

How to be a little smarter in relating to our families, our friends, and ourselves



Applying the Relationship Skills for Success formula in the holiday season Some key points from Dr David Fraser

The big family meal is over and everyone is sitting around making conversation and having a good time, or at least pretending they are. We're not really used to spending so long in each other's company and sometimes tensions rise to the surface and it feels a little awkward...

Toward the end of one year and the beginning of the next, many of us have time away from our work to spend with our families and friends; to reflect together on what went well and what could have been better in the year past; and to think about our hopes and aspirations for the year to come...

The Relationship Skills for Success formula applies just as much to these situations as it does to any other. The formula has stood the test of time over five or six years of development and been proven to cover a comprehensive set of steps for developing your resourcefulness and skill in relationships, wherever they arise.

If you're familiar with my work, you will already know that I developed the system of relationship skills by gathering together ideas from a number of sources. That "Relationship Formula" has 12 elements, which I sometimes call "Steps". Those elements are drawn from practical psychology, NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming), mindfulness training, experience of mediation and, well, life.

I've organised my suggestions for you here under the 12 headings of The Relationship Formula. Let's start with the first one now...

1. Attention to others

Zig Ziglar said, "You can get whatever you want in life if you help enough other people get what they want."

In another (topical) context, Scott Stratten, an authority on the use of Twitter for business said, "The less you make Twitter about you, the more you actually get out of it." Well, that's true of life and relationships as well.

This was a key learning for me: I used to think the best approach was to talk about what I wanted in parallel with working on what another person wanted. I have learned that's not the most effective approach – much better to focus on helping the other person get what they want first while being clear inwardly to ourselves about what we want. Then the other person will be likely to help us get what we want.

Do we consistently do this? Not really. Most of us grow up pushing for what we want, and indeed are encouraged to be like that, but there comes a time when we must shift our focus onto other people if we want to be successful and have good relationships at home.

Here's my specific suggestion...

Hone your awareness of whether your attention is on yourself and what matters to you, or whether it is on the ideas, interests, issues, questions and conversation of the person you are with. What's the split – 50:50, 60:40, 90:10? Which way?

Develop the capacity to place your attention 100% on the other person when you chose, even that family member you find a trial. You will gain great rewards. Among other things, you will be regarded as a great listener. Just try it and make up your own mind whether this works. You'll see.

How best to attend to others?

Asking good, open questions (what, where, when, how, who, which – avoid why, because it sounds judgmental) and keeping your opinions to yourself are the keys to success.

2. Attitude

The second element of the Relationship Skills for Success formula is "Attitude".

With the right approach, we can deal with the whole "attitude" issue in one go. A system of 12 principles from NLP is a great way to make sure our attitude is a resourceful one. I don't have space to cover all 12 here, so let's focus on six. For speed, I'll express them as behaviours to adopt. The issue here is not whether the underlying principles are universally "true" (whatever that means). The point is that experience shows that individuals who live these principles (when it's hard as well as when it's easy), get better professional results, have happier families and enjoy better relationships.

Here's the first one...

Respect others' views of the world

We all have a right to our own understanding of the world, though for all of us, that understanding is a limited map of the world itself. Things will go best for us when we respect others' maps of the world. We don't have to agree with them, just respect them. Accept also that our map of the world is a very incomplete understanding of the world itself.

Take responsibility for the effect of your communication

When we chose to own what happens after we say something or omit to say something, and then do something about those consequences, we will build better relationships over time. Don't say "you've missed the point." Instead accept responsibility with "I can't have been sufficiently clear, let me try again."

Be flexible

History and experience shows that the individuals with the greatest range of options tend to be the most successful and most likely to have an effective response to a situation. So build your flexibility and use it. You might need some with your family, amongst others.

Remember there is a positive intention behind all behaviour

We all act to make things better for ourselves at some level. So when someone does something that you find difficult to deal with, figure out what their positive intention is. You'll be more successful by responding to the underlying intention rather than the behaviour.

Focus on what you want

Energy flows into whatever we place our attention on. Our unconscious mind delivers

what our conscious mind is holding whether we have negation around the idea or not. Don't think of blue tree! You see, you did, didn't you?

So for good relationships, take care to focus yourself and others on what's wanted, not what's not wanted.

Believe that people are doing their best even if it seems they aren't

This one's about forgiveness really – forgiveness of others and yourself. Sometimes the second of these is hardest. Guilt and blame are both useless or worse. Bin them.

Blame puts you in the position of victim and in a disempowered state. OK, suppose it was their fault: Now what? You'll do better if you choose to believe they were doing their best and move on, learning whatever you need to learn. Guilt is just undermining and doesn't help anybody. Does it help anybody in the present if you're burdened by guilt about the past?

3. Self-control

A little more self-control wouldn't go amiss, would it? The best approach is to build up your resources of calmness and one good way of doing that is to take a little a meditative time to yourself – especially when things are at their busiest or most taxing.

In meditative time, the key is to be still physically, seated probably, though standing works too, and choose not to think about anything for 10-20 minutes. Focus on your breathing. Thoughts will, of course, push their way into your mind and you might wonder what to do about that...

Here's the key:

As thoughts come up, just notice them and let them fall away, however urgent and

insistent they might be. Instead of rewarding them with attention, which may be your usual habit, just let them go. Be in the present, accept the future will take care of itself and the past is not something you can do anything about.

Your thoughts begin in your unconscious mind, which is an obedient servant. It responds to training and repetition, so if you stop rewarding it for giving you urgent and disturbing thoughts, it'll stop giving them to you. Think of it like water in a pool becoming still. Stop disturbing the surface and it'll eventually stop being disturbed.

You might think you haven't got time to take 10 or 20 minutes out. Well, you'll easily recoup your investment of time through your increased focus and calmness. Mahatma Ghandi used to say that he meditated for two hours a day – and four when he was busy. Will that do for a recommendation?

Just try it. Wouldn't you like to bring a bit more calmness into your life?

4. Wavelength

Now we come to the first of two topics relating to personality and through which we can learn to treat so-called "personality clashes" as something we can understand and do something about rather than an inexplicable accident about which we are helpless.

If we converse using the same language e.g. English, we might imagine that we're on the same wavelength. Actually, no. More likely, our different preferences for thinking style – images, sounds, touch and feeling, or verbal reasoning – often cause us to be mismatched. We have different preferences and the effects are profound. Ever feel you just don't quite click with someone or just don't see things the same

way? Chances are that's because you're mismatched in these preferences. One is auditory and the other is visual, for example. If you are mismatched, you can have constant difficulties connecting with someone and just never quite feel at ease with them.

The different styles bring complementary strengths and children tend to develop in different directions from each other and their parents, so you can be pretty sure there will be mismatches around at home.

So what's to do?

Well just being aware of the issue is a good start, but, with practice we can figure out others' preferences, and our own. There's a whole bunch of ways of doing this, but one of the simplest is just to notice what mode someone is taking you into. If it's all pictures, chances are they're visual; if verbal dialog is the key mode of communication, then auditory is likely a strong suit. Alternatively, handling of physical objects and expression of feelings might be common, which would suggest the touch and feeling preference. Or, the whole interaction might be very cerebral with little sensory experience at all. If you're aware of these modes happening, then you're noticing something about another's preferences. If you don't notice anything, it means you're well-matched with the other person and probably have an easy relationship.

Adapt your style to suit the person you are communicating with. As in many things, the key is to develop your range and flexibility.

5. Filters (or focus)

This is the second topic around personality.

Our experience of someone's personality is very much determined by what they focus on.

That's a choice – an unconscious one, probably made a long time ago, but a choice nevertheless. This is Myers-Briggs country, if that's familiar to you, or metaprograms in NLP. As in the Myers-Briggs approach, we can map these choices on a number of ranges between extremes of preference. One of many, many instances is preference for details or the big picture, which is perhaps the best known example.

There are lots of these, but understanding even a few can shed light into some of the mysteries of our relationships. Let's focus on three...

Away from – Toward

Do we tend to move away from what we don't want or toward what we do want? (Now, of course, most of us do a bit of both, but some lean rather heavily in one direction or the other.) Sometimes, it can be helpful to shift focus away from what isn't wanted onto what is. So when someone's going on about what they don't like about the holidays, you can change the game by asking what they would like instead. They probably haven't even thought about that. Trying to achieve an absence of what you don't want is like going shopping with a list of things you don't need. It's hard to deliver a meaningful outcome.

Past – Present - Future

The transition from one year to the next is very much a time for choosing to look back and to look ahead more than is our everyday habit. In more usual circumstances, we may tend to dwell on one of the three possibilities: Past, present or future. A balance between the three perspectives of time will help us be effective and successful in our relationships and in our

lives in general, though we do well to remember we can only act in the present.

Task - Relationship

In both the home and work context, attention to task and attention to relationship are in near-constant competition, especially if you have a busy family life or a heavy professional workload or both. Over the holiday, your energies may shift more into relationship than task, or maybe just other people will expect you to be like that. Do you need to re-address your choice on this axis?

What I would suggest to you is this: Be clear about which you are focusing on at any given time – task or relationship – and discuss that explicitly with your partner or whoever. If you are both are clear about when to focus on getting things done and when to have quality time, things will be much easier.

6. Connection

Understanding the ways in which personalities differ is a good start in forming connections with other people more easily. If we realise that someone else has different thinking style preferences (images, sounds, touch and feeling etc.) and tends to focus on different things then we can adjust what we do to suit and be more like the other person.

In general, we tend to like people we think are like us so, to build rapport with someone, be like them – in terms of dress, the way we speak, body language and so on.

Forming lasting connections with people is one of the great pleasures of life and we will find that happens most easily when we are open and others experience us as “real” and also consistent – “what you see is what you

get.” Connection is very easily undermined by lack of sincerity or untruth.

The truth is...

We can sense someone lying a mile off – perhaps only unconsciously, but even then we will have a feeling of unease, and with practice, we can heighten this sensitivity.

Some organisations and individuals don't seem to realise their little untruths repeatedly undermine our trust in them and destroy any chance of us feeling any lasting connection.

Integrity is a powerful attribute. Be aware of its effects.

7. Values

Values – what's important to people – are really the key to understanding them. If you know someone's values, you know how they will react in different situations and the kind of things they are likely to agree to.

How do you find out someone's values? Quite simple really: You ask them what's important about xyz and then maybe what else is important about xyz? Then you'll have a few things that person thinks is important about the topic you have been discussing, and the basis of reaching agreement with them on a suitable way forward, or activity for the day or goal for the year to come, or whatever the topic is.

Here's a tip...

We all value security – both physical and mental. Physical security is usually not in question, but mental security is. We may have a fear of being embarrassed, being shown up or whatever. Fear of this type is likely to be the predominant emotion around you, most of the time. Before an unmet need for security is

resolved, we generally won't move on to active participation in whatever is happening.

So, in many situations, at home or at work, if things aren't moving forward, it's likely to be because one of more people have an unmet need for security – they are fearful of something. Instead of just ignoring the fear, you'll make progress much more quickly and easily if you find out what the cause of the anxiety is and find a way to address it. If you focus specifically on putting people at ease, you will do something the majority never bother to do, and will have a great advantage as a result. Among other things, people will recognise a leadership quality in you.

8. Language

What we say and write is, of course, at the heart of our relationships and their highs and lows. Language is a vast subject and you would think there would be no systematic way to work with the issues that arise in the use of words. Well, that's not true: The linguists have given us a system of 13 structures that describe all the ways we use words in patterns that cause ourselves and others problems. Let's highlight three of the 13 here. (We'll skip the jargon.)

All-encompassing generalisation

"You never wash the dishes."

"We always watch too much television."

These statements are held by someone – maybe you – to be universally valid without exception. That's rarely the case. To nurture your relationships, avoid the universal statements as well seasonal over-indulgence.

Opinions as facts

Another of the troublesome ways of speaking is when we state our opinion as if it is

a fact: "He should phone his mother" or "It's inconsiderate of her to think of her own feelings". The problem is, the person hearing these comments feels browbeaten into accepting their validity, even though they are just an opinion – not good for the relationship. In our own case, it's much better to "own" our opinion and say something like "I think he should phone his mother." Then we don't intimidate the other person.

If we're aware of someone else stating their opinions as if they are facts, well, first of all, it helps just to be aware of what's going on. Secondly, if the circumstances are suitable, we could ask the textbook question "according to whom?" - maybe best not to ask that one over the big family dinner, mind you. Bide you time.

Mind reading

The third problematic language pattern we are going to have a quick look at here is that of mind reading, where we claim to know someone else's mind. We say things like "I know why you're upset" or "He doesn't care about me". The reality is we have no way of knowing these things and to make out that we do damages our relationships. It's better not to imply we know someone else's mind.

If we're aware of someone else claiming to "mind read" and we want to work on the issue, we could say to them "How do you know he doesn't care?" provided – and it is an important proviso – we have a sufficient level of rapport to ask what is a challenging question, intended to reveal to the other person they have no way of knowing what they claim to know and that it might, therefore, simply not be true.

9. Self-awareness

Our family, close friends and associates see us all the time and probably know us better than we really know ourselves. To see what they see, we can put ourselves in their shoes, almost literally. We're used to the notion of seeing another's point of view.

Well, here's a way to take it further...

Our minds and our bodies are much more interdependent than we typically allow for, especially in the West. If we shift ourselves physically, we can shift ourselves mentally, so try sitting somewhere different from your usual seat and look back and imagine yourself in that usual place. What do you like about what you see and what might you change? Try this exercise. You'll be surprised how real and insightful it can be.

10. Attention to yourself

At last we can talk about what you want for yourself. I deliberately place this topic toward the end to emphasise the importance of paying attention to other people first. Understand though that the 12 elements of the formula for success in relationships are happening all the time in parallel. The order in which we cover them is chosen for convenience of explanation more than anything else.

In thinking about ourselves and what we want in our relationships and in our lives in general, it helps to assess how our short-term goals fit with what we want longer term or in the bigger picture. When we do this, we may well decide that what we intended to do in the next few days doesn't really fit with where we want to go. A good way to check out a specific goal is to ask ourselves what it will do for us – what will we get out of it. We can usefully apply

that cycle several times, adjusting as we go, until we are confident our goals fit with our higher purpose.

As we've discussed already, be sure to express what you want in positive terms. For example, if you say to yourself you want "less stress" in a relationship, you'll struggle to achieve that (we're in "don't think of a blue tree" territory here). You'll stand a much better chance of moving forward if you state the goal positively as "I want to have more calmness in the relationship", or even "I want the relationship to be calm."

11. Balance

We're at the second but last of the 12 elements now. We started with "Attention to others" (right up front because in many ways it provides the quickest progress) and we've just covered "Attention to ourselves". Clearly we must find a balance when there is conflict between what we and others want. With clarity about both sides, and the other skills we have covered, finding a mutually acceptable balance point or "win-win", is a much easier prospect.

You might be tempted by "win-lose" in your favour. Good luck. My experience is that win-lose turns into lose-lose in short order. Stephen Covey would say so too. Every time I've pushed someone into a losing position, I've regretted it and the memory torments me long after they've forgotten, or else they retain an ill-will. Either way, I won but I lost.

We've more to say about balance though...

We need to talk about balance within ourselves – between what we want "on the one hand" and what we want "on the other hand". We can resolve these internal conflicts that so torment us. There isn't space to cover how

here, but you'll get on a useful track just by beginning to notice your internal tensions when partly you want this and partly you want that. Reconciling these tensions is a life-long challenge, so it's worth getting good at it.

Now here's a quick takeaway...

We've just talked about we tend to be conflicted inside. Yes? Well, here's the bizarre thing: For some reason, we imagine we're alone in having this incongruence. Well, we're not. Just about everyone you deal with will be at least as conflicted internally as you are. (You can see it in their body language, but that's a subject for another day.) So don't expect them to be any more consistent than you are.

On the other hand, you will come across people who seem very at ease and you're probably attracted to them. More than anything, that's because they've sorted out their internal tensions – Nelson Mandela would be an example. Such congruence and peace is very appealing. Work through your internal tensions and you can have that appeal too.

12. Love

In a business or professional context, it's tempting to substitute the word "compassion" for "love", because that's a bit less challenging. "Compassion" misses the point though.

Like many authors, I learned much in writing my book. When I started out, I had in mind a largely practical resource for the common if not universal challenge of being more resourceful in all our relationships. However, I learned the importance of love to all relationships, in the sense of nurturing another's or one's own growth or "journey".

Charles Handy quotes Erich Fromm as saying that, "despite its difficulties, 'Love is the

only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of existence.'" I have learned that love of this kind is the most powerful force and, if we ignore its effects, we play with only half the deck, at best, even at work.

In closing

That completes my set of suggestions based on the Relationship Skills for Success formula. I hope the points in this short note help you make the most of your relationships in the holiday period. I hope they've also opened your eyes to the potential of a more systematic approach to relationship skills.

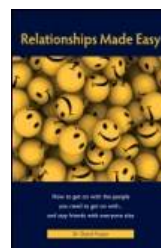
For the sake of good order, can I please record that these notes are made on the understanding I am not rendering professional services in sharing them with you.

I'd be delighted to respond to your questions and comments. Drop me an email at david@davidfraser.com.

To be kept in the loop on the important subject of Relationships Skills for Success, please register for updates at www.drdaavidfraser.com. You can also subscribe to my blog there.

Meanwhile, as the Buddhists would say, "Be compassionate toward those less enlightened than yourself."

Dr David Fraser



Dr David Fraser is author of *Relationships Made Easy* – a ground-breaking book about professional, business and personal relationships, and a journey of self-discovery. "Very positive, helpful and enlightening" (Harry Reid, *The Herald* newspaper). US Edition out soon.

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