

# THE EIGHT PRINCIPLES OF RELATIONAL CAPACITY: THE FIRST OF THE 3 Ps

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As we move ahead in this series I'm inviting you to move beyond the 'what' of relational health – understanding the fundamentals of the relational paradigm – to the 'how': the real measures you can take to transform your organisation, build connection and thrive in this new century of mental health challenges, generational shifts and global permacrisis.

So far we've been thinking about the relational paradigm and the new relational approach that's urgently needed. In the previous article specifically, we considered the crucial balance organisations need to strike between relational and economic wealth if they are to fulfil their potential.

That's the 'what', and I now encourage you to join me in engaging with the 'how': the Principles, Processes and Practices (what I call the 3 Ps) by which you can make the magic of the relational paradigm a reality in your own organisation. In this article we will focus on the first P – the principles.

## The 'how'

It's clear that the mental health of employees and teams requires real attention and commitment. But rather than treating the good mental health of individual employees as the holy grail, organisations need to recognise it is in fact only a result – an output.

Crucial as it may be, individual mental health is something that will naturally come if we can achieve the real input required: the healthy relational spaces that are the only possibility for genuine human and organisational thriving.

For that, a shift is needed to a new way of thinking in which the importance of relational capacity and the quality of our relating is the top priority, and pursued with intentionality, deliberateness and sensitivity.

## *“We are talking about the ‘how’: the Principles, Processes and Practices by which you can make the magic of the relational paradigm a reality in your organisation”*

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Even with all this understood, you might well ask how we can make such a radical transition happen. My next three articles will be about exactly that!

### *“A shift is needed to a new way of thinking in which the importance of relational capacity and the quality of our relating is the top priority”*

It’s a question I’ve been thinking about over more than two decades of practice, and in this fourth article I’ll share the relational principles I’ve developed over that time. These eight principles are the foundation you need to grow your organisation’s capacity for resilience, agility, responsiveness and stress-tolerance; in combination with the other two Ps (Practices and Processes, which follow in subsequent articles), they will build in your workforce the security and confidence needed to respond to the change and uncertainty all individuals and organisations face in the twenty-first century.

Let’s start with a story.

### *I’m marking you up*

A colleague of mine recently began advising on recruitment for one of the world’s largest consulting firms.

While building his team he was surprised – dismayed might be a better word – that at no point in the existing interview structures were candidates invited to share and reflect on their decision-making processes. So to demonstrate the value of the missed opportunity he ran some interviews himself.

‘Share with me how you make decisions,’ he said to one candidate. ‘What’s the process? And what are your priorities – do you as a rule prefer progress or perfection?’

With little hesitation the candidate gave an intelligent, articulate response that came down firmly on the side of progress. She believed that the obsessive pursuit of perfection can potentially stifle innovation and creativity.

My colleague reflected for a moment before responding. ‘Thanks for that great answer. Reflecting on it, I’m realising that my original question wasn’t as fully developed as I thought, because we need to consider situations where we’re producing reports that are legally binding – that’s to say, you and the company will be fully liable for the absolute accuracy of the contents.

Does that influence your thinking in any way?’

The candidate didn’t respond immediately, but after a moment took a deep breath. ‘I hope you won’t mark me down for this,’ she said, ‘but given that context I want to change my answer.’

## *“Humans are co-regulating, fundamentally relational beings whose resilience and stress-tolerance is greatest in an environment where we feel valued and safe”*

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‘Mark you down?’ my colleague asked. ‘The opposite. You just gave me so much incredibly positive information about you and how you process. I’m marking you up. Now, tell me more.’

### ***Building relational capacity***

There’s a lot we can learn from this deceptively simple anecdote. Most obviously: even very successful companies can have huge blind-spots when it comes to building and understanding their teams. But I hope you agree it also specifically demonstrates the importance of constantly building relational capacity through close attention to how we relate, and begins to suggest the principles that are needed to underpin such an approach.

Let’s consider what my colleague was doing at a fundamental level. Rather than resorting to the sort of familiar questions that tend to prompt rehearsed responses – ‘Give me an example of when you solved a difficult problem using team-work’; ‘What do you consider your greatest strength or weakness?’ – he expressed genuine curiosity about the candidate in a way that encouraged thoughtful reflection.

Then, having received an informative answer, he took it as a prompt to reflect upon, evaluate and evolve his original question. Having clearly demonstrated his own curiosity and willingness to learn, and created a

secure space in which the candidate could do the same, he finally asserted the value of the candidate’s candour and willingness to adjust.

What emerged? An interviewee with a positive focus on balancing progress and perfection, the capacity to balance priorities differently when appropriate, and the ability to rethink previous positions based on emerging information. What is also essential is the time my colleague took to allow and encourage that emergence, and the careful intentionality he showed in creating a relational space that manifested the principles of curiosity, engagement, mutual vulnerability, respectful candour and reflection – five of the eight principles that I’m inviting you to think through with me in this article.

***“Even very successful companies can have huge blind-spots when it comes to building and understanding their teams”***

By doing so he offered the candidate a lived experience of what it is to work in a healthy, cultivated relational space, encouraging them to display their thinking and processes, and ultimately allowed a more effective conversation to bloom that fully served the objectives of the interview.

## ***“These eight principles are the foundation you need to grow your organisation’s capacity for resilience, agility, responsiveness and stress-tolerance”***

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It’s a beautiful example of how the deliberate, thoughtful cultivation of a relational space can pay dividends. It illustrates the profound things about human behaviour and insights from fields as diverse as neuroscience, psychology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and even economics that we have explored in earlier articles: humans are co-regulating, fundamentally relational beings whose resilience and stress-tolerance is greatest in an environment where we feel valued and safe – in conditions in which fear and anxiety reactions can be avoided and we empowered to do our best work and make our most meaningful contributions.

***“It’s a beautiful example of how the deliberate, thoughtful cultivation of a relational space can pay dividends”***

To cultivate those conditions, organisations need more than values or guidelines, important as those things are. Rather, they need clear principles that can be felt, internalised and ultimately embodied by individuals and teams in every interaction and endeavour.

That is where the eight principles of relational capacity come in. No one of the 3 Ps is more important than the others, since each is an essential part of an interlocking whole. But the principles come first because they are the concepts, beliefs and commitments upon which the others are founded – you could think of them as the script, the starting point for everything that follows.

### ***Eight principles to transform individuals, teams and organisations***

#### ***Curiosity***

In a very real way, curiosity is the primary mechanism by which we can achieve empathy and true understanding – both prerequisites for healthy and productive relational spaces.

If we are to relate in a healthy, productive way, we need to be able to feel and understand the position and experience of the other. Doing that involves being genuinely curious at all points, asking open-ended questions that do not presuppose answers but seek to discover unexpected ones.

It’s through curiosity that we can ensure a true understanding of the people around us and the problems we face, surrendering our urge to defend or promote positions arrived at in advance in favour of a genuine desire to learn, change and grow.

#### ***Reflection***

Reflection is the individual and shared process by which we can make meaning from our experiences.

In any healthy relationship or interaction, reflection is a necessity; and while it might seem the inevitable result of an attitude of true curiosity, that’s not the case.

## *“No one of the 3 Ps is more important than the others, since each is an essential part of an interlocking whole”*

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Instead, we must do the work to ensure we are reflecting on our own positions and opinions, understanding them and allowing them to evolve. Equally, we must ensure we are reflecting on the needs and motivations of those around us, so that we can benefit from them and in turn help them achieve their goals.

The process of fully intentional reflection is where our individual and shared work and goals can come together in true, productive harmony.

### ***Presence & Engagement***

At this point, we can begin to see the interdependence of the principles I'm outlining, because presence and engagement are prerequisites for true curiosity and for reflection, and fundamental for any healthy and productive interaction. There is a chicken-and-egg aspect to this!

Without presence and engagement, in fact, it is impossible for any true meeting to occur at all. It is only by cultivating presence and engagement that we stay in the productive, real 'here and now'. It is only when presence and engagement are there that we can manifest true curiosity, and only when they are being clearly demonstrated that those to whom we are relating can enter fully into relations with us.

### ***Respectful Candour***

Of course, harmony cannot come at the expense of progress – and for real progress the safety to challenge existing thinking and beliefs is crucial.

By maintaining an attitude of candour that is respectful at all times – that demonstrates positive intent, challenges the idea not the person, and is careful to clearly show constructiveness – we can help to cultivate a relational space in which challenges manifest not as problems but as opportunities for collaborative progress.

Respectful candour is as much considerate as it is authentic, is consciously in service of shared goals, and is clearly context-related to avoid defence, attack, blaming and shaming.

*“The process of fully intentional reflection is where our individual and shared work and goals can come together in true, productive harmony”*

### ***Vulnerability***

Equally indispensable as candour – in fact, the two are closely linked – is the capacity to embrace vulnerability: our own, our teams', our organisations', as well as those of the individuals, teams and organisations with whom we collaborate.

By embracing mutual vulnerability, we reduce the perceived need for defence or attack responses. As essential as it is to maintain respectful candour, it's only in a state of constructive vulnerability that such candour can create beneficial effects and – once again – progress.

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### **Service**

Progress – but progress towards what?

For challenges to manifest as shared positives in the way I've just described, a clear requirement is that we as a team are committed to a shared purpose in which we are equally invested, and from which all stand to benefit. We must be clear at all times about the work we're in service of, and maintain an understanding that everything each of us does or says is simply a contribution to our shared endeavour. This provides a context in which we can come together, and common ground to fall back on when things become difficult or challenges arise.

*“By embracing mutual vulnerability, we reduce the perceived need for defence or attack”*

### **Mindset of Abundance**

Equally, we must maintain an outlook that always takes abundance as its foundational assumption. We must cultivate the attitude that everything we do – whether obviously constructive or successful or not and whether we are working alone or in a team – moves us forward and upward, towards final outcomes that are not limited by our initial preconceptions of objectives, scope or limits.

A mindset of abundance allows us to keep in view the fact that even what looks like a step backwards – if it is wise and necessary – is progress, and that we should always be questioning, refining and removing the limits that can grow up around our shared endeavours.

It begets a generosity of belief in what's possible when we work together without setting up limits around our potential.

### **Navigation of Difference**

One sense of 'navigation' suggests the avoidance of dangers: to navigate our differences is to avoid being shipwrecked on rocks of disagreement or conflict, and of course this is essential. But another sense of 'navigation' suggests forward movement, exploration, discovery. So the phrase 'navigation of difference' actually encourages us to think of difference not only as a potential source of disharmony but as something from which we can benefit, an opportunity to find the undiscovered horizons that can only appear in the relational space between us.

If we are to create smart groups, we have to create environments in which difference is desirable and cultivated. It's natural to seek what's safe and familiar. But in fact we need to consciously cultivate and navigate difference.

## *“The eight principles will offer you and your team a solid, reliable frame around which to build a relational space of renewed health and productivity”*

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### ***Principles – not values – for progress and thriving***

Organisations have come to understand the importance of values, which are great in that they express what an organisation aspires to be. But they aren't enough to shape and direct behaviour at the really deep level required. What's needed are principles we can put into practice: that we can use every day, in every context and interaction, to embody the relational change we need.

I believe the eight principles discussed in this article will offer you and your team a solid, reliable frame around which to build a relational space of renewed health and productivity. More than believe – I've seen the miraculous change they can bring!

Even better, over my decades in private practice and working with organisations I've developed a practical and methodical approach that you can use to bed the eight principles down in your own organisation.

There isn't room in this short article, but full details will be available in my forthcoming book, as well as a tool for measuring progress on your journey towards full relational capacity.

I hope you'll join me next week to think about the second of the 3 Ps. They are the concrete practices through which we begin to pay attention to the 'me' in service of the 'we', practices that you as an individual can use on a day-to-day basis to embody the relational principles and transform the relational space of your teams and organisations.

By doing so, and increasingly as others around you do as well, you can create an organisation that will allow all colleagues to thrive in their differences and be empowered to achieve their full potential in an atmosphere of innovation, efficiency, generosity, encouragement and imagination.

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