

With the vacation behind us, StaffDev emails are back. This next series is based on a book I read recently entitled "Vital Friends" (Gallup Press, 2006, ISBN: 1-59562-007-9). The book is subtitled "The People You Can't Afford to Live Without". It's by Tom Rath, who co-authored one of our previous studies ("How Full Is Your Bucket?", February - April 2005) together with his grandfather, Donald Clifton. Vital Friends is based on a huge amount of research by The Gallup Organization focusing on friendships in general, but specifically on the effects of friendships in the workplace.

Rath opens the book with a criticism of the common focus on self-development, pointing out that it is "The energy between two people [that] creates great marriages, families, teams and organizations". His book addresses this issue.

The book is divided into four parts. The first concentrates generally on "Friends in Life", before the focus shifts to friendships in the workplace and the development of friendships.

Chapter 1: Who Expects You to be Somebody?

Rath opens with the story of an interview he conducted with a homeless man named Roger as part of a Gallup study commissioned to study homelessness and how it might best be handled. Over four months they interviewed hundreds of homeless and formerly-homeless people, trying to find out why some people managed to extract themselves from homelessness, while others did not.

Roger had had a great start in life. He grew up in a good home, graduated from college as an engineer, got a good job with a mechanical engineering company, married, had three children, bought a house and two cars, etc. In many ways, Roger was living the typical American life.

However, things at work were not great. He had a miserable boss, who would belittle his staff. The toxic environment was bearable, because Roger worked with Jimmy, his best friend. Roger and Jimmy played sports together and hunted together. Their families were close and they took holidays together. Then Jimmy was fired from the company. Suddenly, Roger found himself feeling very alone at work. The other engineers handled their appalling boss through "stoic silence", and kept to themselves. Jimmy and Roger's "friendship kept both men engaged in a job that would otherwise have been dreary. Since Jimmy's termination, Roger could hardly muster the motivation to go to work". He started to stop off at a bar after work a few times a week. That rapidly turned into heavy drinking almost all week. Despite his family's attempts to help him, "he began to self-destruct".

Soon he had lost his job, and had left his family. He lived in a small flat, which his mother paid for, until he drove her away, when he started to live in his car. Eventually, he became homeless when his car was impounded for unpaid licence fees and parking fines.

As Rath brought the interview to a close he asked one final question: "Who expects you to be somebody?".

"Roger paused for a moment, took a deep breath, and said, 'I don't think anyone does anymore!'"

Rath tells how Roger's story was repeated over and over again as they conducted their interviews of homeless people, with no prospects. He had expected to find stereotypical roots of homelessness in drug and alcohol abuse. However, as the study progressed, he started to wonder if these were not symptoms, rather than the causes of the problem. "In most cases, the relationship with a bottle or needle was precipitated by the collapse of a close relationship with a friend or loved one. The men and women who remained homeless for decades had something in common: a lack of healthy friendships". There were other reasons for people being homeless, but this lack of friendships was a common thread in many cases.

To complete the research, the Gallup team turned to people who had successfully extricated themselves from homelessness and were now living "normal" lives. Rath tells of his interview with "Maggie". She had had a rough start in life. She never knew her father (and wasn't sure that her mother knew who he was!). During her childhood, her mother moved from one bad relationship to the next. She suffered indifference, verbal and physical abuse from these men, but her mother invariably sided with them. When she was sixteen the current man in her mother's life tried to kiss her. Her mother would not believe her, or protect her, and Maggie ran away from home. She lived with a school friend for some time, then in a shelter for homeless teenagers. Eventually, she ended up on the streets.

From time to time, she would visit a homeless shelter, where a young college volunteer named Jessica would help serve food on Friday evenings. Jessica reached out to Maggie, trying to talk to her. Initially, Maggie ignored the overtures, assuming that Jessica was simply out to please her parents or earn credit for community outreach, and didn't really care

about her. However, Jessica persisted and Maggie started to thaw, sensing her genuineness. Even when her time as a volunteer ended, Jessica continued to visit Maggie, talking with her and encouraging her. When Maggie eventually got a job interview, Jessica took her shopping for new clothes for the interview. While shopping they bumped into a school-friend of Jessica's, and Jessica simply introduced Maggie as "This is my friend Maggie". That simple exchange had a huge impact on Maggie.

After almost two years, Maggie was successful in finding employment, as a receptionist in an accounting firm. She was able to rent her own flat, and was no longer "homeless". She started to study and got a degree in auditing. When Rath interviewed her ten years after she started in that first receptionist job, she was an executive at a large financial services company. She had a husband, two small children, and a "network of friends".

Rath asked her the same question he asked Roger: "Who expects you to be somebody?". Without hesitation she answered, "Jessica".

While these are two extreme cases, they illustrate very powerfully the role that friendships can play in our lives.

Something to think about:

Who expects you to be somebody?

The second chapter of "Vital Friends" is entitled "The Energy _Between_". Tom Rath starts by reflecting on the contrasting stories of Roger and Maggie from Chapter 1, and how they demonstrate that "friendships are among the most fundamental of human needs". We are vitally dependent on relationships.

He then considers how most research, training, etc. has been focused either on individuals or else on groups, with very little attention paid to "one-on-one relationships". Much counselling focuses on individuals. Many books and courses focus on team development. Very little attention is paid to friendships in the broad sense of the word.

"Friendships add significant value to our marriages, families, work, and lives. At some level, everything we see and feel is the product of a personal relationship". In contrast, we often focus on self-development, making ourselves better people. Much of the focus of our educational systems is on self-development: "how to improve yourself". When we do focus on other people, it is often on them as an individual, and not on the relationship. One symptom of this disconnect is the huge number of marriages that fail or are in trouble.

While self-development, education, team-development, etc. are not bad in themselves, they usually leave out the dimension of relationships between pairs of individuals. "Perhaps focusing on the individual is too narrow - and focusing on the entire group is too broad. The real energy occurs in each connection between two people, which can bring about exponential returns".

Rath then relates an example of a very powerful, world-changing relationship: that between Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt. While they knew each other previously, their friendship deepened in 1942, after the USA entered the Second World War. Churchill travelled to Washington and spent several days with Roosevelt. An biographer described how "they would stay up until 2:00 in the morning having drinks and cigars and discussing the war, domestic politics, and their families. They got to know each other on a deeply personal level". During the war they continued to meet, often in remote locations. After one of these meetings, in Marrakech, Roosevelt was due to fly back to the USA - the first ever trans-Atlantic flight by a US president. Churchill told his assistants that he did not want to know when Roosevelt left because it would make him too nervous: "If anything happened to that man, I couldn't stand it. He is the truest friend; he has the farthest vision; he is the greatest man I have ever known".

Importantly, they were not blind to each others flaws, and had differences of opinion, but this did not stand in the way of their very strong friendship. During the war, they wrote 2000 letters to each other, spent more than 100 days with each other and were often together for major holidays (such as Christmas and Thanksgiving). While it is hard to quantify the effect of their friendship, it probably played an important part in the strength of the alliance between their two countries, and thus in the defeat of Nazism.

As the war drew to a close in 1945, Roosevelt was dying. On his last day, he was writing a final speech, focusing on the challenges that lay ahead as the world faced huge changes. He had personally conquered his own paralysis, had led the USA through the Great Depression and through World War 2. His final words:

Today we are faced with the pre-eminent fact that, if civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships.

Some things to think about:

- 1) Would you agree that "focusing on the individual is too narrow - and focusing on the entire group is too broad. The real energy occurs in each connection between two people, which can bring about exponential returns"?
- 2) What friendships have made an significant impact in your life? Why?

The next chapter of "Vital Friends" is entitled "Better than Prozac?!" It explores the relationship between health and friendships.

Rath starts by reflecting on the thoughts of Franklin Roosevelt (the quote with which we ended the last chapter summary), and asking whether we have learnt anything since those words were written in 1945. When he investigated this he found that there has been a significant amount of research into the effects of friendships on our lives. He found studies that indicated that friends are "catalysts for high points in any given day", how the involvement of friends can make boring or unpleasant tasks bearable or even pleasant. "[S]trong social relationships are the leading indicator of our overall happiness... across countries and cultures". Studies have also shown that our friendships can shape our preferences and choices in life - even major beliefs.

He then recounts the story of a colleague of his who, when dating an ex-wrestler, found that she put on a lot of weight. Without really being aware of it, she had adopted his diet of high-fat foods. Soon after her relationship with the wrestler was over she began to go out with someone who was far more health-conscious. Within six months she weighed less than she had done before dating the wrestler, and was feeling far more energetic and healthy. Rath then did an informal survey of his colleagues to find out how their diets and their friends' diets compared. The results surprised him: "If your best friend has a very healthy diet, you are five times more likely to have a very healthy diet yourself". A similar, informal survey of exercise habits was even more extreme: no people with a best friend who was inactive were active themselves! Intrigued by these results, Gallup conducted a formal random survey of over 1000 people and found that the results held true. "[Y]our best friend might just shape you in a more literal way than you ever imagined"!

Other formal studies have shown that friends can help us deal more easily with stressful periods in our lives.

A formal medical study in 2001 of the effects of friends on heart disease produced more astounding results. An earlier study had shown that heart patients with fewer than four friends were "at a significant disadvantage... more than twice as likely to die from heart disease". The 2001 study aimed to uncover the underlying reasons and explored the effects of "stress, social status, income, smoking, hostility, or simply the severity of a patient's initial heart disease". The study of 430 patients showed that NONE of these factors was significant in the increased death rate of "isolated patients"! Interestingly, having more than four friends did not seem to provide any greater protection. "[I]t looks like we might not need an extraordinarily large breadth of friends, it is likely to be the quality of our friendships that matters most. Each person needs a few very deep friendships to thrive".

A closing quote, from Dr. Eugene Kennedy, professor of psychology at Loyola University:

Friendship has a profound effect on your physical well-being. Having good friendships improves health and lifts depressions.

Better than Prozac, indeed!

Some things to think about:

- 1) How does your diet and fitness level correspond with those of your closest friend?
- 2) Would you agree that "friends can help us deal more easily with stressful periods in our lives"?

This week, Rath briefly turns to one of the most vital friendships of all: marriage. The chapter is entitled "The Silver

Lining in a Marriage". Rightly, he describes this as "_the_ most important friendship in a person's life". In addition, marital happiness (or the lack thereof) will affect every other area of our lives, determining happiness, and engagement with one's work. The happiness of one's spouse also affects one's "satisfaction with life". A miserable spouse will lead to a miserable life, or vice versa.

Rath quotes a British economist who has attempted to quantify the effects of a happy marriage. His studies showed that a 30% increase in a spouse's happiness can completely compensate for major setbacks in life, such as losing a job, or spending two months in hospital. Conversely, Rath quotes results from a study conducted in 2005, which showed that the rate of healing in "hostile couples" was reduced to 60% of that measured in couples with little or no hostility. The blood of people in hostile relationships also showed 50% higher levels of interleukin-6, a substance linked to a range of serious diseases, such as heart disease, arthritis, diabetes, and some cancers. A healthy marriage might be literally healthy!

Rath notes that soaring divorce statistics suggest that too many people are caught in negative relationships. Again, he quotes research carried out by Dr. John Gottman, a marriage researcher, which demonstrated that "the quality of a couple's friendship" determined whether the marriage succeeded or failed (and is five times more important than "physical intimacy"). His research suggested that 70% of the satisfaction in a marriage was determined by the level of friendship present. Gottman states that "happy marriages are based on a deep friendship". In his (highly successful - "twice as effective as standard marital therapy") marriage counselling, he provides practical tips for building a good friendship in marriage (e.g. asking about each other's daily activities, assisting with household chores, and working on making small interactions both positive and memorable). "This is what fuels romance and offers protection against adversarial situations".

Gottman made his break-through in marriage counselling when he stopped focusing on what was going wrong in bad marriages, and investigated what was working in good marriages. "He discovered that most couples fight - but what differentiates happily married couples from the rest is the way they get along when they are not fighting". Rath concurs with this from his own research into friendship generally, and notes that one shouldn't judge a relationship on its "low points". "The best gauge of a friendship's health is each person's happiness during everyday interactions".

A closing quote, from Frederich Nietzsche:

It is not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages.

Some things to think about:

- 1) Do you agree that marital happiness affects every other area of a person's life?
- 2) Would you agree with Nietzsche: "It is not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages"?

The next chapter in Tom Rath's book, "Vital Friends", is entitled "The Rounding Error". In it he explores what we can expect from our friendships, and what is unrealistic.

He starts with the story of a married woman, Judy, who, after a couple of years of marriage, starts to doubt whether her husband Tim is the right man for her. At first, she couldn't put her finger on the problem: he was caring, and she loved him. "He was always around, helped with things at home, and was exceptionally trustworthy". Finally she realised that, while he was supportive of her work and her career goals, he didn't push her to succeed. Reflecting on her unmarried life, she realised that she had always had family members or a best friend at college who had encouraged her to achieve her dreams. Since her marriage, she had been spending less time with these people. "So why wasn't Tim filling this gap?". To add insult to injury, he had recently commented how much he had appreciated her encouragement for him to take an exam that would help his career! Judy sat down with Tim and discussed what she had discovered about herself and her need for motivation and encouragement. Tim agreed to try to be more encouraging.

For a few months, he really tried, but then Judy realised that her best friend, at her worst, was better at pushing her than Tim was! He just couldn't give Judy the motivation that she required. Once again, she began to wonder if their marriage was doomed.

The problem of course, was that she was expecting Tim to provide for all her relational needs (to be completely well-rounded). We all fall into this trap in our friendships, marriages, etc. "We expect the other person to meet our every need - to be the one who pushes us to achieve; who listens unconditionally; who always lends a hand; and who is, all

the while, the most fun". Clearly, that is not realistic - we only have to consider what we are able to offer to our friends to realise that no one person can do it all. Focusing on what the other person does not offer the relationship (as Judy was doing) simply brings stress and decreases our satisfaction with the relationship. "We should not expect any of our friends to be good at everything" - this is the "rounding error" that Rath refers to in the title of the chapter.

Returning to Judy, she finally realised that Tim was not going to provide the levels of motivation and encouragement that she required. She began to spend more time with her old college friend, and with a colleague at work who was encouraging. As she stopped focusing on Tim's weaknesses, she began to appreciate his strengths again. "He knew her so well, and he could sense what she wanted even before she asked. He was the only person who had ever been in sync with her emotions in this way, and it meant the world to her... he always made things fun".

A closing quote:

Judy had discovered the key to any great friendship: focusing on what each friend does contribute to your life.

Some things to think about:

- 1) Have you ever had unrealistic expectations of a friend or partner? How did you deal with this?
- 2) What are your strengths in a relationship? Would you say you were completely well-rounded?

In the next chapter of "Vital Friends", Tom Rath starts to move the focus towards the workplace, and specifically the issue of work/life balance. The chapter is entitled "Does Work Balance Life?".

Rath opens with a powerful quote from "Fast Company" magazine:

Balance is bunk! It's the central myth of the modern workplace: With a few compromises, you can have it all. But it's all wrong, and it's making us crazy.

Rath then points out that the scenario we considered last week (Tim and Judy, and her initial dissatisfaction that he was not providing the kind of support that she needed) also applies in our working situations. Our colleagues probably provide different forms of support and encouragement, which may or may not fit in with our needs. Expecting a boss or a colleague to be able to meet all your needs in the workplace is as unrealistic as expecting your spouse to be able to do so in the home.

Our workplace relationships are important, because of the impact they have on our lives away from the office, and vice versa. For example, if you have a fight or disagreement with your spouse before leaving home, you're likely to be in a bad mood when you get to work, and your relationships with your colleagues will be affected negatively. Or, conversely, if your boss comes into your office just before you leave for home and congratulates you on the great job you did on your most recent project, you are likely to arrive home in a mood that produces positive interactions with your family and friends.

Rath then tells the story of a friend of his, Mark, who worked with a very negative woman, Sara. For several months, Rath bore the complaints and frustrations of his friend - "this woman I had never met was doing more to detract from my happiness than anyone else in my life"! Mark was not alone in this, and several of his colleagues were considering resigning because of Sara and her impact on their home lives. Their boss did not appreciate the gravity of the problem, and eventually Mark and several other people left the organisation.

Various studies have shown that people do bring the effects (positive and negative) of their workplace back to their home life. "The boundaries between work and family are pretty permeable" stated Tim Judge, a management professor who performed one of these studies.

Rath then turns to the issue of work/life balance, and points out that these two issues are hard to separate: our work affects our "life" and vice versa. He points out that to not think of work in the evening or over a weekend is probably more symptomatic of a lack of interest in your work, rather than of finding the perfect "work/life balance"! He acknowledges that we do need to find a balance in terms of the time spent at work and at home, but states that the emotional and relational issues are much harder to balance or separate. If we dislike the prospect of going home (or, conversely, of going to work) we need to consider carefully what is affecting our feelings.

A closing quote:

Perhaps balance is about having great friendships that extend between work and home. This is easier said than done, of course. While we spend more than half our waking hours at work, most organizations have done very little to encourage friendships on the job. Some go as far as to prohibit close relationships, which could be a catastrophic mistake.

Some things to think about:

- 1) How do you find your home life affects your work, and vice versa?
- 2) Would you agree that prohibiting friendships in the workplace is a "catastrophic mistake"? What is your experience of relationships at work?

The next chapter of "Vital Friends" deals with the results of some of the Gallup Organization's international research into the effects of workplace friendships on companies. The chapter is entitled "The Three-Friend Threshold".

Rath opens by citing a number of comments by people who think workplace friendships are a bad idea. They raise issues about fraternisation at work being a concern, and separating work and the rest of life. Some organisations have very stringent rules forbidding workplace friendship. Rath tells the (rather scary!) story about a woman, Laura, who worked for such an organisation. She had a very good friend at work, and they managed to hide this fact, as they lived in a large city and were never spotted together away from work. However, she was later transferred to another branch of the company in a small town. Laura and her husband had no friends in the new town, and she began to form a friendship with her supervisor. One day the supervisor invited Laura and another worker for an after-work drink. As there seemed to be few other opportunities to make friends in the small town Laura accepted the invitation. A few days later, a regional manager arrived, sat them down and told them that supervisors could not socialise with non-supervisory staff! Apparently, a co-worker had spotted them and reported them (on the company's toll-free number for anonymously reporting violations of the "no friendships" rule!). Laura tried to explain her situation as a new person in a small town, but the company would not budge. Needless to say, this not only affected Laura's relationship with her manager, but also her attitude towards her work.

While this seems rather extreme, Rath comments that he was surprised at how many organisations have such rules when he started to do research in this area. He acknowledges that there are potential problems with workplace friendships, and tells of his own experience with the Detroit motor industry where the relationships between management and workers was very strained, and friendships between workers were often "based on mutual hatred for their employer" - what he terms "bellyache buddies". Cliques, and romantic liaisons that lead to favoritism or messy fall-outs are other examples of possible negative impacts. However, Gallup's research strongly suggests that the potential benefits of healthy workplace relationships far outweigh the potential problems. In 2004, Rath led a team of Gallup researchers, which investigated the impact of workplace friendships on organisations across the world. An appendix to the book is dedicated to the detailed findings, based on 8 million responses, but in this chapter he summarises some of the highlights.

They focused on the impact of having a "best friend" at work, based on some preliminary research which showed that this was a better predictor for the factors under investigation than less powerful terms (such as "friend" or even "good friend"). Only 30% of the people surveyed claimed to have a best friend at work. Rath's group found that having a best friend at work significantly increased the following factors:

- customer engagement
- productivity
- fun experienced at work
- safety (fewer workplace accidents)
- innovation
- sense of being informed and listened to
- focusing on personal strengths

Rath states that friendships are a critical factor in maintaining a healthy work environment, and that at the best companies "employers recognize that people want to forge quality friendships and that company loyalty is built from such relationships". Satisfaction with the employer can be significantly improved, as can satisfaction with remuneration levels, if there are strong workplace friendships. The level of friendships at work is even a strong predictor of a company's profitability!

In a follow-up study, Rath decided to investigate whether having multiple friends at work made any difference. There was little difference between people with one or two friends at work (which is still highly beneficial), but having three friends produced another significant improvement in satisfaction levels, both at work and outside the workplace. "People with at least three close friends at work were 96% more likely to be extremely satisfied with their life".

A closing quote:

While most companies spend their time thinking about how to increase an employee's loyalty to their organization, ... they might want to try a different approach: fostering the kind of loyalty that is built between one employee and another.

Some things to think about:

- 1) Have you ever experienced any of the negative factors that can arise from workplace friendships? Do you think banning such relationships is the right solution?
- 2) How many close friends do you have at work? Does your experience agree with Rath's findings?

In the next (short) chapter of "Vital Friends" Rath continues to consider workplace friendships, looking specifically at the question "Can You Be Friends with Your Boss?".

Rath opens the chapter by citing some research done at Princeton, which (indirectly) got the subjects to rate how enjoyable the time spent with various people was. At the top of the list (higher than spouse) was time spent with friends. The bottom three were clients/customers, coworkers and (in last place) bosses! "Interacting with the boss was also rated, on average, as being less enjoyable than cleaning the house".

While many bosses are miserable individuals who do nothing to encourage or develop their workers, there are also many bosses who genuinely care about their workers. Rath tells the story about evaluating a manager named Sarah. When they interviewed the people who reported to her, it sounded like they were describing different people! One employee enjoyed the fact that she did not micro-manage him, but left him to get on with the job with minimal supervision. Another employee described how Sarah would regularly check in with her and discuss how she was doing, as well as chatting about her family and other interests. Sarah had perfected the ability to manage each employee as an individual with different needs and styles.

Again, Gallup's research has shown that having a caring manager considerably enhances loyalty to the company, engagement with the job and productivity. Rath notes that we spend about 50% more time with the people we encounter at work (bosses, peers and clients/customers) than we do with our friends and family combined. He closes the chapter with this advice: "If you want to be happier and more engaged at work, consider developing a few strong friendships at the office, maybe even one with your boss"!

Some things to think about:

- 1) How would you rate the time spent at work, and interacting with your boss? Is it better than house-cleaning?!
- 2) How well do you think you are recognised as an individual in the workplace?

The next chapter of "Vital Friends" starts to focus on the "how". The chapter is entitled "Getting Engaged at Work".

Rath opens the chapter by citing some comments that he sometimes receives when he advises an organisation that their employees should have a best friend in the workplace: "Great, but what can I do about it in my organization?", "We don't feel it is actionable", "I can't just tell my people make best friends", "Should I force them to go out and grab a beer together?!" In short, people accept that workplace friendships may bring real benefits, but struggle to see a way of putting this advice into practice.

Rath focuses the rest of the chapter on the story of "Carolyn", a plant manager from Manchester in the U.K., who was remarkably successful at building a workplace with flourishing friendships. Carolyn managed a manufacturing plant,

and was the only woman (and a young one at that), where most of the men in the factory were over 40! She described the initial situation: her factory had some of the lowest scores for employee engagement in the entire company, their safety record was poor, absenteeism was rife, customer complaints were high, etc. After two years of this dismal performance, a senior manager recommended to Carolyn that she focus on improving employee engagement. They believed this would improve the overall assessment criteria for her factory.

She studied the questions in the survey that dealt with employee engagement, but felt that they seemed a bit "soft", particularly in a factory full of older men. She didn't think that sitting down with the "old blokes" and talking about their workplace friendships was going to work out too well! However, she seemed to have little option and, out of desperation, chose to give it a go. "Over the next year... she did everything she could to engage her employees on a more emotional level". The initial reactions from the factory workers were not too positive, but she persisted. In particular, she spent time with the men discussing how they could develop friendships with their coworkers. She also instituted some practical steps, like a fund to pay for social events for the workers and their families. She deliberately tried to keep it simple, and focused on the communication of the idea of strong friendships between the workers.

Within a few months, there was a detectable change: "The men were having more casual conversations, and a few even looked like they were enjoying their jobs". Besides the inevitable British habit of having a pint together after work, people were also playing sport together socially. The improvements in the relationships also showed up in more serious ways. For example, when one worker was having marital problems his coworkers were very supportive (and alerted Carolyn to the problem, so that she would be sensitive in her dealings with the man). When workers were off sick, their friends willingly picked up the slack.

The next survey showed the turn-around clearly: engagement levels had improved substantially, production levels had risen dramatically and customer complaints were halved. Carolyn was now convinced that "this soft stuff was working", and she started to put even more effort into it. The workers also recognised the benefits and really started to cooperate. "The guys were having more fun and getting more done". The safety record started to improve and the factory became a much more pleasant environment in which to work.

The following year, the trend continued: engagement levels were higher again, production levels had set records, customer complaints were halved again, and absenteeism levels were more than three times better than the industry average. Customer satisfaction and feedback was also greatly improved.

A closing comment from Carolyn:

If it worked with these old blokes, it should work for anyone.

Some things to think about:

How well do you think your workplace helps build friendships?
How could it be improved?
What could you do to help foster such friendships?

In the next chapter of "Vital Friends", Rath describes an online tool that the Gallup Organization has developed to allow people to assess their friendships. This is used as the basis for strengthening the relationships. The chapter is headed "Sharpening Each Relationship".

The sharpening analogy is used in the introduction, where Rath points out that sharpening the "wrong" side of a knife blade is going to be difficult and potentially dangerous. Sharpening the handle would just be stupid! Yet this is what we sometimes try to do when we try "round" our friendships (see session 5 of the series):

<http://listserv.ru.ac.za/pipermail/cs-staffdev-l/2007-March/000127.html>

Rather than expecting our friends to be good at everything (in terms of their contribution to the friendship) we should rather focus on the specific strengths that they contribute to the relationship: "the areas where each friendship has the most potential for sharpening". Some of Rath's team's initial investigation showed that friendships are strongest when there is a clear understanding of the unique contribution that each person makes. Their next step was to explore this further. However, their work was frustrated by the loose way in which the term "friend" is often used today. "[T]he word 'friend' is not that exclusive anymore and borders on a generic label". In order to counteract this, Rath's group started to use the phrase "vital friend", which is not in common use and captures the fact that it is something "essential to your life". Their definition of "vital friend" is: "1. someone who measurably improves your life. 2. a person at work or in your personal life whom you can't afford to live without".

In continuing their investigation the Gallup researchers found that most friends made a great contribution to the relationship in a few areas (and sometimes only one). In order to assess the role(s) played by friends, they developed an assessment tool, which identifies which of eight possible roles a friend may play in a relationship ("Vital Roles"). These roles are discussed in the next chapter.

It is important to note that the assessment focuses on what you receive from your friend in a relationship (not vice versa). We cannot be objective in trying to assess our own contribution(s) to a friendship - only the recipient can do that. The assessment is thus one-sided focusing on what you get out of a friendship, and not on what you contribute. Rath recommends that both parties complete the assessment to get a full picture. This is particularly important as the contributions are often different (and hence complementary), rather than the same.

Rath also injects a note of realism, pointing out that (like any of these kinds of simple assessment tests), their Vital Friends Assessment cannot capture the full complexity of a friendship. In particular, there are many more roles than the eight key roles that the assessment identifies. The assessment is intended as a starting point for exploring the depths of a friendship, and is not intended to be the final word on the relationship. In this way it is meant to provide a focus for the sharpening activity of this chapter, allowing you to focus on and develop those areas of strength in your relationship.

A closing quote:

The key is to devote your attention to the roles this person does play in your life; this is where the opportunity for true growth lies.

Next week we start to look at the eight roles that Rath and his team have identified as the key ones in friendships.

Something to think about:

Unfortunately, one needs to purchase the book in order to get a unique access key for the assessment website (www.vitalfriends.com). However, give some thought to who your closest friends are, and start to think about what they contribute to your friendship in preparation for our discussion of the eight roles.

The next chapter of "Vital Friends" has a look in detail at the eight "vital roles" that friends can play in our lives. As we noted last week, there may be many more roles than this, but these are some of the key roles. This chapter is considerably longer than the previous ones, so we will take a look at a few of the roles each week over a number of weeks. However, the full list of eight vital roles is as follows, with a brief description (taken from the website: <https://www.vitalfriends.com/roles.aspx>):

Builder

Builders are great motivators, always pushing you toward the finish line. They continually invest in your development and genuinely want you to succeed.

Companion

A Companion is always there for you, whatever the circumstances. You share a bond that is virtually unbreakable.

Connector

Connectors are bridge-builders who help you to get what you want. They get to know you -- and then connect you to others.

Collaborator

A Collaborator is a friend with similar interests, with whom you can easily relate. You might share a passion for sports, hobbies, religion, work, politics, foods, music, films, or books.

Energizer

Energizers are your fun friends, who always give you a boost. You have more positive moments when you are with these friends.

Mind Opener

Mind Openers are the friends who expand your horizons with new ideas, opportunities, cultures, and people. They help you create positive change.

Navigator

Navigators are the friends who give you advice, and keep you headed in the right direction. You go to them whenever you need guidance, and they talk through the "pros" and "cons" with you until you find an answer.

Champion

Champions stand up for you and what you believe in. They are loyal friends who sing your praises and defend you until the end.

Builders

Friends who are Builders will provide motivation and encouragement - they act as catalysts. They will provide positive input, guidance and advice on how to capitalise on your strengths, and develop your skills. Importantly, they will not compete with you, but will rather complement your strengths.

Rath gives some anecdotes from people about the Builders in their lives: the friend who encouraged someone to go back to college and get a degree as a mature student; the boss who invested time in an employee and motivated him to extra effort; the manager who asked an employee to tackle a large project, which he was very nervous about, "but [she] gave me ideas, resources, and had faith in me... [She] knew I could do it - when I didn't even know myself!"; and the husband who supported and encouraged his wife who was tackling a big job at work.

Strengthening Your Builders: Rath then gives some tips on how to get the maximum benefit from a friendship with a Builder: Let them know what your current goals are, and explicitly ask them to push you along if you lose energy for the task; keep a focus on your strengths - Builders will want to capitalise on your existing talents, and help you to make the most of them; seek advice from them before significant events or moments (critical meetings, etc.); make sure you share your triumphs with them, and let them know the role they played.

Creating New Builders: In order to create new Builder relationships you should ask people for advice, look out for people who "seem to care about the success of others", be open with possible Builders (their contribution will be strengthened if they understand you better), and ask your manager/supervisor for explicit guidance, perhaps on a quarterly basis (while they are in a good position to be a Builder, it might take some effort from you to develop the relationship in that direction).

Lastly, Rath turns the focus around with some ideas on how to develop the relationship if you are a Builder. He suggests looking out for situations where your friends develop and grow (be explicit in discussing this with them). Discuss your friends' achievements with them, pointing out their strengths, and letting them know of opportunities your encounter that can make use of the same strengths. Ask your friends about their strengths. Suggest ways in which your friends might grow their abilities (formal learning is one way, but try to help them find other ways - e.g. volunteering). Look for complementary skills and situations where you can work together as a team.

(Each following sections has the same format as the one above: an introduction/description; some real-life stories, tips on getting the most benefit from the friendship, tips on developing new friendships within that role, and tips on fulfilling that role yourself.)

Champions

A Champion will praise you, both directly and publically - they are your personal "praise singers"! They will also support you when you are not present. They are loyal, non-judgmental and, when necessary, discrete. "Champions thrive on your accomplishments and happiness".

Anecdotes: Rath tells of the coworker who spoke up at an important meeting, sharing what his friend had done when she was too shy to do so herself, and how good she felt when congratulated by the group; a manager who was being criticised by his workers until one of them spoke up in his defense (the message had far more impact coming from a peer); the husband who was overheard telling his family and friends how proud he was of his wife's promotion; and the coworker who recommended someone for a financially rewarding position in the company.

Strengthening Your Champions: be explicit about their role and what you would like them to say about you; make sure that you thanks them and give them feedback when their efforts make a difference; be explicit about the fact that you find it easier to share your successes with them than with others; and if you mess up, let them know - they will be supportive.

Creating New Champions: look out for people who are championing others and get to know them better; share your plans and aspirations with possible new Champions; share your successes with others (without bragging!); give praise to those around you who deserve it - they may well reciprocate.

If You Are a Champion: make sure you know what your friends have achieved (ask!); look for new areas in which to champion your friends in order to extend their boundaries; ask your friends how you can help them succeed; be careful to keep confidences; acknowledge your friends achievements, both personally and publically, particularly to the people that are most significant in their lives.

Some things to think about:

1) Who are Builders or Champions in your life? What can you do to strengthen the expression of that role in those friendships?

2) For whom are you a Builder or a Champion? What steps can you take to maximise the positive impact you can make in their life?

Last week we looked at the first two of the eight "vital roles": Builders and Champions. We will continue this exploration of the roles this week.

Collaborators

Collaborators are friends with shared interests (e.g. a sport, books, movies, etc., or membership of the same clubs or associations). This gives the friendship a foundation of shared experience.

Anecdotes: Rath tells the stories of the college friends who play golf together and belong to the same golf club, of the two volunteers working with underprivileged children in their community who became best friends, of the two friends who set up an organisation to encourage young people in their area to vote, and the workers at an animal shelter who all love animals and find that this provides motivation and support in their work.

Strengthening Your Collaborators: share books and articles that discuss your common interests, then make time to discuss them; look for ways to spend time together on your common interest (e.g. arrange a friendly sporting event, start a book club etc.); explicitly acknowledge your appreciation of the time spent together on your shared interest.

Creating New Collaborators: share your interests with the people you work with, or display photos or symbols of your interest (e.g. parking my bicycle in my office often causes visitors to comment on it!); when attending meetings associated with your interests, look out for people you know already and try to build on the shared interest; "volunteer for a club or organization with a mission or purpose you strongly believe in".

If You Are a Collaborator: talk about your shared experiences (even frequently repeated "war stories" can help to cement the friendship); give unexpected gifts that are relevant to the common interest (the latest book by a favourite author, a ticket to a show or a sporting event, etc.); create traditions around your shared interest (e.g. an annual golf date on the first day of spring); invite other people who enjoy the same activities to join you, increasing the circle of friends.

Companions

These are friends who will support you through good times and bad. They will be the first people you contact when something significant takes place in your life. They will often know your emotions and thoughts without being told. These are friends who would do anything for you, and will usually be friends for life.

Anecdotes: the business partners who started out working for the same company, then decided to go into business for themselves: "...we have worked together ever since [i.e. 20 years]. I trust Luke with my life... He is like a brother to me"; the wife of 35 years whose husband calls her his best friend; the friend since second grade "with whom I can be so completely honest and let my guard down. I know he feels the same about me."

Strengthening Your Companions: ask deep questions (you can safely go beyond superficial topics with a Companion) so that "you stay connected at a deep level"; make sure that you regularly spend quality time together; share gifts or notes that express your appreciation for them and your understanding of them; ensure you can be trusted with their

deepest feelings.

Creating New Companions: "Relationships develop through shared experiences, trust, and a deep bond" - look for ways to develop existing friendships deeper in this way; if you find sharing your innermost feelings difficult, start with smaller issues and be explicit about your struggle to open up; this role is often reciprocal (unlike most of the others), so make an effort to be a good Companion yourself; consider your extended family members - the basis of shared experiences and values you are likely to have with them may well be a good foundation for a Companion.

If You Are a Companion: support your friends in difficulty; don't keep secrets from your friends (trust is vital); if conflict arises in the friendship, deal with it quickly; "Tell your friends how much they mean to you"; do something special for them or give them a meaningful gift.

Connectors

These friends are bridge-builders. Because they know you well they can connect to you to other people with similar interests, extending your personal networks. They tend to be highly social people. They can recommend resources such as "a job, a doctor, a friend, or a date".

Anecdotes: Rath tells of the new employee who was struggling to fit in until she met Leigh who introduced her to the rest of their colleagues; "My business partner's mind is like a database of people"! the wife who has used her friends to expand her husband's circle of friends; the introvert whose friend recommends conferences and workshops for him to attend.

Strengthening Your Connectors: let them know when you are looking for new opportunities (and that you appreciate their introductions and recommendations); ask them for advice and let them know about your interests and plans; acknowledge their help when you benefit from it.

Creating New Connectors: accept invitations from your friends - if they introduce you to new people, they're a potential Connector; in new situations look out for the people who seem to know everyone else; if you are shy and have to organise a social event invite people who you know like to meet with new people.

If You Are a Connector: tell your friends know that you are happy to introduce them to useful contacts; invite your friends to attend functions that they might not normally go to, especially if they are introverted or lonely; look out for opportunities to introduce your friends to potentially useful contacts; look out for new people in your circles and introduce them to others; keep your friends' and contacts' details at hand in an organiser so you can easily share them when the occasion arises; look for opportunities to introduce people you know who may add value to each other.

Some things to think about:

- 1) Who are Collaborators, Companions or Connectors in your life? What can you do to strengthen the expression of that role in those friendships?
- 2) For whom are you a Collaborator, Companion or Connector? What steps can you take to maximise the positive impact you can make in their life?

This week we consider the last three of the eight "vital roles". Over the last two weeks have looked at the first five: Builders, Champions, Collaborators, Companions and Connectors.

Energisers

These are the friends who brighten your day, who are fun to be around and leave you feeling energised and ready to face anything. They have a markedly positive impact on your life "They are always saying and doing things that make you feel better... If you want to relax and have a good time or need to get out of a rut, call an Energizer".

Anecdotes: Rath tells about the dental assistant whose boss "lights up the room", putting his patients at ease, and filling his practice with laughter (now that's a really impressive ability!); the coworker who knows just when to give an invitation to lunch that invariably results in a better outlook on life; the director, who, when he feels stressed always stops by Josh's office and leaves having had a good laugh and feeling far better for it; the receptionist who beams at everyone who enters the office, brightening everyone's day as they arrive at work; the distant friend with whom visits

are always great fun, and telephone calls are a laugh-filled pick-me-up.

Strengthening Your Energisers: remind people about their stories that always make you laugh and encouraging them to share the stories with others; focus on positive aspects of your friendship; when an Energiser tries to cheer you up, recognise this and actively work on your perspective and outlook; tell them how they make a positive difference in people's lives (it is often quite small things - like the receptionist's smile above - that they might not appreciate have the impact that they do); .

Creating New Energisers: while many Energisers may be outgoing, some may be quite quiet - look out for people who pick you up, and make an effort to spend more time with them; allow yourself to be cheered-up - laugh at the silly joke, or return the smile; maintain a sense of humour - other people will respond to this and reciprocate.

If You Are an Energiser: share jokes or humorous anecdotes with your friends and coworkers; encourage your friends and help them to focus on the positive things in their lives; work out when you are most "up" (e.g. are you fired up in the morning when you're fresh, or after work when you can relax?) and make a point of spending this time with your friends when possible; invite your friends on a "mini-vacation": a meal, a movie, etc. where you can enjoy a good time together.

Mind Openers

"Mind Openers are the friends who expand your horizons and encourage you to embrace new ideas, opportunities, cultures, and people". They challenge your thinking and draw out your opinions.

Anecdotes: the financial expert who was going to visit his friend, Jay, in Kazakhstan, when Jay challenged him to sign up for a short-term volunteer position providing financial advice in Kazakhstan, leading to a much more fulfilling and life-stretching trip than if it had just been a holiday; the woman with long-term back pain who kept putting off exercise until her friend forced her to go to exercise classes, which made her feel much better; the coworker who acts as a sounding board for new ideas by asking probing questions and forcing his friend to really work through all the issues around the idea.

Strengthening Your Mind Openers: when you're facing a difficult situation seek advice from your Mind Openers; carefully consider what your Mind Openers say, or the questions they ask, even (especially?) when they challenge your thinking; before going ahead with a new initiative, ask a Mind Opener to play "devil's advocate"; challenge your Mind Openers (e.g. recommend books, movies, etc. that you have found stimulating) - this is likely to lead to stimulating conversations.

Creating New Mind Openers: use brainstorming sessions and similar group discussions at work to identify possible Mind Openers; look for people whose opinions differ from your own, and respectfully probe their reasoning and their basis for their views; stretch yourself by stepping outside your "comfort zones" (e.g. take a course in a different area) and let people know that you are doing this; when someone invites you to try something unusual, say "yes" - "At worst, you will have an interesting story to tell. At best, you will have learned more about yourself and your friend".

If You Are a Mind Opener: look out for opportunities to challenge (respectfully, again) your friends' thinking; help them to brainstorm their own ideas, probing their reasoning; look for opportunities to expose your friends to new situations; look for opportunities to have conversations about important issues.

Navigators

These are friends who help you find your path in life. They provide advice and guidance, helping you to work through difficult decision-making processes. "They are the ideal friends to share your goals and dreams with".

Anecdotes: the mentor who provides career advice, "[helping] me find clarity"; the wife who is always consulted on big decisions, because she gives such good advice; the friend who provided an objective perspective on the risks associated with a possible new job; the friend who listened to Ayanna's life goals and her frustration at not knowing how to get there, then helped her draw up a plan to guide her towards achieving those goals.

Strengthening Your Navigators: if you are facing an important decision discuss the pros and cons with a Navigator; ask them about their own decisions in the past and how they managed them; share your life-goals with them.

Creating New Navigators: older family members may well be very good Navigators - ask them about the significant decisions in their lives and discuss your own dilemmas with them; ask someone to be a mentor, and question them

about their own lives; take note of your friends' experiences and expertise - this will help you choose the best person to go to for advice when faced with a similar situation yourself; "Seek counsel from people you respect, such as clergy members, doctors, or former teachers".

If You Are a Navigator: when your friends encounter difficulties try to help them maintain a proper perspective - an anecdote from your own experience can be particularly helpful; listen carefully to your friends when they discuss their aspirations with you, and look out for opportunities that will help them reach their goals; help your friends to weigh up the pros and cons when they are facing difficult decisions; help your friends to celebrate their decisions and successes; share your own goals with your friends - this may encourage them to think about their personal goals and to share them with you.

Some things to think about:

- 1) Who are Energisers, Mind Openers or Navigators in your life? What can you do to strengthen the expression of that role in those friendships?
- 2) For whom are you an Energiser, Mind Opener or Navigator? What steps can you take to maximise the positive impact you can make in their life?

This week brings us to the end of "Vital Friends". Rath has one last topic of discussion and then closes the book with some final reflections.

Plugging In

Rath starts off this chapter with a story. Imagine you were invited to dinner by a new acquaintance. When you arrive your host greets you at the door, directs you to the dining room and tells you that he will be with you shortly. You stand in the dining room for a while and then take a seat. In the next room you can see a woman and some children. They can obviously see you, but ignore you and keep watching the TV. One of the children gets up and walks into the dining room, straight past you to the kitchen to get a drink and return to the TV room. After a while your host returns and dumps a pile of books on the table. He says, very politely, "Let me know if you have any questions", then leaves the room again. More than a little curious at this bizarre treatment you start to look through the books - they're the manuals for the kitchen appliances and some recipe books!

Odd behaviour, without a doubt, but Rath makes the point that this how many organisations treat new employees! They're shown to their office, given some documentation on the company, its policies and products and essentially left to themselves. He quotes the experience of someone who had exactly this experience when he moved 500 miles to take up a new job. After a week of studying manuals and being ignored by everyone else in the building, he phoned in sick for a couple of days and then submitted his resignation. No one took the trouble to even have lunch with him in the cafeteria, or to ask how he was settling into the new job and new city.

Rath makes the point that it is vital for new employees to forge friendships in their workplaces to help them settle in effectively. He tells of an organisation that brings its new representatives in from all over the country every few months and provides them with a few weeks of training and social events (meals, sports events, visits to local tourist spots, etc.). The friendships that are forged in this way often last for decades and span the country as the reps return to their bases. Rath quotes research that suggests that helping new recruits to form workplace friendships could double their satisfaction with their work.

He goes on to tell of Proctor and Gamble who require new recruits to spend an hour with each member of their new team, with explicit instructions that there is to be no talk about work! This greatly speeds up the formation of friendships and a base of trust.

On a smaller scale, Rath suggests opening meetings with a quick, informal "ice breaker" where everyone is asked to share, briefly, about themselves. He tells of a manager he worked under, who got everyone to answer four questions at the start of each meeting:

- 1) What name do you prefer to be called?
- 2) What are two of your favourite activities/hobbies outside of work?
- 3) What is one recent personal success you have had?
- 4) What is one recent professional success you have had?

At first, Rath thought this was a waste of time, but then he started to find the name refresher useful for people he did not interact with much, and also started to notice some colleagues who shared some of his interests. This led to conversations about the shared interests, and, in time, to some of very strong friendships.

"The best workgroups we have studied engage in passionate conversations and e-mail discussions about non-work topics. This helps the group bond and makes it stronger."

Parting Thoughts

As he closes, Rath refers back to the quotation from Franklin Roosevelt (written the day before he died), which we covered in our second session:

Today we are faced with the pre-eminent fact that, if civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships.

Based on their research, Rath concludes that Roosevelt was right. "Vast, untapped potential exists if we are able to improve the quality of our friendships".

Rath then tells the personal story about how he had been in the habit of neglecting his friendships, or at least taking them for granted. He also separated his personal friendships from workplace friendships. As he started to consider the subject of friendship more carefully, he realised that he was overlooking some very important relationships, who had the potential to play very important roles in his life (refer to the list of roles we identified in sessions 11-13). Rath started to explicitly tell his friends what they meant to him and how he benefitted from their friendship. This strengthened the bonds, and encouraged his friends.

His closing advice is to focus on the positive impact that people have in your life (remembering that no individual can meet all your relational needs). "This one key will help you unlock the potential within each friendship". As a second, critical step, you also need to consider what you contribute to the friendship.

Some things to think about:

- 1) To what extent do you "engage in passionate conversations and e-mail discussions about non-work topics" with your co-workers?
- 2) How could you strengthen your existing friendships? Do you need to be more explicit about what your friends contribute to your life?