

WHY BEING 'LONELY AT THE TOP' ISN'T GOOD FOR YOU, OR FOR BUSINESS

by Glenn Williams



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Our careers, and lives, are a culmination of many choices that when added up over time, create our life's trajectory. Not many people start out their career planning to make some of the choices and sacrifices they have to achieve success. Often it is only when they get to their desired destination that they look back at what their success has cost. Most often, it's important relationships. And these are not always easy to restore.

Leaders are no more exempt from loneliness and isolation than others, in fact the inverse is often true. For many executive leaders there is a decline in the quality of their social connections as their responsibilities increase. The more your role requires from you, the perception is that something else must give. It's tempting to sacrifice investing in key relationships to meet pressing organizational deadlines or business goals, but over time, those sacrifices can undermine a leader's capacity for sustainable success. Why? Because leadership never occurs in isolation; it is always in the context of relationships.

"Meeting human needs is the premise of effective leadership."

Effectively managing up and down, increasing staff engagement, empowering collaboration, and building organizational trust is fostered through quality relationships. Your ability to cultivate meaningful relationships has a direct impact on your work performance and as a result, your business outcomes.

Quality relationships are good for business

Research into loneliness and work performance found that loneliness "undermines individual performance, team performance and a sense of connection between employees and their organization"².

The evidence for quality relationships positively impacting your health and wellbeing is vast. Governments, organizations, and psychologists are aligned in their advocacy for and support of people building strong support systems as protective factors against stress, burnout, and declining mental and physical health.

When 268 men took part in a [75-year longitudinal study](#) by Harvard University measuring optimum health and potential, the most successful were those who invested in relationships.

Global analytics company Gallup found that those with close friendships "are more engaged, produce higher quality work and have a higher state of well-being"³.

Meaningful relationships and business success are not mutually exclusive; they impact each other. How often do we bring our work stresses into our personal lives, projecting the frustrations of the job onto key

relationships? Or conversely, how breakdowns and loss in our personal relationships impact our work performance - our focus, energy, and capacity to relate to colleagues or stakeholders? How you navigate relationships in your own personal life translates into your ability and capacity to foster a culture of connectedness within your organization.

"To neglect the relational component is to neglect the higher order needs... for both leaders and followers."¹

Intentionally investing in meaningful relationships fills up your relational tank which is important when stress, loss, failure, and feelings of isolation show up in your life. Throughout your leadership journey, you can lean on and draw from the investments you've made into those key relationships. More than just a buffer against hardship, quality relationships are an anchor that keeps you grounded amidst the ever-changing organizational landscape.

What's the bottom line?

Relationships are a great source of energy, motivation, and support - a resource you can draw on for achieving your goals. Here are some questions worth reflecting on:

- Which relationships energize you and motivate you to pursue your goals?
- Who do you need to surround yourself with that can encourage you and spur you on to achieve success in every part of your life?

References

¹ Martin, R. (2013). Relationship as a Core of Effective Leadership. *Low Intensity Conflict & Law Enforcement*. 13. 76.

² Ozcelik, H., & Barsade, S. (2011). Work loneliness and employee performance. *Academy of Management Proceedings*. 2011. 1-6.

³ Rath, T., & Harter, J. (2010). Your Friends and Your Social Well-Being.
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