement, strategic alignment, communication, cooperation, and innovation. Combined, this is a very powerful boost to competitive advantage.

What differentiates a culture of connection from one that wields control (vis-à-vis the six universal needs you write about)?

There are six universal human needs to thrive in the workplace: respect, recognition, belonging, autonomy, personal growth, and meaning. When these needs are met in a connection culture, people describe feeling connected to their work, the people they work with (including their supervisor), and their customers.

In a culture of control, individuals with power, control, and status rule over the rest. Under those conditions, many, if not all, of the universal needs are not met, leaving people feeling unsupported, left out, or lonely. Rather than energized and fired up, they are more likely to burn out over time.

As opposed to a control culture, connection culture leads to competitive advantage in terms of task excellence and productivity. Could you elaborate on this with an example?

Here's a simple example in the context of a team. The rock band U2 was not very good when they began playing together in the mid-1970s. People booed and laughed at them. Bono, U2's leader, lead singer and lyricist, created a connection culture by communicating an inspiring vision, valuing people, and giving them a voice. Bono is referring to U2's connection culture when he says U2 is like a strong family and people with strong families are typically strong people. He also says the way U2 operates is more extraordinary than its music.

You would expect a rock band's focus to be on making money and selling out concert tours. U2's inspiring vision is to create and perform music that advocates for human rights, social justice, and matters of faith.

Bono values his band mates by splitting economic profits equally with them, praising each member's talents and character, and being there for them during tough times. For example, when drummer Larry Mullen Jr.'s mother was killed in a car accident, Bono reached out to him so that he wouldn't mourn alone. Early on, when U2 received a recording contract offer from a huge recording label that was contingent upon replacing Larry, Bono told the record label no way, it was all of them or none of them.

Each band member has a voice in decisions. If there is a decision that one of the four band members or their manager strongly opposes, U2 will not go forward with it. The band members say this can take more time and be frustrating to work through differences but it produces superior results. And who can argue with them? U2 has won more Grammy awards than any band in history and they surpassed the Rolling Stones' record for the highest revenue producing concert tour in history.

Could you give us a brief overview of the scientific case for connection--its roots in psychology and neuroscience?

Connection Culture has an entire chapter titled "The Science of Connection" so I'll touch on what I see as the essence. Culture, which I define as the shared attitudes, language, and behaviors of a group (such as a team

or department), affects human biology. When we feel connected to others, the science shows that our brain and other body systems operate at a state of balance so they get the right amounts of hormones, blood, glucose, and oxygen to perform at their best.

When we feel disconnected, unsupported, left out, or lonely, our bodies alter the levels of hormones and reallocate blood, glucose, and oxygen to the "fight or flight" systems such as the heart, lungs and thighs in preparation for needing to respond quickly. The body's natural "stress response" is good if we are facing a short-term threat such as an attack. However, if working in cultures of control or indifference cause our bodies to become stuck in stress response, we become more vulnerable to anxiety, depression and addiction.

How difficult is it to build a connection culture--the need/importance of 'connection' has to be felt across an organization? How does a leader get others in the organization to nurture it?

It's not difficult to create a connection subculture on a team or in a business unit if you have a good leader. Creating a connection culture across an entire organization, however, is more challenging because it means converting any subcultures of control and indifference into connection subcultures. A system is therefore necessary.

In the system, training is first required so people know what connection is, why it's important to them and to the organization, and what increases and diminishes connection. Second, employee engagement surveys are necessary to identify manager who are creating connection cultures and those who are not. Third, the best managers at creating connection cultures and achieving performance objectives should teach and coach those managers who need help creating connection cultures. Over time, this system converts subcultures of control and indifference into connection subcultures.

Given the smooth knowledge flow and relationship excellence it envisages, connection culture sets the ideal setting for risk-taking and innovation. Could you cite an example?

Connection culture cultivates an openness that facilitates connecting ideas and knowledge to spark innovation. It also provides relational support so that people feel safe to take the risks required to innovate. For example, the connection culture of Qualcomm's ImpaQt program helped connect the idea that a Qualcomm employee had to bring surround sound to mobile devices with the people who had the expertise to bring the idea to life. Remarkably, Qualcomm's Immersive Audio technology went from idea to commercialization in just one year.

Being an intangible commodity, how would one measure the degree of 'connection' in an organization?

In the employee engagement surveys we do for clients, we include questions you would find in a typical employee engagement survey as well as questions about whether or not an employee is experiencing the stated values of the organization. It is also useful to offer opportunities for employees to share anecdotes of times in which they have felt connected to their peers, their supervisor, and the organization. Through learning these personal experiences, clients can identify best practices and intentional connectors.

What are the dangers of a culture where connection seems elusive?

The danger is managerial failure and survival. A lack or deficiency of connection negatively affects individual employee engagement and execution (which I addressed above). Absent connection, knowledge traps build up, just like cholesterol builds up in an unhealthy cardiovascular system and leads to a heart

attack. Knowledge traps include rivalries, departmental silos, and decision-makers who don't seek and consider the opinions and ideas of others. Connection stimulates knowledge flow that is essential to optimal decision-making and maintaining a robust internal marketplace of ideas that fuels innovation.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

June Whitaker:

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