Life Through the Relational Lens

How can a focus on relationships help us engage with, enhance and critique a wide range of practices in organisations and in wider society – from appraisals to office design, from material sourcing to pricing, from dividends to tea ladies. Mark Greene explores in this edited excerpt from his book The Best Idea in the World.

What, Jesus was asked, is the most important commandment of all?

Now he had 613 commandments to choose from but his response was unequivocal: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’

Jesus’ response, as Michael Schluter has shown, not only clarifies God’s priorities, it provides a tool for us to measure the thoughts of our minds, the words of our mouth and the deeds of our hands. At root the great command to love is a relational command. As such, what interests God most is:

1. The quality of our relationship with him
2. The quality of our relationship with others

This divine priority on the quality of relationships stems inevitably from the nature of the triune God who is neither some distant impersonal force nor starkly monadic like the god of Islam. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is relational in essence and in that essence the three persons commune with one another – the Father with the Son, the Son with the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit with the Father., and so on. Relationship is vital because God is relational.

So, in considering any idea, policy or action, we look at it through the lenses of relationship. How will this decision affect my relationship with God? How will this decision affect our relationships with other people? Furthermore, the relational lens is not only a means of examining our behaviour it is also a diagnostic tool in analysing everything from karaoke to housing policy.

So for example, should we have built those concrete tower blocks in the sixties that came to dominate our inner city skyscapes? They weren’t bad because they were ugly, which from a distance at least they weren’t. They weren’t bad because they were an inefficient use of space or funding. Functionally efficient they were – the modernist’s dream realised in concrete. They were bad because the designs failed to preserve or create or nurture relationships and therefore to build vibrant, safe communities. In fact the opposite occurred. Design affects relationships. So does technology. So does pretty much everything.

Relational thinking may sound somewhat theoretical but it is often worked out in very simple ways. The first step is to see what is inhibiting the relationship.

Over the last twenty years, the Jubilee Centre, the Cambridge think tank founded by Michael Schluter, has identified five factors that tend to predict or lead to what they call “relational proximity,” or closeness. These factors have also been used to analyse a wide range of types of relationships, not only in families but in companies, in public
institutions like prisons and the tax office, with tangible, measurable results. As you read
them you might want to consider how your own relationships – organisational and
personal – might be enhanced by these guidelines.

1. DIRECTNESS OF CONTACT: MAXIMISE IT
A kiss on the cheek is better than an “X” at the bottom of a letter, the touch of
someone’s skin better than a photo, and a face-to-face conversation almost always richer
than a teleconference. We are made of flesh, not silicon – at least most of most of us is.
We are created to relish physical presence, to grow most through direct contact.

Direct contact almost invariably builds deeper understanding than physical absence.
Being there is better than sending emails or virtual communication and usually more
effective. This is, of course, common sense. However, such common sense was much
challenged in the 1990s and the early years of this century as businesses sought to
increase efficiency and reduce travel costs and carbon emissions through increased use of
technology. However, true communication is more than the transfer of information.
“Being there” facilitates touch – important even in the simplest of transactions – and
increases the accuracy and richness of the communication. Indeed, in any oral
communication, words can make up as little as 7 percent of the message. The rest is
voice tone, gesture, body language. There are, after all, lots of ways to say the words
“Did you buy tickets for the theatre?” Including with an utterly disbelieving, disdainful
raising of the right eyebrow.

Directness of contact has proved so vital that a number of businesses have brought back
tea ladies, their trolleys and their tinkling bells – not out of nostalgia for ye goode olde
days. Quite the opposite. Many businesses found that their employees had become
bound up in their technologies, sitting in their cubicles, emailing people in the next
cubicle and rarely bothering to even try to communicate face-to-face. The result was not
only a less satisfying work experience but lower productivity.

However, when the tea lady’s bell tinkles, no one has to ask for whom it tinkles… People
have permission to join the queue and chat for a while, sometimes about the football,
Desperate Housewives or the new man in accounts, but often about those little “by the
way” bits of business that are actually more efficiently and easily taken care of directly. In
either case, overall levels of communication and camaraderie improve. And so does
productivity.

Similarly, in today’s office environment, there is almost never a convenient time to spend
half an hour eating a sandwich with someone over lunch, even if half an hour is actually
only fifteen minutes and it’s in a cubicle – dining al desko. Besides, as Gordon Gecko
famously intoned in the film, Wall Street, “Lunch is for wimps.” Nevertheless, over time,
spending fifteen minutes munching a sandwich with a colleague once a week can be
hugely effective in enhancing efficiency.

Directness of contact is also a useful criterion in the family. How much direct contact do
you have? How often do you eat together? And how many of you are there for the whole
meal? As author Pat Spungin put it, “The cement of all relationships is talk.” And it’s
tough to talk to someone who isn’t there or who’s watching the TV, as around a third of
British people prefer to eat their meals.
So how can you create the kind of dynamics that will build deeper relationships? How can you create opportunities for “directness of contact”?

In one case, the dishwasher broke. The parents had two teenage children. What should they do?

Have it repaired?

Buy a new one?

They decided to do neither.

Instead the parents took turns washing up with one of their teenagers.

After all, you are more likely to have an accidental deeply meaningful conversation about life, the universe and the perfect boy / girlfriend with your teenager in the relaxed atmosphere of doing the dishes than in response to the question: “Why don’t we go into the living room and have a nice chat?” Interestingly, when the teenagers left home for university, the parents promptly went out and bought a new dishwasher.

The memorable moments that bring people together – the great laughs, the shared disasters, the wonderful sense of being understood – can as easily occur in a traffic jam, during a frenetic project, or doing the shopping, as in a chi-chi restaurant or savouring a hazelnut soufflé with the candlelight glinting in your eyes.

Creativity and discernment are required. Buying a 2000-piece jigsaw to finish over the Christmas holidays strikes me as an advanced form of psychological torture. However, for some people, it’s a stimulating, cooperative venture that can be nibbled at, left, returned to on your own or in pairs or threes or fours or sevens and can create precisely the kind of ease that allows conversation to meander from the incidental to the intimate and back again without pressure.

The key issue here is awareness. On the one hand, as we said earlier, we may have a lot of direct contact but have not found a way to do anything with it – like a parent who spends hours ferrying a child around in the car to various activities and, in the flurry of it all, doesn’t see the opportunity it presents. Interestingly, when people go to business meetings, they plan what they want to get out of the meetings. What would happen if, as we made our way home, we took a couple of minutes to consider how best to make the most of the coming family meal?

On the other hand, we may simply need to create opportunities for direct contact. That’s why some couples arrange date nights and others schedule sex – unspontaneous, even unromantic as that may initially seem. Still, it has the advantage of valuing that aspect of their lives that is so easily buffeted aside by the gusts and squalls of everyday living. And at least you know when to take a shower. Or get a headache.

Directness of contact also contains a component of intensity. How emotionally and mentally “there” are we when we’re physically there? This idea of “intensity” explains why some encounters have an impact out of all proportion to the amount of time spent – someone hugging you when you really need a hug, for example. Even a stranger. As happened to me once at a speaking engagement when, for reasons that had nothing to
do with the reception to my talk, I felt raw, wounded, and empty of the resources to face what I thought was waiting for me. Then a woman, clearly enthused by what she’d heard, came up to me and asked me if she could give me a hug. She really didn’t need to ask. Similarly, it is not just the singer James Blunt who has had the experience of seeing “her face, across a crowded space,” not knowing what to do but sensing that they “shared a moment that will last forever.”

Directness of contact doesn’t guarantee intimacy, but without it you’re very unlikely to experience it.

2. CONTINUITY OF CONTACT: TREASURE IT

I grew up in a little suburb called Northwood on the edge of Greater London. From the age of about ten, my mum would send me down to the shops with money, a list and a pencil to write down what I’d paid. I’d go and see Mr Allen, the grocer, who was always happy and always knocked a few pennies off the bill, and then on to Mr Worbuoys, who looked like a proper butcher, burly and red-jowled and a little bit fearsome. They’d know my name and ask after my mum, and then I’d pop into Carey’s to buy eight nails and put it on Mr Greene’s account. But now, thirty years later, I have to get in the car, drive four miles, get stuck in the ring road traffic round Watford to have the deep joy of going into some hardware hypermarket called Seek & Queue on the off chance that they might actually have what I want, to be greeted by no one at all, and then scurry round the aisles like a blindfolded toddler in Hampton Court maze, chasing the always receding figure of a salesperson I have never met and who not only doesn’t know my name but doesn’t know my mother’s name either. Only to discover that they don’t have what I’m looking for but that Nails R US might – which requires another trip round the ring road.

And this, I’m told, is progress.

Nevertheless, in the decade or so after leaving home, I’d go back into town and there’d still be people I knew and who would know me and ask after my mum. There was something warming about that continuity of relationship, about there being people you knew and who knew you, even if not necessarily very well, people you felt a definite affection for. But all those shops have closed now, and when I go to the supermarket, the people on the check-out seem to be different every time and they don’t know my name and no one ever takes a few pennies off the bill. Computers don’t work that way. Something’s been lost.

How arid so many of our sorties into the world now seem. No wonder so many people shop on the web.

Of course, auld acquaintance is not necessarily best acquaintance, but there’s something about old friends – they know just how many times you floated into a room to announce that you’d met the perfect partner, they know how many diets you’ve been on, they know you were never ever a size twelve, they remember that you were once a great dancer, that you have always had a way with young people, that you lost your first child. You don’t have to start all over. Or, in our high mobility, high turnover culture, over and over again. Indeed, as a nation, most of us have fewer friends than our counterparts fifty years ago, and we are much more likely to live more than half an hour’s drive away from relatives. And much less likely to work in the same company for ten years, never mind our whole lives.
Continuity builds trust, not only in the family but in the workplace and in the church. Continuity of presence within a particular community allows a number of relationships to flourish at different levels. Obviously, we can’t be best friends with everyone, but after a while just the fact that we have been around people in our work or in our town or our club for years develops affection and a sense of belonging and trust.

Continuity of relationship matters, so when we are thinking about moving jobs or houses or towns or countries, we need to ask ourselves how it will affect our relationships. And whether the relational sacrifice is actually worth it.

3. COMMONALITY OF PURPOSE: CLARIFY IT

It was the end of the season. Not my season, but the end of my son’s Saturday morning football coaching sessions. The coaches had decided that there would be a fathers-against-fathers match and that they would join in. The coaches were for the most part under thirty. And the fathers for the most part were over forty. And to the naked eye, and I include myself, we looked somewhat beyond full-fledged matches involving anyone who can run a mile in under a quarter of a day. But, we were told, it would be twenty-five minutes. So we went for it, most of us without boots or anything resembling proper soccer kit.

Of course, this being England, the fathers who had been faithfully watching their progeny from the sidelines had hardly talked to each other for the whole season. Still, as we eyed each other somewhat nervously, there were already the flickerings of an embryonic respect, somewhat suppressed by the more urgent hope that we would a) survive without the need for an ambulance and a defibrillator and b) not play so badly that our sons put themselves up for adoption.

Still, it felt like backs-to-the-wall, not-really-ready-for-the-battle, ill-equipped, not-a-pair-of-Nike-90s-between-us, but, hey, needs must – Dunkirk spirit and all that sort of stuff.

So we huffed and we puffed and the wind blew the ball around. Twenty five minutes passed. Slowly. But they passed. The whistle blew. Grimaces turned to grins, chests expanded, relief abounded. Then we discovered it was twenty five minutes each way. Huffs turned to wheezes that sounded like chalk across a blackboard, and puffs to red-cheeked, doubled-over, hands-on-knees, hurricane-force panting.

But we survived. And as we left the field, something had changed in all our relationships. It wasn’t just that that round ball of a man, scarcely five-foot-six, and surely overweight, had the agility of a squirrel and the shot-stopping capacity of a truck, it was more elemental than that. We’d all got through this unexpected challenge, and we’d had a good game. And so there was a warmth as we left the field, eye contact and genuine smiles as we shook hands. We’d connected. If we’d started the season with the fathers’ match, we would have had a lot more fun watching from the sidelines.

Shared activity, shared purpose, shared experience bind people together.

And when we share goals, it often diminishes personality tensions or helps to resolve them more quickly when they occur. Wars, for example, tend to focus even ethnically diverse nations. Many people who lived through World War II still reminisce about the positive sense of community they experienced. And as President Barack Obama has pointed out, this is one of the reasons that the US politicians who emerged in the post-
war years were so much more respectful to one another than the bulk of their successors: they'd fought a war together, they'd put their lives on the line for a cause greater than pretty much any issue than they were likely to disagree on in Congress.

The impact of commonality of purpose on relationships is also clear in family, community, church and working life. People motivated by a clear common cause tend to be more productive and satisfied. A family that’s involved in the ‘family’ project together and recognises their shared commitment to helping one another flourish is ever so much stronger than a gaggle of individuals loosely joined by genes, shared facilities and occasional meals.

Interestingly, as it relates to the workplace, an alarming number of workers don’t know what’s expected of them and how or why what they do fits in with the institution’s goals. Employees may have a sense that they are there to make a profit for the shareholders but, beyond that, what is the company’s purpose?

Indeed, as Collins and Porras demonstrated in their book Built to Last, the most consistently profitable companies are not those that focus on profit but on some higher goal. So people need to know how their work contributes to the realisation of that higher mission and to be convinced that the mission is indeed worthwhile. One man is chiselling stone, another man is building a cathedral; one woman is making furniture for science labs, another woman is facilitating the safe pursuit of knowledge for the benefit of humankind; one teacher is teaching kids enough mathematics to get a C, another is helping them grow into fully-rounded adults with enough self-respect, enough self-confidence and enough self-knowledge to find a role that contributes positively to humankind.

Interestingly, the same applies in the church, where an alarming number of people have very little sense of what the church is there to do other than to carry on doing what it is already doing. Indeed, whilst it is certainly true that one of the best things you can do for a lonely person is give them something to do, particularly if it involves others, people actually need to know why they’re doing it. Are they serving coffee because people need a drink after seventy-five minutes in a service? Not a bad reason, by the way. Or are they seeking to facilitate conversations that deepen friendships and open up new ways to encourage one another in the high calling that God has given each one? Is there any sense of how these essential, though mundane, tasks serve the great task of bringing God’s love to the world?

Community without purpose is a dead and deadening thing. But shared purpose builds community and releases creativity.

4. MULTIPLEXITY: FOSTER IT
Jane was my boss, a tall, elegant, understated English lady, just thirty and not yet married – I’ve had worse assignments. She had been in advertising since she was eighteen, and was just getting into her stride. She ended up as vice chairman and one of the most adored and respected people in the agency. I ended up adoring her too. She seemed utterly at home in the metropolitan world in which she moved – cabs and clients and nice restaurants and a penchant for twinkly things that her salary did not yet give her an opportunity to celebrate. Then she invited me down to her home in the country. It was a little cottage with a smallish garden split between English flowers and a vegetable plot that yielded all kinds of good things and was the beginning of my love for purple
sprouting. And there she was, more at home than in the urban scene, in Wellington boots, not Prada, with thick gardening gloves to protect her parabolic nails, making interesting meals from home-grown produce and taking me on long walks through the Wiltshire countryside. It was in a way a revelation, consistent, of course, with what I knew of her as a person who appreciated the good things in life but making me realise that the range of the good things she appreciated was so much wider than I could have guessed and so much wider than mine. And so our friendship grew.

People who see one another in more than one kind of context – a multiplexity of contexts – are more likely to develop and maintain deeper relationships. This makes intuitive sense. If I only see a person in one context, in which they are required to play a particular role, wear particular types of clothes, and, in general, confine their conversation to a relatively narrow range of topics, how well will I know them? But if I see them in another context – at a football match, screaming out their lungs in a vein-bursting apoplectic crimson rage at the arrantly unjust and galactic incompetence of an official – I get a different picture. Hence the value of office parties, off-site team-building exercises, and excursions to the pub. Or indeed family days. It’s quite helpful for people to see where spouses/friends/parents work – even if it’s only a desk wedged between banks of filing cabinets behind a pillar in a windowless corridor – as my first office was. (My colleagues called it “the hutch” – not that I’m bitter, the carrots were large.) And it’s quite helpful to meet some of the people they work with and they to meet you: you’re real and that secretary he raves about is sixty-two not twenty-one. Or she’s twenty-six. And on a scale of 1 to 10, she’s an 11. Now you know what he faces every day

“Time for a new job, darling.”

Or a new secretary.

This insight also explains the potential value of some corporate entertaining. When I used to work in advertising, I rarely spent my entertainment budget, despite being encouraged to do so. Sadly, there was a little bit of the legalist in me that somehow regarded corporate entertaining as a form of bribery – stick with us and you’ll get to go to the US Open. But at its best, corporate entertaining is a legitimate attempt to develop trust by widening the scope of the relationship. Many high-level decisions may well still be made on the golf course, and this may not be because senior executives are swept off their feet by the sight of a well-manicured green but rather that on a golf course there are usually not lots of other people around. In that context, a senior executive can say what they think, express a level of doubt or lack of understanding that might be difficult in a meeting with ten subordinates hanging on their every syllable and expecting them to be incisive and decisive. The same applies at any level: the better the relationship, the more likely trust and understanding will grow.

Multiplexity can be applied to families and church contexts too. Has the married couple’s relationship been narrowed down to domestic duties and parental responsibilities? How are other important and enjoyable activities preserved? In what kinds of contexts do parents relate to their children? Is it too narrowly confined for parents to get to know their children or for children to get to know their parents? Indeed, there is some evidence that parents with daughters are slightly more likely to divorce than parents with sons. And the reason, given that it tends to be fathers who are required to leave the family home, is that men, though they may love daughters as much as sons, actually feel more bound to sons because they have a wider natural repertoire of leisure activities to
share. The old adage was that the family that prays together stays together, but might it also be true that the family that plays together stays together?

Or, looking at a church context, does the church offer her people a range of ways to relate, not simply in what might be called overtly “ecclesiastical” activities – prayer, Bible study, worship – but in activities that allow people to express other aspects of their humanity – informal suppers, book clubs, sports teams, clean-up-the-neighbourhood days, and even, heaven forbid, quiz nights where you discover that that shy, somewhat retiring individual actually knows more about life, the universe and everything than Wikipedia and has such a comprehensive knowledge of music that they can tell you the name of the bass player on every top 10 album since the invention of the wind-up gramophone. Of course, it may not be immediately obvious how such a discovery might further the cause of the gospel. Still, it’s no trivial thing to appreciate other people’s enthusiasms and accomplishments. And besides, might they not be the perfect person to introduce to that music-obsessed work colleague that you’ve been meaning to have round for supper?

5. PARITY OF POWER: PROTECT IT

Her name was Philippa-Jo Dobson, which sounds rather grand, but most people called her Jo. That being her name, I used it too. Still, I preferred to hail her as Jo-Jo, punching the syllables out in exuberant, somewhat infantile delight. Sometimes I’d call her PJD as if our operation were a sleek, stainless steel, impersonal paragon of cool corporate efficiency. Jo was our receptionist and events manager and conference manager and probably a whole host of other things that I, as executive director even of a small team, was only dimly aware of. That was her job. And she was good at it. My job was rather different. I’m meant to be good at speaking in public, at connecting theology and ordinary life in a way that is both authentic and feels possible. On my team, I have people with a high level of theological acumen, and they help me do things better. We also have experienced speakers and seminar leaders who can not only tell me that something worked well, or didn’t work at all, but also spot why.

Anyway, after one evening engagement, I received some feedback from Philippa-Jo through another “junior” member of staff about what I’d said and how I’d said it. And it was probably the most helpful piece of feedback I’d received in three years. She simply said, “When Mark speaks, even on a familiar topic, but out of what God is doing in his own life at the time, it is so much more powerful.”

Jo is not a trained theologian, though she is very astute theologically. Jo is not an experienced public speaker though she leads worship in her church. But she, like the rest of the team, is committed to us all doing what we do as well as we can under God. She could have supposed that she shouldn’t say anything, and so could the person who passed it on. Still, in healthy organisations, like healthy families, everyone should have parity of power – an equal right to express their opinion, make a contribution, have their voice heard, and feel that they can ask the CEO not to call them PJD or Jo-Jo, if it turns out to be a source of niggling irritation rather than soaring delight.

It is, after all, the powerful who tend to assign people the nicknames that are used in public. And this applies as much to adults as children. Indeed, the principle of parity would mean that ‘Big Nose’ – a nickname that has been applied to me for reasons which only an elephant or toucan might dispute – gets to choose whether he wants to continue
to be called ‘Big Nose’ and whether that is as appropriate in a board meeting as it is over a meal with old friends.

Of course, people are not equal in their skills or knowledge and so should not have an equal “say” in how things are run. I don’t know a great deal about running conferences. I don’t know as much about technology as the director of operations at LICC (The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity). Actually, I don’t know as much about technology as my son when he was nine. Or my daughter when she was seven. Actually… I don’t know much about technology. But as a user, it’s important for me to have my say. Similarly, a welder may not know as much as the company finance director about structuring loans, but he or she should certainly have some opportunity to comment on the consequences for their company. All people are created in the image of God and worthy of respect and dignity and entitled to a voice.

One person’s superior competency in one area should not lead to treating people as inferior beings nor to the assumption that those less competent in a particular area do not have something to contribute that may turn out to be vital.

Take the recent global financial crisis. We had devised a system so complex that it was almost impossible for a non-expert to comment without being dismissed as ignorant. But what we have learned is that 99.98 percent of the world’s financial experts were wrong, that they were not as smart as they or we hoped they were. We also learned that those financially unsophisticated people who had qualms about the ethics of an economy where so much money was being made on money rather than by making products or offering services were right to be concerned. And we learned that we hadn’t found a way to listen to those voices. On a smaller scale, company suggestion boxes are a small but significant manifestation of a belief in the parity of power.

The apostle Paul illustrates the concept of parity by using the metaphor of a body to describe the church. Every part is vital, though clearly each part has a different function. The finger may not be as good as a foot at rifling a soccer ball twenty-five yards into the top right-hand corner of the net, but a finger can point out that an opposition player is lurking unmarked on the edge of the box. Similarly, as Jesus pointed out, adults have something to learn from the faith of children, even if he wouldn’t have advocated putting a six-year-old in charge of the local synagogue.

This concept of parity has clear implications in a whole host of areas – from labour relations to family. As union leader Tom Jones put it, “There has never been a strike about pay – only about pay differentials.” People usually don’t strike because they want more money but rather because they feel that they are not getting a fair share of the money available. Indeed, over the last thirty years, the pay of top-level executives no longer bears any logical relationship to the pay of those who work for them. In a context where the pay differentials between CEOs and junior employees have risen so rapidly and in some cases, to a factor of over 300 to 1, it’s easy to see why many workers have come to feel resentful, particularly when huge salaries are not dependent on spectacular performance and when huge bonuses can be paid to people who have actually bankrupted the companies they work for.

For many people, such differentials seem to flout a basic principle of proportionality – are the highflyers really making that big a contribution? And are they really sharing the risk? Similarly, a big company has considerable power to abuse its suppliers by squeezing
them on price to the point of unprofitability. The small company clearly doesn’t have parity of economic power but should they not have the right to make a fair profit too?

And this applies in the family. Who has a voice? One of the most countercultural aspects of the Jewish Passover service is the moment when the youngest male child present asks the Four Questions to discover why this night is different from all other nights. The practice dignifies the simplest question. It communicates that we all need to know why we do things, whatever our status. It reminds us that we are all meant to be included, not as mere functions but as people created in the image of God who are part of this unfolding drama in time and eternity.

Later in the book we look at how the five criteria might apply to relationship with God, but for the moment, consider your relationships at home, at work, in your local community, club or in church. How would you describe them? And what might you do to improve the directness, continuity, multiplexity, priority of purpose and parity of the ones that are important to you?

In daily life, in daily work, what we think, what we say, what we feel, what we buy, how we dress affects relationships – with God and with our neighbour – so considering our behaviour in the light of its consequences on relationships is vital.