

Engage Wisely *For Healthy Relationships*

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ENGAGING WITH OTHER PEOPLE goes on constantly during our waking hours. It all seems so natural and spontaneous. Many of these interactions mature into what we call “relationships”. A relationship can seem really solid because it can last long—even a lifetime.

But the fact is that a relationship is not a solid thing, like a possession. A relationship is dynamic, composed of an ongoing stream of *individual* behaviors, which *each* of the two parties performs to keep the relationship alive and rewarding.

Furthermore, relationships between two individuals cover an extremely broad spectrum, from relatively brief and casual to lifelong and intimate.

WHAT THIS BOILS DOWN TO is that relationships, although they seem to “just happen”, almost without any conscious thought, really *need to be managed*, and in a conscious, deliberate way. If you or I engage with another party in a way that is *right for the situation*, the results are good. We enjoy the engagement, we feel satisfied. If, however, we make an effort to engage in a way which is wrong for the situation, it leaves us with a bad feeling or outcome.

HOW, THEN, TO MANAGE “ENGAGING”? It turns out that it’s really not that complicated to get a handle on the process. The key idea is that there are basically two aspects to the act of engaging:

- With the heart—with emotions like affection, even love
- With the mind—involving thinking, planning, problem-solving

However, we can inject whatever “mix” of these two ingredients we choose in any interpersonal situation that comes along, each hour of every day.

Looking at what can be appropriate mixtures of the two ingredients of engaging for different types of relationships may be helpful. Here is a graph to show the idea.

VITAL engagement HIGH "Heart" HIGH "Mind"	COLLEGIAL engagement Low "Heart" HIGH "Mind"
AFFECTIONAL engagement HIGH "Heart" Low "Mind"	CASUAL engagement Low "Heart" Low "Mind"

(This graph is entitled the Broenen Engagement Matrix (BEM). Copyright 2011. All rights reserved.)

FOUR TYPES OF ENGAGING emerge when plotted in the graph:

1. Vital (upper left): Engaging with both heart and mind. Sharing feelings and thoughts.
2. Collegial (upper right). Primarily sharing thoughts and ideas, with the emotional connection less emphasized.
3. Affectional (lower left): Focus is on affection and affiliation, with little emphasis on intellectual engagement like planning and problem solving.
4. Casual (lower right): No strong emphasis on either emotional or intellectual engagement, but still some kind of relating, probably to conduct everyday transactions.

WHEN WE DECIDE to enter into a relationship, it's a good idea to pick the right "flavor" for the situation. Let's take them one at a time:

1. Vital. Obviously, we don't want to expend the precious energy to engage in a personal relationship with every person that comes along. We reserve that for one a very few people in our life, like our true friends, our significant other and immediate family.¹
2. Collegial. This kind of engaging is well suited to most of our relationships, whether at work or among friends. Over time, we may develop some degree of closeness with our business associates, but getting things done takes priority.
3. Affectional. This kind of engaging works well only in a situation where the most important thing is to give loving support to another person unquestioningly, without "getting into their business" by offering unsolicited advice. This could apply, for example, to grandparenting.
4. Casual. This kind of engaging goes on dozens of times everyday, as we deal with clerks, customers, contractors. The engagements are not highly personal, so they don't warrant deep emotional involvement. They are straightforward and routine, so they don't demand intense intellectual and heartfelt engagement.

GREAT “MATCHES” ARE MADE IN HEAVEN, BUT! When we properly match an engagement behavior to a particular situation, things progress nicely. But the inverse is also true. When we seek to engage with someone in a way that does not suit the situation, the exchanges in the faltering, attempted relationship are not aligned properly. As a result, many of the exchanges are fraught with:

- Frustration—“Why are we having trouble connecting on this?”
- Disappointment—“Why did you react that way?”
- Anger—“You just don’t get it!”

. . . And so forth.

SO, USING THESE IDEAS, take a look at how you engage in each of your relationships from day to day. You may gain some insights into why things are working so well in some cases, and perhaps could use some realignments to the situation in others.

1. Thanks to Dean Strupp for suggesting the inclusion of friends.

Note: The authors have now completed a book expanding on this conceptual model to further explore the dynamics of engaging and offer guidelines for managing relationships. Its title is: [Heart : Mind - Warmth and Light in Your Relationships](#) and is now available for purchase on this website (click on link).

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