

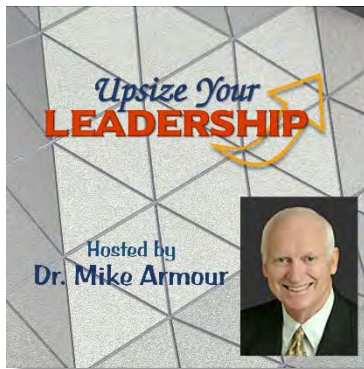
Revisiting High-Touch Leadership

Why It's More Essential Than Ever

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Episode UYL1903

Podcast Date: April 2, 2019



Like millions of others, I first encountered the phrase “high tech/high touch” in the early 1980s. It was one of the more memorable phrases from John Naisbitt’s best-selling book *MegaTrends*, published in 1982.

Here we are, nearly four decades later, and Naisbitt’s phrase is still an urgent reminder of how today’s leaders and managers must approach their task.

Today we are going to revisit Naisbitt’s phrase and talk about why it is even more relevant now than when he first coined it. His words are indeed wise counsel if you want to upsize your leadership.

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High Tech, High Touch

In *MegaTrends*, John Naisbitt argued that changes in the workplace now demand styles of leadership and management which are more interpersonal than ever before. He called these styles “high-touch.” This type of management is necessary, he said, because of the impact of technology on the workplace and the lives of those who work there.

The more sophisticated technology becomes, the easier it is for people to work in isolation from one another. Technology replaces personal conversation as the way to communicate, collaborate, and get things done. We see this especially in the rise of virtual work teams and the growing number of “work-at-home” employees.

Our youngest daughter, who lives in the Midwest, has a work profile which was unimaginable two or three decades ago. She works from home as part of an international virtual team. Her closest manager is 1500 miles away, in New York. And her primary work colleague lives in France.

Yet the same technology which makes this scenario possible can also isolate even those people who work in relatively close proximity to each other. Despite this physical proximity, their jobs

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may require little or no face-to-face interaction with anyone nearby. Perhaps it requires none at all.

Worker Engagement and Loyalty

Naisbitt recognized that such a workplace would run counter to one of our deepest human needs – the need to feel connected to others. And if workers feel disconnected from one another, they are likely to feel disconnected from the larger organization and its management team.

And indeed, that seems to be exactly what has happened. As technology has become increasingly pervasive in the workplace, problems with worker engagement and loyalty have emerged as wholesale management concerns. Is it mere coincidence that a high-tech workplace and diminished worker engagement developed side by side? Probably not.

What's striking is that Naisbitt anticipated the disconnected workplace at a time when, by today's standards, high tech was in its infancy. Remember, he published *MegaTrends* in 1982. That was just months after IBM introduced its first personal computer, a machine with no hard drive and no more than 256 kilobytes of memory.

Yet, even in 1982, Naisbitt contended that the course for the future had been set, a future to be dominated by advanced technology. And he warned that this high-tech future would present unprecedented challenges to leadership. One of these challenges is a workplace which is highly connected technologically, but terribly disconnected interpersonally.

Management Challenges

Ironically, **the same technology which isolates workers from one another also allows managers to isolate themselves from their workers.** With a steady stream of reports and data coming to them electronically, managers can easily rely on technology rather than interpersonal conversation to stay informed and abreast of what's happening. Moreover, it's easier for managers to fire off an email or a text to a team member than to seek out the team member for face-to-face discussion. Managers can therefore find themselves as disconnected from their team members as the team members are from one another.

To counter this disconnect, Naisbitt argued that high tech must be married to high-touch styles of leadership. Thus, his phrase, "high tech, high touch." In a high-tech world, managers must be purposeful in creating high-touch relationships with their teams. And if that was already the case in 1982, it's far, far more the case today – exponentially so.

It's also ironic that **the very technology which leads to disconnectedness also serves to mask it.** Social media gives us the impression that we are highly connected, perhaps more so than ever before. After all, we may have hundreds of friends and followers on social media. Even thousands of them. Our network of connections spreads far and wide.

But for the most part, these so-called connections are little more than casual contacts, if that. While some are truly friends and family, the vast majority are merely names in a social media directory. Many may even be people whom we have never met in person. We feel no deep, interpersonal connection with them at all. Social media contacts are a far cry from the kind of relationships which satisfy our drive to have meaningful connections with other people.

At a cognitive level, I might add, workers may not recognize how much their drive to find connections is going unsatisfied, unfulfilled. Because they are not consciously aware that they feel disconnected, they may never speak of it. At an unconscious level, however, they will develop a gnawing sense of disconnectedness. It's impossible for them to do otherwise. The drive to connect with others is hard-wired into our very being.

Building Relationships with Your People

And since most people spend more hours at work than in any other waking activity, it's only natural that workers respond appreciatively when they find interpersonal connections at work. When these connections are with managers and supervisors, workers are even more appreciative. Studies repeatedly show that high-touch management increases morale, engagement, and retention.

Now, this does not mean that a manager must become a glorified, hand-holding team psychologist. Rather, it means showing genuine interest, individually, in people under the manager's purview. This begins with something as simple as knowing their names. With a small team, that's done easily enough. When a manager oversees dozens of people, however, the task requires focused effort.

If we don't even know people's names, we aren't likely to know enough about them to bring out their best. I once coached a vice-president for a giant manufacturing firm who oversaw a department of 185 white-collar workers. Most of them sat just outside of his office, in cubicles that sprawled across an expansive open area – what had once been a massive manufacturing assembly line floor. When I began working with him, he was new to the job, only four months into it. But he had already concluded that his team was sub-par and not particularly talented or engaged.

“So,” I said. “There's no one on your team who is truly competent?” “Oh, no, I wouldn't say that,” he answered. “Five or six of them seem rather capable.” “Tell me about them,” I said. “What are their names?”

Without a moment's pause, he rattled off three names. Then, before naming the fourth and fifth workers, he did pause, not able to remember their first names and fumbling to recall their last names. With the sixth person, he had to resort to a physical description. He could not remember either the man's first name or his last one. And from what I could tell, he may have never known them.

When I pressed him further, he was able to give me the names, either first or last, of no more than 15 people in his entire organization. He had worked within steps of these people for four months and could put names with fewer than 10 percent of their faces.

At the end of the coaching session, I gave him an assignment. I instructed him to carve out 15 minutes every day to meet members of his team. He was to wander through that maze of cubicles, stopping here and there to converse with people, giving priority to those with whom he had not previously talked. I would check back in two weeks to see how he had done.

At the two-week recap, he spoke with excitement about several people whom he met during his daily walkaround. For the first time, he realized how talented and experienced they were. Within two more months, he had completely reversed his original opinion of his team. Now he considered the team one of the strongest that he had ever led.

Of course, high-touch management involves far more than merely learning people's names and conversing with them occasionally. But that's where it starts. Another client, who also happened to manage 185 people, routinely brought in pizza once a week and had 15 of his team members join him for lunch in the conference room.

Now, this was not some thinly-disguised work session. Over pizza he drew them into conversations about their families, their background, their outside interests, and their dreams. The next week he scheduled 15 others for the luncheon and another 15 the week following. By maintaining a weekly rotation, he had lunch four or five times a year with every member of his team.

And by asking about their families, hobbies, pastimes, and dreams, he demonstrated a caring interest in them individually and as a group. After the meeting, he compiled notes about specific things which one individual or another had mentioned. He consulted these notes often so that in chance encounters with team members, he could ask about something which he knew that they valued.

High-touch actions like these pay incalculable dividends. **Fifteen years ago, in a survey of over 100 companies, employees were asked what determined their trust in the company. The second most common answer was, "A manager who really cares for me."** High-touch management aims at conveying that sense of care. Wise managers are intentional in using high-touch strategies to build connections within their organizations.

And by the way, the manager who had the weekly pizza lunches? He happened to work for a company which ranked among the world's top ten high tech firms in terms of revenue. With all of the communication technology at his fingertips, he nonetheless recognized that it could never replace the impact of high-touch relationships.

How Managers and Leaders Build Trust

This same manager also made another striking impression on me. More than any other manager whom I've known, he truly understood the connection between high-touch leadership and a high-trust environment. His team of workers played a daily high-stakes game. They were the primary line of defense against some of the most sophisticated computer hackers in the world. When the bad guys launched an attack, his team had to react immediately, decisively, and effectively. Otherwise, millions of customers were left exposed to potentially ruinous losses.

To mount their defense, his team had to be innovative, creative, collaborative, and fast. He knew that innovation, creativity, collaboration, and operational speed all languish when trust is in low supply. He had also learned that to foster a high-trust environment, he had to practice high-touch leadership. His motto might well have been "high-touch, high-trust."

As a rule of thumb, the more essential trust is to an organization, the more essential it is to have high-touch leadership. Trust does not flourish in an impersonal or uncaring environment. That's why athletic teams put so much emphasis on camaraderie and team spirit. The bonding which results allows trust to flourish. Teams only reach their peak when each team member trusts every other member to do his or her job.

Camaraderie is even more vital in military and first-responder organizations. These organizations have a myriad of ways in which they intentionally promote camaraderie. When life and limb are on the line, team members must trust unhesitatingly that their flank and backside

are fully protected by others on the team. And they develop this trust from the camaraderie which they share.

Of course, with only rare exceptions, corporate work environments put neither life nor limb at risk. But there is a direct correlation between the level of trust within an organization and its overall productivity, effectiveness, and impact. Companies with low internal trust are rarely as profitable – and certainly, not for the long run – as their counterparts with a high-trust culture. As I wrote about in my book *Leadership and the Power of Trust*, leaders who engender trust do so in large part by practicing high-touch leadership.

Building Cohesiveness

The military is especially mindful of the relationship between trust and high-touch leadership. From a purely external perspective, military command structures can appear hard, rigid, and impersonal. Internally, however, from the very outset of their training, military and naval leaders are taught to put the needs of their men and women above all concerns except the accomplishment of the mission itself. Simon Sinek has captured the essence of this priority in his book, *Leaders Eat Last*, based on his observation of Marine operations in Afghanistan.

It is the combination of this concern on the part of their leaders and the camaraderie within the ranks which gives military units their tenacious cohesiveness. Frontline fighters trust each other, above all others. One reason that many combat veterans find it difficult to adjust to civilian life is that they still yearn for the sense of belonging and the trust-bond which sustained them through the thick and thin of battle.

In trust-building, whether in the military or in corporate life, one fundamental reality makes high-touch leadership essential. Namely, we trust people in general and leaders in particular only to the degree that we believe that they are genuinely concerned for us. Or to put it another way, we are unlikely to trust people who are unconcerned about our needs, our desires, or the challenges which we are up against.

And genuine concern can only be shown interpersonally. Technology is simply technology, no matter how much we empower it with artificial intelligence. **Technology may be able to imitate human behavior, but it can never be truly human in its behavior.** When technology expresses concern, the message always feels canned and fake, because that's exactly what it is. It's not genuine, heart-felt concern. It's programmed concern. And the circuitry in our brain which generates trust recognizes the difference. Genuine concern must be communicated genuinely.

Maintaining Authenticity

Before we close this episode, however, let me offer a caution. High-touch leadership should never be used manipulatively. If we are not authentically interested in and concerned for our people and their well-being, we should not fake concern with some type of counterfeit high-touch approach. Sooner or later people will sense the hypocrisy. The resulting damage to our credibility will then undermine our ability to lead effectively.

Instead, we should first put our emphasis on actually developing the kind of interest and concern for our people that makes our high-touch moments genuine and heart-felt. For some leaders, this is not an insignificant challenge, because they are not by nature “people people.”

Rather, they are somewhat like a client I once had who jokingly told me in our first coaching session that he suffered from RDD. He then went on to explain that RDD means Relationship Deficit Disorder.

I'm afraid that I've met many others with RDD in management circles. In my experience, most of them are individuals who, for their entire lives, have been far more drawn to solving problems with things than to solving problems related to people. As a result, they did not rise into a leadership position with a natural inclination toward quality high-touch relationships.

Quite often this inclination is missing because the leader simply does not know his or her people well. Merely getting to know them is frequently enough to stoke the leader's concern for them.

Remember my client who did not know the names of most people on his immediate team? Fifteen minutes a day of walking through their cubicles, stopping here and there to become acquainted with workers personally and individually, changed his entire perception of his team. He went from being their judgmental critic to being their most ardent defender and cheerleader.

He borrowed a high-touch technique – spending time with workers one-on-one – to ignite a depth of concern for them which then became evident in his every interaction with them. Once he was genuinely concerned, his high-touch leadership was authentic. His motivation was no longer simply to learn people's names, but to help them succeed.

I would recommend a similar approach to any leader who recognizes a need for higher levels of engagement, both with his or her team and within the team itself. **Leaders cannot realistically expect their people to be more engaged with one another than the leader is with the team.**

Leadership disengagement breeds general disengagement. And neither engagement nor re-engagement ever occurs without consistent high-touch.

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