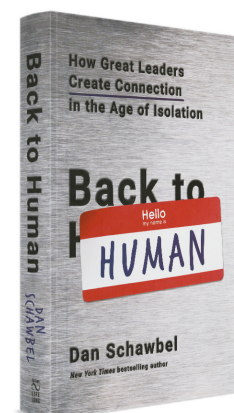


Back to Human

How Great Leaders Create Connection in the Age of Isolation

by **Dan Schawbel**



Contents

Part I: Master Self-Connection

Page 2

Practice Shared Learning

Page 3

Part II: Create Team Connection

Page 4

Reward Through Recognition

Page 5

Part III: Build Organizational Connection

Page 6

Lead With Empathy

Page 7

Improve Employee Experiences

Page 8

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

The next generation of leaders must create a workplace where teammates feel genuinely connected, engaged, and empowered—without relying on technology. Based on Dan Schawbel's exclusive research studies, featuring the perspectives of over 2,000 managers and employees across different age groups, *Back to Human* reveals why virtual communication, though vital and useful, actually contributes to a stronger sense of isolation at work than ever before. How can we change this culture?

Back to Human explains how a more socially connected workforce creates greater fulfillment, productivity, and engagement while preventing burnout and turnover. Schawbel shares exercises, examples, and activities, which readers can work on individually or as a team, that will help them increase personal productivity, be more collaborative, and become more fulfilled at work.

Back to Human ultimately helps you decide when and how to use technology to build better connections in your work life. It is a call to action to leaders across the world to make the workplace a better experience for all of us.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- To use technology in ways that increase connection rather than fuel isolation.
- To connect by promoting diverse ideas and embracing open collaboration.
- Why it is so important to hire for personality—and how to do it right.

How Technology Is Isolating Us at Work

Modern technologies have impacted our workplaces in ways that would have been impossible just a decade ago. Instant messaging, digital platforms, and videoconferencing have completely changed how, when, and where we work.

A Gallup survey found that over a third of the entire US workforce has worked remotely. Robotics and artificial intelligence have supercharged our productivity at the cost of replacing tasks and even eliminating full-time jobs from our economy.

Our devices offer many incredible benefits, including real-time interactions, efficiencies in workflow, creation of new ideas, and access to resources. At the same time, those devices have disrupted our relationships and made our workplaces more dysfunctional. Instead of strong bonds, we have weak ties. Instead of productive meetings, we have distractions.

Technology has created an illusion that today's workers are highly connected to one another, when in reality most feel isolated from their colleagues.

What they crave most—and what research increasingly shows to be the hallmark of the highest performing workplace cultures—is a sense of authentic connection with others.

Deeper Relationships Build Commitment at Work

To be fulfilled at work, committed to our teams, and happy, we need to focus on building deeper relationships with the people around us.

A few researchers have studied the correlation between the loneliness that isolated employees feel and their commitment to their teams. The consensus is that having work friends and team camaraderie can make a huge difference when it comes to job performance, loyalty to the employer, and employees' overall well-being.

It's possible to address the hidden emotional need that makes us more human and less machine, not by discounting technology altogether but by using it to propel your career.

When you master self-connection, promote team connection, and build organizational connection, you can be the leader your organization desperately needs while providing greater fulfillment for you and those you connect with.

Focus on Fulfillment

Regardless of our age, gender, or ethnic background, we all share the basic human needs to connect deeply with others, to feel loved, and to matter. By meeting these needs, we will be happier and more fulfilled and thus more productive and successful in our teams. Being a leader is about creating fulfillment for yourself and your team, and when you do, the true magic at work occurs.

The Five Characteristics of Personal Fulfillment

There are several key factors you need to focus on to ensure that you're living a happy, well-balanced, and meaningful life:

Connection: A strong connection to your teammates makes work more meaningful and enjoyable. The lack of it makes work feel like a chore and creates the silos that eliminate creativity and innovation.

Values: If one of your values is authenticity, create and support a transparent and honest culture in your team. Your values are reflected in your actions, so the more you demonstrate them, the more you internalize them.

Purpose: Think hard about your personal story up until right now and about the thread that connects the decisions you've made.

Openness: Many people fear change because it is unpredictable. But as a leader you need to be open to it. Instead of keeping company secrets, confide in your team so that you can build trust. Being open is also about expressing your true feelings instead of holding back.

Accomplishment. This is not only something we desire but also the emotional feeling we have when something is finished. If you want to be more accomplished, set more goals and make sure they're attainable.

Begin by focusing on your own fulfillment. When you feel fulfilled, you naturally have a positive attitude and a clearer direction for what you're working on.

- What do you enjoy doing the most?
- What do your past accomplishments tell you about your strengths?
- What are your core values (i.e., adventure, challenge, contribution, respect)?

Today, text messages and emails are competing for our time with human connections, and the technology is winning big-time.

- What brings out your most positive feelings and emotions?
- Where do you envision yourself in the future, and why?

Optimize Your Productivity

Today, text messages and emails are competing for our time with human connections, and the technology is winning big-time. Several studies show that the average office worker receives more than one hundred emails per day.

Relying too much on technology inhibits our ability to connect and get things done. That said, used appropriately, technology can be our greatest ally. There are several key ways to use technology to bring us together so we can get our work done in the quickest, most efficient way possible.

For example, use a conference room-booking system to lock in a time and place for your team to talk about an important project or facilitate a one-on-one catch-up meeting. Or you can use search engines to quickly answer basic questions. That will save you and your team from having long, unnecessary discussions about them. Use videoconferencing to connect remote employees so they get to see one another even though they aren't physically with the rest of the team.

Three Actions to Optimize Productivity

Technology undermines our productivity in significant—and insidious—ways. Following are three ideas on how to curb that problem.

Procrastinate less. Whenever you're working on a project, it's always helpful to break it down into smaller tasks. When you do that, the overall project becomes less daunting and more manageable, which makes it harder to procrastinate.

Resist perfectionism. Perfectionism is a weakness disguised as a strength. We think that being perfect will enable us to be more productive and successful at work, yet striving for it depletes our time, causes anxiety, and makes us unhappy. Perfectionism doesn't work in the fast-paced, always-on world that we live in. If you move slowly at work, another worker who's willing to work

smarter and faster will replace you.

Stop multitasking. Dozens of neuroscience research studies prove that our brains don't do tasks simultaneously. Instead, we jump from task to task rapidly. When we shift from the conference call to the status update to the email, there's a stop-and-start process in our brains that causes a momentary lag between steps when nothing happens at all.

The best way to keep from wasting a bunch of time trying to multitask is to become an expert at prioritizing your workload so you're always focused on the right project at the right time instead of on multiple projects all at once. Start by not saying yes to everything people ask of you, because there is truly no way to manage everything at the same time. Instead, focus on what's most important, and delegate the rest to your teammates.

Practice Shared Learning

If you care about your team's success, you need to become a shared learner who is open to giving your teammates the knowledge they need when you receive it. At the same time, you need to be just as open to learning from your teammates. This free flow of information is good for everyone—and for business. By collaborating with your team, sharing what you know with them, and learning from them, you'll all acquire information more quickly, retain it better, and be able to apply it in new ways.

When you're actively helping your teammates, you become a role model for how they can better learn and support one another. The following is a list of recommendations for creating a culture of shared learning.

Ask for and give feedback. By giving your employees regular feedback and then soliciting theirs, you'll create an environment in which it's acceptable to both criticize and compliment, and you'll facilitate invaluable conversations that will benefit everyone.

Track accomplishments. Take a hard look at what you and your team have done over the past several months, and examine the actual business results of your activities. Think about the team's accomplishments and employees' indi-

vidual ones. By identifying gaps and weak points, you can create a learning ecosystem that will support everyone.

Be flexible. Be flexible with how you share new material. Having a proper mix of face-to-face meetings, videoconferencing, email, and social media can support everyone's needs.

Have a positive attitude. Push your ego aside, and get excited about improving the lives of those around you. When you're in shared learning discussions, encourage—and embrace—criticism, because that's how you'll get the most honest feedback possible. When you hire for your team, look for those who have a positive attitude about helping others, and be wary of those who seem to be focused on becoming the next CEO.

Promote the expertise of others. Everyone has their own unique skills and can be a teacher, not just a learner. Over time the interactions you have with your teammates and the actual work they produce will let you know what their strengths and weaknesses are. Pay special attention to what they're good at, and when you see an opportunity for them to help, bring them in.

PART II: CREATE TEAM CONNECTION

Promote Diverse Ideas

Not long ago, when people talked about diversity they were referring to a number of visible demographic attributes, such as race, ethnicity, age, and sex. After a while the definition of diversity expanded to include less visible attributes such as sexuality, religion, and even educational attainment. Today diversity has become even broader and now includes intangible characteristics such as upbringing, socioeconomic status, life experiences, and worldviews.

It would be impossible to create a workforce made up of a perfect, mathematical representation of every conceivable demographic. That said, there's one type of diversity that is achievable. In a global study, four thousand young workers were asked about the type of workplace diversity they value the most, and they didn't say gender, age, religion, or ethnicity. Instead, they said, "diverse points of view." This can be called diverse ideas. Focusing on people's experiences, mindsets, and viewpoints effectively incorporates diversity in all its forms.

How to Effectively Manage Diversity

We can all do a better job of incorporating the ideas of others and making people feel more comfortable at work.

Hire unconventional candidates. To get the right level of diversity in your team, you must change your hiring criteria. Don't just look at candidates' accomplishments and where they went to school. Ask about their passions, who and what most influenced them, and their interests outside of work.

Understand individual needs. Instead of just observing your team from a distance, set up one-on-one, in-person meetings to get to know your teammates better. Don't bother texting or instant messaging them; that won't give you a sense of their emotions, views, and creativity. You need to get to know the people you work with and their habits so you can lead them in the most effective way.

Create a safe space. Having a safe environment in which people feel comfortable interacting and sharing their perspectives is what makes a team successful and more productive than others. Those feelings of safety and security reduce employees' stress and encourage them to share their ideas instead of keeping them to themselves.

Encourage people to share their ideas. Successful leaders around the world do this in a variety of ways. Patricia Rollins, senior director of marketing at CA, dedicates a few minutes of every team call to thinking through what's working and what's not. "I encourage one 'get fired' idea (something that's really out-of-the-box thinking) to help transform our roles. I then assign a lead to that idea to get it executed."

Embrace Open Collaboration

How we collaborate and network within our teams has evolved over the past decade, and we now rely to a much greater extent on technology for both activities. Today, you can have a videoconference with teammates and co-workers in a dozen different countries without even leaving your office (or bedroom, for that matter).

As an employee, you can work at home, at a coffee shop, or even on a plane or in some other vehicle. As an employer, giving your employees a choice of where and how to work is critical to ensuring that they're comfortable, feel supported, and are in a creative environment. Research shows that a growing percentage of workers are willing to make less money in exchange for this flexibility. The most successful leaders of the future will embrace flexibility.

Although working remotely gives us freedom of choice, it also tends to separate us from the relationships that make businesses function properly. When you don't have true hu-

man interaction, you lose some of the humanity that makes collaboration meaningful, fun, and exciting. One study in the *Harvard Business Review* found that the most productive and innovative teams had leaders who were both task and relationship oriented.

Leaders who focus only on results will be ineffective if they disregard the relationships that are required to achieve those results. In-person relationships are much stronger than virtual ones.

Promote a Culture of Open Communication in Your Team

Here are some ways to promote a culture of open communication in your team.

Make everyone on your team commit to being open and accessible. The best way to do this is to set ground rules up front for people to agree on. For instance, if you have an office, you should have an open-door policy that encourages any team member to stop by and share an idea or issue without repercussions.

Champion real-time feedback. Research shows that employees (especially younger ones) want feedback regularly and are too impatient to wait a year for a performance review. Get your team comfortable with providing much more frequent feedback. This starts with you. If one of your teammates shares a new idea in a meeting in an off-putting tone, talk to him afterward and explain that although the idea was great, there are better ways of communicating it.

Share your to-do list. Although you may think you should keep your tasks and goals to yourself, sharing them actually increases the chances that you'll accomplish them. When your co-workers know what you're working on and what your priorities are, they'll be much more likely to help you accomplish them. You can all hold yourselves (and one another) accountable by sharing your daily or weekly to-do lists.

Reward Through Recognition

Personal recognition can not only make team members want to work harder for you and stay at your company longer; it can also create a lasting positive memory in their minds. Although many leaders don't offer much feedback or recognition, doing so can have significant individual, team, and company-wide benefits.

Employees who say that they're consistently recognized at work in ways that are meaningful to them are 11 times more likely to spend their careers with one company and seven times more likely to be completely satisfied in their jobs. Organizations that have formal recognition programs have six times greater operating margins and employees with the highest engagement levels.

Throughout your day, there are countless opportunities to compliment your teammates, and that can make all the difference in their work experience and satisfaction. You can compliment them in the moment, during a meeting, in passing, virtually, or in a formal review.

In-person relationships are much stronger than virtual ones.

Ask Your Team Members How (and When) They'd Like to Be Recognized

There are various ways to recognize your employees. Obviously not all of them will resonate with everyone. Some people, such as Katie Vachon, merchandise manager of women's apparel at Puma, will prefer public recognition in front of their peers (or a larger group), whereas others, like Chris Gumiela, vice president of marketing and advertising at MGM National Harbor, prefer a private pat on the back.

The best way to figure out how to maximize the effectiveness of your recognition—and which approach will work best—is to simply ask.

But be prepared for some pretty honest answers, such as this one from Sam Howe, director of business development at MSLGROUP. "I think there is a tendency among older generations to treat millennials like we are kindergarteners, and they offer us ice cream socials and pizza for our hard work," he said.

"Now, I am for ice cream and pizza as much as the next guy, but I would like to be recognized at work, as often as earned, by being given more advanced titles (and associated compensation), responsibilities and influence. In essence, we should be rewarded by being given a voice and seat at

the proverbial leadership table. And by being treated like adults, not a Trophy Generation to be placated.”

Also, don't underestimate the value of a personal touch. Because we spend so much time online, it's super easy to shoot off a tweet, post something to Facebook or the company website or newsletter, or send an email blast. And while that type of praise is nice, in-person, face-to-face interaction is far more effective.

PART III: BUILD ORGANIZATIONAL CONNECTION

Hire for Personality

Because the pace of business is constantly speeding up and companies are always looking for ways to save money, many have looked to technology to lower the cost of recruiting talent and increase the number of people they can reach.

While these companies tout how much money they're saving by doing their interviewing by phone or video, they don't seem to realize that neither of those approaches can ever replace in-person interviews, in which you actually meet people, see their body language, and observe how they handle themselves. Those approaches are missing the critical emotional connections and personality traits that will help you hire the best possible candidate, who will stay with you longer.

Because relationships are the cornerstone to a healthy workplace, shouldn't we put more emphasis on personality when recruiting new employees? It's challenging to work with someone we don't like, but it's exciting to work with someone who has a great personality that meshes well with our own. Hard skills are important, but they can be learned on the job. It's the soft, intangible skills that are so valuable to creating a team that thrives. They're also the ones that technology has a difficult time assessing.

Five Personality Traits to Look for in a New Hire

When you're hiring for your team, there are five personality traits that you should look for. You'll be able to screen for each by paying close attention to the answers you get to a number of key, strategic questions.

Confidence. If you're not confident, you're less likely to share new ideas, stand up for what you believe in, and perform at your best. When you're confident, you know what you're doing and how to convey your knowledge to others.

Ask candidates, “What was an obstacle you overcame in a

previous job?” The answer to this question lets you know about the candidate's ability to push through failure and the challenges that naturally happen in any work situation.

Attitude. You want to hire employees who have a positive attitude because they tend to boost the morale of everyone around them and encourage and motivate their team members to perform better. Ask candidates, “When have you admitted to your teammate(s) that you made a mistake, and how did you manage it?” Candidates with a positive attitude will hold themselves accountable and tend not to make excuses or point a finger at others.

Professionalism. The most obvious signs of professionalism are punctuality at the interview (or being early) and the candidate's basic manners. Ask candidates, “Give me an example of a situation in which you had a conflict with a team member, and tell how you handled yourself.” The answer to this question will give you a sense of how candidates handle their emotions during a tough situation.

Likability. In the workplace, likable people somehow manage to bring out the best version of you. Also, they have an incredible competitive advantage because they tend to get promoted more quickly (managers tend to promote people they like over those they don't) and build strong relationships with others, which leads to new opportunities. Ask candidates, “Who has been a great mentor to you, and how was that manifested?” The answer to this question will give you some clues about candidates' relationships with others. Likable candidates typically attract better mentors and describe those relationships in a more positive way.

Curiosity. People who are curious about their own potential and are willing to try new tasks and roles are better able to adapt to change, challenge themselves, and grow as team members. Ask candidates, “Do you have any questions about the position or the company?” Candidates need to impress you, just as you need to impress them. People who don't ask good questions—or any at all—won't be the type of employees you want because they won't push the boundaries or challenge the status quo.

Engage to Retain

According to Gallup, about two-thirds of employees are disengaged at work. Part of the problem is that all that technology—the very things that are supposed to connect us to our teammates—often ends up making us feel even lonelier. Another part of the problem is the rise in remote

Empathy is the most important ingredient in successful, long-term relationships with your teammates, family, and friends.

work, which despite the best of intentions, contributes to a culture of social isolation. And in social isolation, both strong personal relationships and corporate culture suffer.

The Four Ways to Promote Employee Engagement

Countless research studies and conversations with leaders across a variety of businesses show that employee engagement comes down to four factors: happiness, belonging, purpose, and trust. As a leader, if you can nurture these factors, you'll significantly increase the likelihood that your teammates will stay productive, fulfilled, and committed to your goals.

Spread more happiness. Have a serious conversation about work-life balance to show employees that you care about their personal lives and not just their work performance. Do a random act of kindness, like ordering lunch for everyone on a day other than Friday, to show that you care about them. Spend time with your employees, get to know them better, and ask how you can create a better work experience for them.

Create a sense of belonging. Promote belongingness by scheduling social events, having team lunches, and creating an environment in which people feel safe to share information about their personal lives. Hold more meetings that include your whole team so that all feel their voices are being heard and their needs are being met.

Connect purpose to the work. Bring in a customer who has been personally affected by your team's work so that your employees can hear and see the impact of their efforts. Don't just assign work; make sure your teammates know why they're doing it and how it will be used to support your organization, your customers, or even the world. Have employees share their accomplishments and the sense of purpose they feel when they come to work every day. This will help identify shared purpose and goals.

Establish and maintain trust. Be transparent with your team, letting them know what's really on your mind and keeping corporate speak to a minimum. Admit your

mistakes. That makes you seem more human and trustworthy and will make it easier for others to admit their own mistakes. Keep your promises so that people know they can always count on you.

Lead With Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand someone's feelings as if they were our own—in many cases because we've actually had them. Empathy is the most important ingredient in successful, long-term relationships with your teammates, family, and friends.

MIT professor Sherry Turkle explains that technology prevents us from learning how to be empathetic. "It's not some silly causal effect, that if you text you have less empathy; it's that you're not getting practice in the stuff that gives you empathy."

Turkle says that when you apologize face-to-face, you see the other person's body language and potential tears, and you know how upset she is. And the other person gets to see, from your body language and facial expressions, that you have genuine compassion and are truly sorry.

Becoming an Empathetic Leader

To train yourself in how to lead with empathy, take small steps. Set aside time to speak to one of your teammates, and at the beginning of the conversation, just ask how they're feeling. This is an easy, low-stress, direct way of starting an emotional conversation.

There's a big difference between asking, "How are you doing?" and "How are you feeling?" The word *feeling* elicits emotion, whereas *doing* is more activity based. Your goal is to get closer to being open instead of using technology to check in.

If you aren't comfortable with the word *feeling*, that's okay. The point is to ask questions that elicit honest answers—questions that can't be answered, "Fine." If the individual is not interested in engaging in empathetic conversations, whether they're about sexual harassment or death in the family, don't push the issue. But if employees decide to open up to you, listen wholeheartedly.

Improve Employee Experiences

The employee experience is the sum of all the interactions that affect employees' cognition, behaviors, and feelings. Their experience includes conversations with their teammates, the physical space they occupy every day, the nature of the work they do, and their observations throughout their journey at your company. It's how they feel about their workplace, their jobs, their teammates, and their bosses.

The Three Dimensions of Employee Experience: Culture, Relationships, Space

When thinking about the different touch points we have with our teammates, we need to focus on three dimensions. You can control various levers in each dimension in a way that will affect how your employees feel, but over time things must be set up to run without your having to be involved.

Culture. These are the unwritten rules of how teammates work together to accomplish goals and the glue that creates a cohesive, well-oiled team. Culture is made up of many elements, including core values, empathy, community, work ethic, language, symbols, systems, ethics, and rituals.

Relationships. This is a critical part of employee experience because people connect emotionally with other humans much more than they do with a logo, a brand, or a product. If you treat your employees unfairly or you have a toxic employee who aggravates everyone else, the good people on your team are going to leave—and you shouldn't blame them.

The best leaders and companies are the ones that create a family-like environment. They know that when you care about others' success, you create a strong emotional connection.

Space. Physical space is key to creativity, collaboration, and wellness at work. Space enforces and reinforces your culture every single day. Although your company controls the light switches and layout, employees should be able to decide how to personalize their cubicles or offices. If you don't get space right, another company will.

In the not-too-distant future, robots may bring you your morning coffee and brush your teeth for you, but you'll still have a heart, a soul, and a mind—and so will the people who work for and with you. The essential qualities that you'll need to be an effective leader, such as empathy, openness, and vision, can't be outsourced to machines. For that reason, as leaders we need to get back to human and become the masters of technology instead of the other way around.

So, put your phone down, turn off your notifications, and get offline. There's no going back in time, but there is going back to human. Make every interaction count every day, every hour, and every minute.

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