

The Contact Lens: why and how to see business from a relationships perspective

‘Love God ... and love your neighbour. On these two laws hang all the law and the prophets’
(Matt 22: 34-40)

‘... I realise how much my own thinking has changed since it became almost second nature to approach a subject from a relational perspective. The disappointment is to realise how little understanding government has of relationships – within itself, with public servants, with the electorate (not the same thing as the popular press), even with its own supporters in Parliament. Nor does it seem to have much understanding of professional or institutional relationships ...
A retired senior civil servant

‘... in a changing world, a company must maintain five key relationships: with investors, employees, customers, suppliers and the community; whatever else changes, those relationships remain. The key to success in the future is to maximise the value of all of them.’
Sir Anthony Cleaver

1. Different lenses

It is possible to look at the world:

- financially
- environmentally – the Green movement
- spatially
- relationally

Impacts on:

- lifestyle issues
- business issues
- public services
- international relations

A relational perspective tends to be more comprehensive than the environmental or spatial, and arguably more relevant to organisational success.

2. What is a relationship?

- A series of encounters with an ‘other’ (not a one-off interaction)
- Shaped by the experience of past encounters and the expectation of future encounters and have some narrative coherence
- Where the other is known
- Where the actions of each can affect the other
- Within some shared context

3. The Foundation: Christianity is a ‘relational religion’

- Trinity as an understanding of God in terms of relationships (Jn 1:1)
- Covenant is a word which describes a particular kind of long-term, committed, faithful relationship (Genesis 15: 4, 5)
- The meaning of ‘righteousness’ in the OT (tsdq) is primarily ‘right relationships’ rather than only absence of guilt in a judicial sense
- The Cross is about reconciliation, a relational term (2 Cor 5: 17-18)
- Eternal life is about ‘knowing God’ (Jn 17: 3)
- Ethics is summarised by the word ‘love’, which perhaps in this context means ‘other-person-centredness’ (Matt 22: 34-40)
- Lifestyle: Christian lifestyle is not primarily concerned with prophetic gifts, financial sacrifice or even being martyred for the faith; it is about the quality of relationships. (1 Cor 13: 1-3)

- Personal goals. Paul describes his own goals and the goals he believes that other Christians should aspire to in terms of relationships (Eph 1: 17, Phil 3: 7-10)
- Jesus is our role model for perfect relationships, as the reason for, and means of achieving, all right relationships

4. Some implications:

- (a) Relationships and community, rather than the material world, are what constitute ultimate reality
- (b) There is no work/home or sacred/secular divide
- (c) This provides a basis for a critique of the individualism and materialism of our culture
- (d) We need to learn to recognise this alternative view of reality in every area of life
- (e) It is 'love' (of God and neighbour), a relational approach, which will be the basis for the evaluation of our own lives by God.

5. Which relationships are of interest to God?

- (a) Each person's relationship with God (e.g. Jn 1: 12) and with other people (e.g. Rom 13: 9-10)
- (b) Relationships within and between groups, churches, cities, regions and nations, and these groups' relationships with God (e.g. Gen 19: 1-29; Is 9:21, 11: 13, 58: 6-9; Ezek 16: 19-52; Amos chs 1&2; Lk 11: 37-53; Lk 13: 34; Rev chs 2 & 3, etc)

6. In business, relationships are more than a means to greater profit by manipulating a client

Other aspects:

- Companies/organisations are non-linear, complex adaptive systems of relationships
- The R dimension of a company's goals (e.g. Greggs/John Lewis Partnership)
- The soft issues can become the hard issues (e.g. Leeson)
- Locating the heart of competitive advantage
- The ability to achieve change in structure or operational procedures

7. Five Preconditions for effective communication

<u>Domain</u>	<u>Goal</u>	<u>Preconditions</u>
Connection	Connectness	Directness
Time	Shared story	Continuity
Knowledge	Mutual understanding	Multiplexity
Power	Respect and mutuality	Parity
Purpose	Shared purpose & values	Commonality

8. Ensuring connectedness through directness

- Who will you meet face to face today?
- Choice and use of technology
- Access and responsiveness issues
- Dialogue skills
- Where to locate staff
- Office design

9. Creating a shared story through continuity

- The duration of the relationship
- The amount of time given to the relationship over time
- Managing change and stability
- Maintaining presence during absence

10. Building mutual understanding through multiplexity

Many stranded relationships, with knowledge from:

- Varied contexts
- Varied sources
- Asking, listening, observing
- Self-disclosure

11. Building respect and mutuality through parity

Parity deals with the use and abuse of power. It influences investment in the relationship

Key issues:

- Is the distribution of risk and return, credit and blame fair?
- Am I affirmed or diminished?
- Are the rules applied fairly to each party?

12. Building shared purpose and values through commonality

Commonality aligns the purpose of the relationship:

- What really guides choices and decisions?
- Where is the centre of gravity?

And creates a shared identity

- Are you still partners when things go wrong?

Which enables creative difference to be accommodated

13. The bigger picture: Why relationships matter so much to us as individuals and as a society

They are the key to:

- self-understanding
- happiness and well-being
- reputation and self-esteem
- re-establishing the balance in our personal lives
- long-term personal support
- meaning in life?