Vibe: The Secrets of Strong Connections in a Lonely World

Adam Grant
Viking, 2026

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PROLOGUE

Adam Grant struggled socially throughout much of his childhood and young adulthood. He felt that most of his attempts at connection were unsuccessful, and he didn't know the best way to find his people. It wasn't until he enrolled in a class on personality psychology during his junior year of college that conversing with his classmates suddenly felt effortless. Grant attributes much of this to the professor, who—despite being deeply introverted—engaged with his students in a way that unlocked something similar between them.

"I couldn't stop wondering why these interactions were so different. I finished the class with a mission: reverse-engineer the dynamic and figure out how to foster that kind of kinship. I had to know what it takes for people to vibe."

A vibe is not only a feeling of connection but also a synchronization of brainwaves and heartbeats. It can arise easily between some people and not at all between others. With the feeling of loneliness becoming more pervasive around the world, understanding what makes it happen has never mattered more. In Grant's view, loneliness is the result of fewer interactions taking place. The interactions that do occur tend to be more clunky because we're losing the ability to read cues and build ties. Without practice, these skills can deteriorate over time.

The norms we've come to accept for social interaction can also be obstacles to connection. Small talk, for example, can inhibit creating real bonds. Grant retrospectively sees this as one of his shortcomings when he was younger because he was trying to use superficial conversation topics to create real connection, which doesn't work.

Grant's professor, on the other hand, was skilled at forging connections. One tactic he used is called "pebbling," which involves sharing something that is relevant to the conversations you've had with a person as a bid for connection. In essence, if

you see something specific that makes you think of a person and then share that with them, it can help solidify the bond—especially if you don't know them very well. The most critical thing is to be personal rather than overemphasizing friendliness. This demonstrates that you paid attention during your last interaction with that person and that you cared enough to remember something specific about them.

By doing this with his own students, the professor helped them learn how to do it, too. Knowing how to vibe with people isn't an inherited trait; it's something that can be learned. Everyone has the ability to get better at it. This book explores connection and how to foster it across all types of relationships.

PART I:

SPARKING CONNECTION:

THE THREE MYTHS OF CHEMISTRY AND CLOSENESS

We have so much vocabulary associated with romantic relationships and how we choose to define them. The same doesn't exist for platonic ones. This means that everyone can interpret the meaning of friendship differently because there are many different ways people can be close.

Grant explains that there are four "wavelengths" of connection across the friendship spectrum: associates, allies, pals, and companions. Associates tend to be relationships that are transactional in nature. Allies involve some kind of shared purpose—whether that be volunteering, work, or a shared faith. Pals are those who like to do the same things and have a shared sense of fun. Companions are built on care and emotional support, and they tend to be one's confidants.

Each of these relationship wavelengths involves different priorities. In an associate or ally relationship, value comes from a shared outcome, while with companions and pals, it's about the actual time spent together. These relationships also exist for different reasons: Associates and pals are largely a result of convenience, whereas allies and companions result from commitments to one another.

We're happier when we have a balanced portfolio of connections. Different bonds help us feel valued and add value in distinct ways. Grant believes understanding the distinction between wavelengths allows us to more easily understand a person's role in our lives and how we should behave toward them—and how they should behave toward us. The goal is not necessarily to transform someone from one wavelength to another but rather to appreciate the different ways they add value to your life. At the same time, it's also possible to engage with someone in different modes. Even if you see a person as an ally, for example, you can engage with them in "pal mode" by going for a drink with them or doing something more fun and lighthearted.

“We vibe when we connect on a common wavelength. Alignment creates chemistry, elevating the energy in our interactions. That paves the way to closeness, strengthening our bonds. We get along and grow tight when we see our relationship the same way—and communicate that way.”

Closeness can exist across all four wavelengths if each of you sees the other as occupying the same one. It’s when two people aren’t on the same page about what kind of relationship they have or want that things can go wrong. That mismatch creates static, and it can leave people feeling disappointed or even betrayed. Opportunity for connection abounds so long as we check our assumptions and keep an open mind.

1. STRIKING A MATCH:

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF COMPATIBILITY

Grant presents a group of astronauts from different countries working together on the International Space Station to showcase how compatibility is not an essential ingredient for connection. The astronauts initially had issues working together because of their contrasting and conflicting personalities, but over time, they learned to trust one another implicitly, which was essential to the success of their mission.

"Compatibility is rarely something we can determine when we meet. It's usually something we develop as we interact. Instead of leaving chemistry to luck or fate, we can cultivate it." It's less about the starting point and more about what you do from there.

This is why matchmaking so often fails. We think we need to find someone who is our opposite or our mirror image, and we expect that there will be a specific quality in each of us that will help predict compatibility. In reality, we're not very good at judging who might be a good match for us. What determines closeness and chemistry over time are the interactions between two people, not their individual traits.

Different scenarios or interactions can elicit entirely different impressions of the same person. Characteristics may be dialed up or down. In some settings, you might be dominant, while in others, you may be more passive. "Compatibility is not determined by how we typically act. It's a function of how we interact. It's not you or me; it's us." The norms between you matter more than each of your individual qualities. This also means that you can create compatibility with almost anyone. Proximity tends to matter more than shared traits, as being physically close to someone leads to more interactions and makes it easier to find points of overlap.

Connections also aren't static, so compatibility can be built over time. A relationship may evolve from one wavelength to another, or it may exist on multiple wavelengths simultaneously. Allowing for

this fluidity matters because forcing a relationship to stay on a specific wavelength can be constraining.

The strongest connections tend to exist on multiple wavelengths. This is particularly true for those you're closest to, whether that be a best friend or a romantic partner. Ideally, the connection you have with the latter would exist on all four, though this does not mean relying entirely or exclusively on your romantic partner. "Across multiple studies, people who seek different kinds of emotional support from different friends are happier than those who go to the same friends for everything."

Connection is not exclusive. We're able to build and maintain strong connections with numerous people and should strive to do so—even with those who seem very different from us at first. The astronauts on the ISS prove this. While their personalities clashed, and they came from different cultures, they were able to build strong connections over time. They put effort into forging a bond by cooking meals together and discussing why they each became astronauts. Talking about their past, rather than their future, helped them to better understand each other and see one another as humans. It's less about finding someone "right" and more about working together to create the bond that works for you.

2. FAST FRIENDS:

THE ART OF ACCELERATING ATTACHMENT

In the early 1970s, Bill Riddick, a Black social worker in Durham, North Carolina, took an unconventional approach to tackle ongoing challenges with school desegregation. Instead of trying to reduce tension by separating segregationist C.P. Ellis and Black civil rights activist Ann Atwater, he made them work together in order to amplify the intensity and, in turn, shift the vibe between them.

This approach is backed by science. It may typically take a long time for two people to bond, but emotionally intense situations can amplify feelings. Two people sharing a scary, stressful, or pressure-filled experience with each other are more likely to become closer afterward. In short, high stakes drive and accelerate connection. “Connection springs from shared experiences that are emotional or transformational. The active ingredient is not adversity—it’s intensity.”

Riddick did this with Ellis and Atwater by naming them co-chairs of a committee focused on school desegregation. Assigning them this task, without their own allies to back them up, gave them a shared purpose and created the conditions for them to figure out a solution together. He didn’t need to neutralize their feelings; he only needed to align them through a common goal.

Vulnerability is also an effective way to improve the vibe between adversaries or strangers. Grant regularly runs an experiment with his students where he pairs them up and gives them one minute to vibe. He offers no further instructions, but the short time frame often leads them to quickly leave small talk behind in favor of deeper conversation, which helps form bonds between them.

Even if you don’t get this kind of deep talk right, people tend to like you more when you show vulnerability. It’s not about trauma dumping or burdening someone with your problems; it’s about showing your full humanity, including your flaws. Another

effective tactic is to ask revealing questions, which can help you go into deep talk quicker with your conversation partner. By disrupting the expected flow of a conversation, you can subvert assumptions and create conditions for more responsiveness from both sides.

This is ultimately what happened with Ellis and Atwater. After long, intense days of negotiating, Ellis asked Atwater a personal question. When she confided in him, it opened him up, as well. The intensity of the situation forced them to interact differently, and that, in turn, allowed them to see each other in a different light. It created a wavelength shift and laid the foundation for a lifelong connection between the two.

Studies with other adversary groups found something similar. “Discussing charged issues together was more powerful than simply socializing together. More than eating or bunking together, it was going deep on a common wavelength that built bonds across the divide.”

3. LOVE AT SECOND SIGHT:

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SHAPE-SHIFTING

Instant chemistry is not a necessary ingredient for closeness. Sometimes, working to overcome your dislike for a person can actually make you like them more. Authors C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien started on the wrong foot while both were working as professors at the University of Oxford. After they both attended a reading group, they discovered shared interests between them. Engaging in a different context allowed them to see a different side of each other. Over time, they developed a close friendship, starting a multidecade-long book club and encouraging each other to work on the novels for which they later became known.

If we believe that chemistry has to be present from the start or that our first impressions are always right, then we miss out on countless opportunities for connection. Relying too heavily on first impressions is rarely a good idea. It's not possible to truly know a person from a single encounter. Our impressions are often wrong due to the "fundamental attribution error." This is what happens when we see someone do something we perceive as negative, and we attribute it to their personality rather than the situation. For instance, you might assume that someone who cuts you off is rude when they actually could be rushing to the hospital.

Different situations can elicit different reactions in the same person, so we can only get an accurate read of someone after seeing them in a range of contexts. Each of us has our own set of "if-then signatures," where we behave differently depending on the situation. Therefore, seeing how someone behaves in a single situation may lead us to misjudge them.

"Recognizing if-then fluctuations can help us find settings where we might connect. Many strong bonds have emerged between people who clashed in one context and then clicked in another." By spending more time with a person, we can learn what sets them off and how to respond. We'll also have more opportunities

to find areas of compatibility. The more you know a person, the easier it becomes to manage if-then clashes, identify shared values, and create a vibe.

Building connections with others doesn't just allow us to see them in a different light; it allows us to see ourselves differently. A study found that people in love tend to broaden how they define themselves. "Bad relationships confine us to situations that activate our worst selves. Good relationships put us in situations that bring out our best selves. Great relationships introduce experiences that elevate us into better versions of ourselves." This resulted not just from sharing and taking on some of their partner's strengths and interests, but from growing together, too. Leading each other to change can also strengthen a relationship, both romantic and platonic.

In the same way that each of us behaves differently in different scenarios, different people can draw out new versions of us, sometimes leading us to connect on a different wavelength altogether. Lewis and Tolkien's close friendship helped them hone their skills and made them both stronger writers. They eventually grew apart, but the success of their books may not have been possible without the other. None of this would have happened if they hadn't overcome their initial judgments and seen each other for the complex humans they were.

PART 2:

SUSTAINING CONNECTION:

THE RITUALS OF RESILIENT RELATIONSHIPS

Riley Enright is known on the internet for the agendas he creates for his weekly "board meetings" with his friends. Grant was drawn to the story because it demonstrated Enright's commitment to maintaining these bonds—something that matters now more than ever. People are more connected today but are also more mobile, changing jobs and the cities they live in often, and relationships have suffered as a result. Your companions might not be in that same role a decade from now. "Sociologists find that in seven years, only 30 percent of your pals and companions will be in that same role—and only half of them will be in your life at all."

This isn't to say that all friendships are meant to last, but many of us have fewer strong ties than most people had in the past. The reasons are structural as much as personal: We engage less with our neighbors, we don't live as close to our friends, and the social norms that once drew us into shared spaces have quietly eroded. We go to third places less, and when we do, we block people out. Social networks were supposed to bridge this divide, but they haven't actually helped us maintain the connections that matter.

Being more intentional about maintaining relationships matters. We can't let difficulty or distance keep us apart. This is especially true for men, who have fewer close friends and less emotional support than they had in the past. Sustaining connection requires different tactics than sparking it in the first place.

4. ABSENCE MAKES THE HEART GROW FONDER:

RETHINKING THE RHYTHM OF COMMUNICATION

Pat DeReamer and Mary Kroger have maintained a friendship for more than 80 years. For much of that time, they haven't lived near one another, nor have they interacted on a regular basis. In fact, their friendship is largely based on a birthday card they've sent back and forth every year since they were 14 years old.

Other experiments seem to corroborate this: The frequency and duration of interactions are not essential for keeping a relationship alive. Even sporadic and short interactions are sufficient if there's a depth of connection. This is because frequency doesn't necessarily translate into meaning. In some cases, distance or space can actually be a good thing, compelling you to make the most out of the time you have together. This is true not just in romantic relationships but also in friendships and among colleagues. Studies have found that colleagues may be more productive when they work together in bursts rather than continually.

Monty Python is an excellent example. "Although they built their chemistry through an initial phase of intense interaction, they sustained it by intentionally splitting apart and going their separate ways for months." Their time apart allowed them to have a fresh start each time they came back together, enabling them to rethink, refuel, retool, and reconnect.

With distance, the group was able to reassess some of their ideas. Having time apart meant that they felt reinvigorated when they came back together and were able to unlock ideas and move past stuck points. It also allowed any tensions that had bubbled up to dissipate. In the interim, each of them continued working on other projects, which meant that they came back together with new talents and techniques at their disposal. The time apart also allowed them to shift the vibe, changing the way they worked together.

Quality is more important than quantity, and meaning trumps frequency when it comes to sustaining connections. Sharing novel or memorable experiences improves relationships, though what counts as meaningful differs depending on the wavelength, ranging from shared projects or conversations to new experiences.

This applies to dormant ties, as well. Every one of us has people we used to know who we're no longer in touch with. Most of us are reluctant to reach out to these people, fearful that it could be awkward or unwelcome; however, the opposite is often true. Because we don't typically fall out of touch intentionally, people tend to be more responsive to reconnecting than we might expect.

Worrying less about time apart or infrequent contact makes it easier to maintain a bond. There are light-lift ways to reconnect with someone: wishing them a happy birthday, reflecting on a shared memory, commemorating a moment, or sending something that tells them you were thinking of them, like an article or a playlist. It can even be as simple as telling someone you miss them or how much they mean to you.

That's not to say that all bids for connection are accepted, but there's no reason not to try. The quickness of a response isn't necessarily indicative of closeness—quality of the attention matters more. As far as method is concerned, Grant notes that texts and emails can work, but phone calls are even better. If you don't have time for one-on-one catch-ups, it can also be beneficial to bring a group together, even if they don't all know one another. Introducing people can build trust, increase your happiness, and help you stay connected.

5. IT'S COMPLICATED:

MAINTAINING MESSY CONNECTIONS

Ambivalence, where you experience both positive and negative feelings toward a person, can elicit more stress than a purely good or bad relationship. This is because not knowing what to expect can make us feel on edge. At the same time, the good moments or pleasant aspects may compel us not to cut ties with the person. "Improving complicated connections is not about raising our tolerance. It's not about ignoring their vices. It's about confining their vices and unlocking their virtues."

Each of us has positive and negative traits. These can bring out different feelings or reactions in others. We'll often avoid people who make us feel bad, move toward those who make us feel good, and perhaps maintain loose ties with those who make us feel indifferent. It's the ambivalent relationships that are more difficult to navigate because we like the good aspects but not the bad. Taking distance is an option, but it's not the only one.

In 2004, the president of the Detroit Pistons, Joe Dumars, decided to acquire a volatile player. It was a gamble. The player was strong but unpredictable. Years later, Grant asked Dumars about the decision. Dumars shared that he had learned how to deal with difficult players from his time as a teammate of Dennis Rodman: He had to accept him as he was.

There are broadly two ways to navigate ambivalent relationships: Contain the vices, or harness the virtues. The first is about setting clear boundaries around the behaviors you won't tolerate. The second is about actively choosing to focus on someone's strengths rather than their flaws. Sometimes, one approach is enough; other times, both are needed.

Research finds that ambivalence is best addressed through acceptance. But, acceptance does not mean letting everything slide, particularly if someone treats you poorly. It's about giving people leeway and accepting that they have limitations. The key

is to make the person feel validated and understood—and it isn't boundless. You can acknowledge that it's OK for someone to be different from you while still setting boundaries.

For Dumars, that meant accepting how passionate the player was while being clear about when and how he was allowed to lose his cool. He told him directly that getting ejected or suspended wouldn't be tolerated. The boundary was specific, not general. "When people disappoint us, it's rarely due to their actions alone. It's usually because their actions fell short of our expectations. And in many cases, they had no idea, because we didn't bother to tell them what was acceptable and unacceptable."

Boundaries are easier to set when there is mutual respect, and they're easier to enforce from a position of power. Without that power, you can still set them by showing how it's in the other person's interest to address your interest, or by framing suggestions as your asking questions or seeking advice. With ambivalent peer relationships, it can be as simple as keeping them on a certain wavelength. If someone is fun but not a person you want as a companion, that can mean keeping them as a pal. Or if they're not so pleasant, you might keep them as an associate.

For some relationships, containment alone isn't the answer. In those cases, the more powerful move is to reframe: Find the good among the difficult, and choose to lead with that.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Antonin Scalia differed ideologically but shared similar professional goals, and as young judges, they were close. Even after they both joined the U.S. Supreme Court, they maintained their friendship, refusing to let their differences define it.

A study of couples tracked over a year found two ways people were able to overlook their partner's flaws: They gave more weight to their virtues or found the good within the bad. "Seeing the good in others is not about denying their shortcomings—it's about appreciating their strengths. You're not turning a blind eye

to their bad qualities; you're taking them in context of their best qualities."

Redeeming qualities can be found in almost anyone. The question to ask of any complicated relationship is whether the vices can be contained or the virtues can be harnessed—and whether the net result is worth it.

6. GOOD VIBRATIONS:

CREATING HARMONY FROM DISHARMONY

Avoiding conflict is not always the best approach for maintaining connection. In fact, being open in moments of discord can actually strengthen bonds. Metallica went through a period of crisis and eventually sought out group therapy, wherein they were encouraged to fight openly. Welcoming this friction eventually proved to be positive. Afterward, the band released a successful album and has continued working together and winning awards ever since.

We tend to romanticize strong relationships as something natural, seamless, and easy to maintain. Conflict feels like a threat, so we often go to great lengths to avoid it, but the real threat is the act of avoidance itself.

Friction is a key part of maintaining relationships. It stems from differences in preferences, interests, goals, and values. We may be afraid to give voice to it, worrying that it will threaten ties, but in reality, it can bring people closer together. “The discussions we dodge are more likely to deepen our bonds than destroy them. If we can’t be honest, what we’re maintaining is less of a relationship than a charade. Connections stagnate in silence. Candor opens the door to growth.”

Metallica’s therapist helped them by encouraging them to confront each other, but conflict avoidance and suppressed feelings had been making things worse. Early attempts at openness didn’t go smoothly. The band members were passive-aggressive or leaned on more destructive kinds of conflict. They needed to learn how to have a “good fight.”

One way to make criticism more productive is to simply share that you have high expectations of the other person, and ones that you know they can reach. That allows them to see the criticism as a form of coaching instead of judgment. Signaling that the feedback comes from a place of care, while separating

what you're saying from why you're saying it, can also make the other person more receptive. It's this undercurrent of love or care that makes it easier for the other person to hear something that might otherwise feel difficult.

"Compliment sandwiches" don't tend to work because the criticism gets lost or the person doesn't take the compliments seriously. The alternative is what Grant calls an "open-faced sandwich," which contains both the positive and the negative. What's most important is to be clear and kind. Avoidance is actually more painful than the initial pain of clear communication. Kindness and clarity must carry equal weight.

Ironically, conflict can be harder to navigate with companions than with anyone else. When we try to keep the peace, we can get resentful and eventually blow up. The care we feel for the person is what makes us want to avoid the conflict in the first place—and it's what makes the problem worse when we do.

It's also possible to change the way we fight with someone. "Good friction rituals don't just lighten the mood—they reinforce that we're on a shared wavelength." Sometimes, waiting or scheduling a time to address something can be better than bringing it up in the heat of the moment.

In heated moments, we often rely on the ladder of inference. We see someone do something and assume it means something, leading us to conclusions built on faulty premises. We tend not to assume good intent. Rather than accusing the person of something, ask open questions to understand their perspective. This stops us from making false assumptions and makes it easier to communicate through a conflict. The goal isn't necessarily to agree but to understand one another and each other's points of view.

It took time, but the members of Metallica eventually learned how to confront each other constructively. They learned that conflict wasn't something to avoid, so long as it brings them closer together rather than drives them further apart.

PART 3:

SCALING CONNECTION:

THE ROOTS OF GROUP SOLIDARITY

Interpersonal dynamics become more complicated when the group is larger than two. In a group of three, there's always at least one person who can be talked about or ganged up against, and a larger group makes people less likely to share secrets and bond. Studies have found that two siblings are closer than three, and similar dynamics play out in teams of any kind—from workplaces to sports teams. When there are more people involved, both coordination and motivation become more challenging. It's harder to get everyone on the same page and ensure that each person feels equally responsible for the outcome.

Despite these challenges, groups are essential to our well-being. We need community to counteract feelings of isolation. Groups give people a sense of belonging and meaning. They can also give rise to collective effervescence, "the energy and harmony we find in group interaction rituals with a shared purpose," generating both joy and hope. Collective effervescence can cause heart rates to synchronize, flooding us with endorphins and oxytocin. It creates a "feeling of oneness with the group."

Being part of a group has numerous positive side effects, and they can lead you to meet even more people. The problem is that in the U.S., people are engaging in activities alone more frequently. "Our social circles used to look like interwoven webs. Now they look more like bicycle wheels with a hub and spokes—many of the people in our lives don't know each other." Reversing that, in Grant's view, matters enormously, both for individuals and society.

7. PLANNED SERENDIPITY:

HOW TO CHOREOGRAPH A GATHERING

Jeff Zaslow was an advice columnist for *The Wall Street Journal* and, for many years, hosted highly successful singles parties where countless people found love. Some people may think that simply attending a party or gathering is enough to create the conditions for a serendipitous meeting, but for people like Zaslow, the scene was carefully designed. He arranged entertainment to foster shared experiences, created icebreakers, and introduced measures to make it easier for strangers to approach one another. "Effective meetups bring us closer through choreography. Skilled hosts arrange a sequence of movements that enable connection. That's not about social engineering—it's about creating the conditions in which serendipity is more likely. The interactions aren't scripted, but the stage is set."

Such gatherings succeed when they have both a purpose and a plan. Purposes include bonding, learning, creating, and deciding. "The purpose comes to life when rituals are designed to address shared needs, goals, interests, or values." This works for people who know each other, such as friends coming together for an "admin night." But, if people are strangers or acquaintances, more structure is required. Even at a mixer or networking event, attendees tend to gravitate toward the people they already know.

Overcoming this tendency requires intention. Curating connections or using seating purposefully can help create scaffolding that guides people, making it clear how they should act and easier to do so. A host can also help facilitate. One study found that encouraging a shy person to speak up can be as simple as making eye contact with them. Structure can also prevent one person from dominating conversations by requiring consensus or doing a round robin.

Another effective tool is creating a pause between conversations. Giving people a moment to gather their thoughts before a discussion can unlock a level of comfort and vulnerability that

open group settings might otherwise inhibit. Grant experienced this firsthand at a retreat where participants answered a journaling prompt before sharing with the group. Having time to reflect first made the difference.

The vibe of a gathering can be measured by attendees' level of FOMO—fear of missing out—on the next one, or their level of ROMO—regret of missing out—on the previous one. With a purpose, a plan, and the right structures in place, anyone can create a great gathering, even an introvert. When they're done well, gatherings don't just fill an evening; they forge bonds.

8. UNITY THROUGH DIVISION:

CRAFTING COMMUNITIES WITHIN COMMUNITIES

In 2003, the student community of a middle school in Southern California was facing a great amount of division. Instead of trying to build bridges, the principal tried something completely different: separating the students. He created four different houses, similar to Hogwarts in Harry Potter, and divided both students and teachers into them, fostering belonging through house logos, merch, and a yearlong competition in which the different houses vied for a cup. After two years, the vibe in the school completely shifted. Fighting decreased, test scores improved, and connections flourished. “The best way to unite people is not always to combine them into one group. It’s often to divide them into distinct groups with shared goals.”

Communities are groups of people from a shared place or with a common purpose; however, being a part of numerous communities doesn’t automatically guarantee a sense of belonging. Each of us also feels a competing pull to exercise our individuality. To satisfy both urges, humans tend to find niches, which offer “optimal distinctiveness,” a balance between fitting in within a group and standing out in a community.

What made the house system work was that it gave students that niche, and each house was optimally distinct from the others. Belonging to a house fostered connections between students who may not otherwise have interacted, while strengthening a sense of belonging to the school.

Optimal distinctiveness is also about having a unique role. Feeling needed is a better driver of belonging than simply being included. Many rituals that are intended to help create a sense of belonging—like school orientations or onboarding at jobs—fall short. Another effective approach used by some colleges is having incoming freshmen read letters from older students sharing their own fears and challenges about fitting in. Feeling less alone made them more likely to seek out groups and get

involved. But, the right structures also need to be in place, such as third places, where people can connect with others and find their niche.

“In communities, people feel solidarity with insiders but no animosity toward outsiders. In cliques and tribes, people are antagonistic toward outsiders.” The Olympics illustrate this. Watching on TV at home, people tend to be more antagonistic toward competitors from other countries. Watching live, alongside people from all over the world, that changes. Attendees feel not just allegiance to their own country but part of a bigger community of sports fans.

Belonging to a sub-group does not preclude belonging to a larger one. In fact, it can strengthen it. The sub-groups just need to feel special—not superior—to the others. That’s what Hogwarts got wrong. By grouping people by similarity, it created tribes. Cross-sections work better, which is what allowed the experiment at the Southern California middle school to succeed. Students were intentionally mixed, given their house shirt before the school year began to seed belonging, and brought together across the houses through collaborative events. “Belonging is not only about fitting in—it’s also about standing out. That happens when we find our place in a distinct group, which has a distinct purpose in a community.”

9. ALL FOR ONE:

GETTING SQUADS IN SYNC

Grant was hired to help build unity among the players of the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team. He quickly noticed a tension between veteran and newer players that everyone was aware of but not addressing.

While people may believe that they need to like each other to succeed, research shows that commitment to purpose is more important. A shared goal is enough. "They don't have to bond as a squad—they just need to bond to the squad." This is what Grant set out to do.

In a squad, each person is chosen for their skills and brought together to achieve a common goal. Most efforts to bond squads socially tend to fail, such as organizing social events or having open-plan offices. On the other hand, getting too close can also backfire, causing people to prioritize their relationships over the task at hand. The sweet spot is alliance—working together in pursuit of shared goals rather than prioritizing shared opinions.

The content of the shared goal matters less than the fact of having one. It's about using a shared purpose to create a culture and align on values. "Culture is a codebook for how a squad pursues its purpose. Building a strong culture begins with aligning around core values. ... Values make a difference when they meet three conditions: express the principles we hold dear, translate into specific behaviors, and come with accountability for living them."

To do this with the women's soccer team, Grant surveyed all the players on their values and quickly discovered a lot of overlap. The players narrowed down the list to their most important values, created shared definitions, and used anecdotes to ground each value in specific behaviors, including what it might look like to violate them. This ensured alignment and created the basis for accountability.

Different squad cultures suit different situations. Among firefighters, companion cultures proved safer, while pal cultures were quicker. Each was strong in different ways. The longer a squad works together, the more personal bonds may help. For those on short rotations, such as at a restaurant or for an airline, being allies may be enough.

Accountability is what turns values from words into culture. An esports platform dealing with toxic player behavior tried different accountability interventions and found that immediate feedback after an offense prompted most players to reform. People tend to justify bad behavior as a one-off rather than a reflection of their character. Having it reflected back to them in the moment makes it harder to justify.

Consequences matter, too. At a law firm where partners regularly hazed junior associates, the solution was structural: The lowest-ranked partners were given the last pick of junior associates. Adding a reputational cost to bad behavior was enough to change it. Even when you can't control the incentives directly, making someone's behavior visible and naming what they're known for creates its own form of accountability.

"The most effective leaders are prototypical of the group and prosocial toward the group. Prototypicality is about exemplifying the squad's core principles, and prosociality is about putting the collective purpose above personal interests. The net effect is often a team identity shift from us vs. them to all for one." With values and behaviors established, the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team needed accountability. They identified the most prototypical and prosocial player and named her captain of the team. She held the older players accountable while energizing the younger players, raising the expectation that everyone should live up to what they'd agreed. The team improved—not by minimizing their differences but by directing them toward a common purpose.

10. EVERYTHING IS RELATIVE:

FORMING AND REFORMING FAMILY TRADITIONS

Family traditions don't have to be limited to the family you're born into. Jamal Hinton and Wanda Dench met by accident, when Dench mistakenly texted a stranger thinking she was inviting her grandson for Thanksgiving. Even after Hinton corrected the error, Dench invited him to her house. They have kept this up over the past decade, spending various holidays together and building a bond neither of them expected. What their story shows is that closeness doesn't require blood ties or consistent routines; it requires committing to creating and sustaining meaningful rituals—preserving old traditions and willing to create new ones.

Traditions are different from routines. While they recur, they're flexible and don't need to happen at fixed intervals. Meaning matters more than frequency or consistency. Traditions help create a sense of identity for a family, whether biological or chosen, and they have lasting effects. "The bond outlives the tradition: Nostalgia motivates families to reminisce, which brings them closer and motivates the next generation to continue traditions, augmenting their significance. Anticipating, participating, and remembering traditions together signals and strengthens our sense of family as an important, unique unit."

Buy-in matters, though. If a tradition doesn't feel meaningful to everyone involved, it can create distance rather than closeness. Particularly as children get older, traditions may need to evolve. Maintaining connection requires adaptability, updating how the family bonds as circumstances require.

Eating together is one straightforward way to strengthen bonds and increase well-being. It allows family members to develop inside jokes and their own vocabulary, and it decreases the cost of conflict. The frequency, however, matters less than the intention. Not every family can eat together regularly, and that's fine. A weekly meal done with care outweighs a daily one done out of habit.

The key is that traditions evolve. Grant's own family started with a weekly question: "Who did you help this week?" As the kids got older, they altered the question to keep it meaningful, adding reflections on recent mistakes and what they learned from them. Traditions that stay static go stale; ones that adapt with the family keep doing their work.

Research supports the value of this kind of storytelling. The more children know about their family history and stories, the greater their well-being becomes. It gives them a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves. "Families are more cohesive and adaptable when they balance dreaming about tomorrow with reminiscing about yesterday."

Traditions can go beyond the dinner table, helping families build resilience, cope with challenging times, or simply bring joy. Reflecting on the past or asking new members of the family to share their favorite traditions can reinvigorate a family's sense of itself. Time spent with extended family matters, too. The Fischer family has created something called Cousin Camp, where they invite all of their grandchildren to stay for a long weekend each summer. The mix of meals and activities lets them bond across ages and in different ways. Cousins occupy a particular niche because "they offer familiarity without friction and bonds without baggage."

Family traditions don't have to span the whole family either. One-on-one time can matter just as much. Individual relationships between parents and each of their children, as well as the relationships between siblings, have their own distinct value. The connection between both parents sets the tone for the family's bond as a whole.

That's not an argument for couples to be everything to each other; it's quite the opposite. Relying on a partner for all emotional needs puts the relationship under strain. Having other people to rely on in your life, accepting that your partner won't always be in sync with you, and investing in the relationship itself all make a family more resilient when challenges arise.

As people have fewer children, family trees are changing shape. Immediate and extended family may be less available than they once were, making it more important to stay open to chosen families. “If we live far away from the friends and relatives we see as family, the majority of our gatherings may already be behind us. Establishing and evolving traditions is how we stay connected in our scarce time together.”

EPILOGUE

Fears about technology and its impact on human connection are nothing new. Every new solution introduces new problems, and we need to be thoughtful about how we adapt. AI can both build connections and create unintended consequences. One of the risks it presents is that it smooths over interactions, making hard conversations easier to avoid and gradually eroding our ability to have them at all. Knowing how to cope with uncertainty, complexity, and conflict is not just a social skill; it's central to connection itself.

The deeper concern is that as chatbots get better at simulating empathy and understanding, people may come to prefer them over the messiness of human interaction. "There are growing concerns that much like social media hijacked our attention, AI is hijacking our attachments." We can't be on the same wavelength as a machine. The interaction isn't real, and neither is the relationship. Humans are harder to interact with, but that difficulty is the point. Relationships have meaning precisely because of the effort required to build them.

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