

Connecting Strategic and Intimate Interactions: The Need for Balance

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ABSTRACT

To be fully effective as a couple, family, or work system, the presence is required of both intimate and strategic interactions. By moving in a rhythm from one to the other, there will be a balance or a "seamless braid." Competent alliances can switch flexibly and appropriately from the intimate to the strategic and back again over time. Difficulties in human relationships may be the result of an imbalanced or inappropriate use of one or both sets of interactions.

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INTRODUCTION

In an episode of the highly popular television program, *The West Wing*, there is a scene in which the President's press secretary, CJ Craig, holds a conference with the White House press corps. The exchange starts with CJ presenting a report about the President falling off his bicycle, and falling again when he tries to remount. She is open and forthcoming about this event—making it an exchange among fellow journalists—and ends her report by encouraging the reporters to “by all means, have a good time with this one.” Those present smile or laugh; the mood is warm and friendly. The interaction is a joining of everyone on a level playing ground.

Almost before CJ finishes her story, a reporter asks a question about a topic that CJ does not want to discuss. CJ replies by saying, in a decidedly no-nonsense manner, “it’s a light day; let’s not get into that.” The questioner chose not to insist on pursuing the matter further and became silent. The exchange with the press corps moved on to one or two relatively innocuous items before ending.

In this vignette we see the use of two powerful ways of relating to others. In talking about the President’s fall, CJ shrinks her “psychological size” as the President’s spokesperson in order to achieve closeness with the press corps. The members of the press willingly join with her. The interaction achieves a brief moment of mutuality and intimacy between CJ and the reporters.

When CJ starts to close down the press conference, and the reporter asks a question, CJ takes a hierarchical stance, increases her “psychological size,” and deflects the question. The reporter allows the deflection and cooperates in ending the discussion. The press conference shifts from an intimate to a strategic mode. This is a *strategic interaction* in which hierarchy prevails.

This paper presents a model for understanding and using these two basic modes in which people relate to each other, which we call *Intimate Interactions* and *Strategic Interactions*. *Intimate Interactions* are those that bring us closer to each other through caring about what each person is thinking or feeling. The intent is to enhance connectedness as a desirable goal in its own right. The behavior is used as a way of being together in a mutually powerful way, whether the context is a couple, a family, or an organizational relationship.

Strategic Interactions are the ways in which individuals exchange influence when the goal is to accomplish a specific task. Here, the intent is to use hierarchical power and to be less concerned with equality. Achieving the goal is of primary importance and, though connectedness is still desired, mutuality gives way to getting something done. Hierarchy is maintained by a willingness to lead and a willingness to follow.

To understand these different ways of behaving, it is important to grasp two essential notions:

- Both intimate and strategic interactions seek to maintain a connection among the parties involved. They are both ways of supporting ongoing relationships, but they are different ways of defining the *quality* of any given interaction. Intimate interactions are supported by feelings of mutual identification and empathy concerning the needs of the parties involved. Strategic interactions are supported by an acceptance of differences in accountability and authority in getting tasks accomplished.
- Though an interaction may be viewed in terms of an initiator and a respondent, a more useful perspective is to look at an exchange as a *system* in which there are unspoken assumptions and agreements as to how we will interact with each other. When CJ acted strategically, the reporters present knew and accepted the fact that she had the power to act as she did. They accept this power differential; otherwise they would continue to confront her with their questions. Likewise, when the reporters and CJ joked about the President's fall, they were acting on an unspoken agreement that they were "comrades" trying to achieve mutual objectives. Lacking this, they are likely to be cautious in joining with her in a playful way.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before moving into a detailed discussion of definitions and examples of the two modes of interacting, it may be useful to look at prevailing values in human relations theory and practice since the time of World War II. In the Western world, beginning about 1940, there was a great spurt in the drive for participative democracy and involvement in decisions of personal importance. Lewinian-inspired group dynamics, the growth of labor unions, and the development of a better educated work force helped to create the field of "human relations" and to broaden the definition of "industrial relations." The focus shifted from reliance on hierarchical power to that of consensus building and cooperation. Sensitivity training and community-building interventions proliferated, and leaders were subjected to many forces and programs exhorting them to listen more to their employees and followers, and to minimize hierarchical differences in the service of achieving better relationships based on mutual trust. Over time, organizational and community leaders were strongly encouraged to lessen their hierarchical power, a trend that continues today as the prevailing doctrine.

At the same time, there was a significant increase in forces for self-expression from people in all walks of life. The liberation movements of the 1960s, supported by the development of the human potential movement in general, gave rise to flourishing industries devoted to helping people to "let it all hang out," "do their own thing," etc. This included the

growing field of psychotherapy, once for the privileged few and now for the population at large.

There was also a corresponding shift in the theory of family relations and family therapy. Supported by important writers such as Benjamin Spock, a significant body of research on child development, and increased recognition of the rights of children, what children thought, felt, and/or wanted became important. Parents were expected to take great interest in this, and to create a climate in the family in which there was more open sharing. Marriage and other forms of commitment also began to be judged in terms of the quality of the intimacy provided and the support for self-actualization. For many, this became more important than how the couple or family managed the work required to maintain a human system.

These developments have had a great, almost revolutionary, impact in teaching people the importance of a close connection and how to achieve it. The movements discussed above have been successful, and we now have much more open and democratic relationships than existed at the beginning of the 20th Century. On the other hand, these movements tend to work against a view of the positive nature of hierarchy, and of the use of what we call strategic interactions. There are times when strong forces for close connection will be dysfunctional, even though they are highly useful. We now need to swing the pendulum back and honor having one's influence prevail when it is useful or required for getting work accomplished—whether in a family or a business organization.

In this paper, we hope to show that hierarchical influence can be highly useful when it is supported by intimate interactions. Our major thesis is that intimate interactions support hierarchical interactions, and that hierarchical interactions support intimate ones.

AN INTEGRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Our thesis is fairly easy to comprehend, yet profound in its implications. Stated simply:

Systems designed primarily to bring people closer together (sometimes referred to as “intimate alliances”), such as couples and families, need the support of strategic behaviors if they are to be effective and nourishing. A highly loving family that cannot manage hierarchical differences is often dysfunctional: mismanaging child rearing, children, finances, etc. Likewise, task relationships that focus too heavily on the achievement of interpersonal closeness—trying to achieve strong intimate alliances—will have trouble in getting work done effectively, particularly in making difficult decisions. This point is illustrated by the following case:

I had a call from Nancy. She had a new job and asked whether I would be willing to come and observe her giving feedback. Nancy is a music therapist, and her job is to lead groups at a large Community Center. She said it was a mixed

group—men and women; many struggled with substance abuse and others with mental instability. I observed as people arrived and Nancy greeted them by name, or, if it was a new person, welcomed them. I was surprised to see that this group had about 25 people, and that Nancy led it alone.

She began by recruiting one of the “regulars” to tell the group how this particular session, called a “Listening Group,” would work. People brought in music that they wanted played, and then they talked about why they had chosen it and about what it meant to them. Others joined in about what had been evoked in them. It was moving for me to watch it.

There were several difficult people: a man who talked too much and interrupted others frequently; a man who listened to his own music with earphones, but nevertheless his music could be heard by the others; a woman who said the music reminded her of a conflict she was having with another woman in the room, and then launched into telling private things about the other one with no permission from her; and a woman who would get up once in a while and play a little on a drum that was in the rear of the room.

I remembered that Nancy had led many groups with different populations: the elderly, children, and teenagers. Her skill in forming intimate alliances was impressive. She moved around, said a little here, asked a question there, and used non-verbal cues to make excellent contact with many people. She knew less about using the connections she had to build strategic alliances. She did know a little about it intuitively, but was somewhat awkward when she needed more than her intimate moves.

We met later to talk about the session. I explained about the building of alliances that included both intimacy and strategy. She needs to learn to take better “charge” with the interrupter; since she had already built an intimate alliance with him, she could switch and expect him to follow her willingly. She needed to change the tone of her voice, to say fewer words, and to ask and expect different behavior from him. She needs to “sandwich” intimate interactions with strategic ones as needed. We practiced a few times until she could feel the difference. She said she would try it out.

A few weeks later, Nancy called to say that her groups were going splendidly and that, while she could not always make the switch with some people to a strategic alliance, her success rate was going up.

- Systems designed primarily to accomplish work, such as business organizations and schools, cannot be effective without the presence of intimate behaviors. Effective strategic systems rely on exchanges of thoughts, ideas, information, and feelings. On the other side, a family that is highly effective in getting work accomplished but lacking in emotional closeness—acting too much like a work system—is likely to fail in fulfilling its purpose of providing emotional nourishment and profound connection. Consider the following case:

A married couple, each a lawyer, came to see me for help with a specific conflict: The husband chose to leave his law firm for another firm. He wanted his wife to join the new firm; she had many reservations. I could see they had highly developed strategic skills. They had quickly put together a set of rules, ten in number, produced by one of them and agreed to by the other. An example of the rules they adhered to involved not interfering with the choice of the other in any overt or subtle way.

They stayed in the strategic mode well, and seemed to feel supported by one another in doing so. However, after a brief time in my office, I realized that the skills of the strategic mode were not providing enough satisfaction with the exchange. They had begun to ask questions that begged a less perfunctory and more personal response. Their exchange started with: "Why do you think the new firm will make you happier than you were?" The questions were seen to have hidden agendas, and answers were evasive; escalating conflict ensued. The need to rhythmically switch to an intimate interaction was becoming timely.

Strategically, in the service of the economy of time and the protection of the shared goal of not interfering with the choice of the other, a brief and somewhat vague answer may have worked well. When the need arose for mutuality, they did not know how to ask and respond to questions well. Questions and detailed responses are so important in intimate interactions that it is appropriate to ask, "Did that answer your question?" and to want to know if in fact the response to a question was adequate. Switching to an unfamiliar way was hard for them. Their highly developed strategic skills had no cushion of intimate interaction in the moment it was sorely needed. The couple was unable to switch from one form to another, and momentarily lost energy and hope for mutual support for a change in their life together.

- To be fully effective as a couple, family, or work system requires the presence of both intimate and strategic interactions. By moving in a rhythm from one to the other, there will be a balance or a “seamless braid.” Competent alliances can flexibly and appropriately switch from the intimate to the strategic and back again over time. They look seamless as they switch back and forth. When used appropriately over time, trust is built and alliances become stronger and stronger.
- Difficulties in human relationships may be the result of an imbalanced or inappropriate use of one or both sets of interactions. Inappropriate intimate interaction makes it difficult to achieve a high level of productivity and satisfaction in work tasks. Inappropriate strategic interaction makes for cold and distancing environments, often resulting in a loss of creativity in the work. Both lead to dissatisfaction and can lead people to a desire to move to a more nourishing environment.

MYTHS ABOUT INTIMATE & STRATEGIC INTERACTIONS

Over the years several myths have developed about both intimate and strategic Interactions. Some of them cause the need for intimacy to be easily dismissed in organizations, where the basic processes are goal and output-oriented. The same is true for the dismissal of strategic interactions in a couple, family, or group whose basic purpose is emotional closeness. Here are two of the most prevalent myths:

- One myth about intimacy is that the intimate interaction requires honest and full disclosure. Saying whatever is thought or felt is done with impunity. To disclose one’s feelings, especially about the other, is thought to be the sine qua non of intimate interactions. Yet we know the kinds of trouble that can ensue as a function of acting on this myth. In our model, self-disclosure without a developing sense of its impact on each other promises failure. Self-disclosure needs to be modulated by strategic considerations of what each person can take in, and of how each is reacting to the other. No two people have the same clarity and speed of expression, and there is wide variation in the ability of people to absorb troubling news. This may be accomplished by a combination of statements and questions: “I think this—What do you think?” It also helps to tread gently when there is the possibility that one or the other might be hurt by something that is said.
- One myth about strategy is that action taken without a full and caring exchange of awareness is disrespectful to people. Strategic interac-

tions push for action, and they are often characterized as “hard” or lacking in spontaneity or authenticity, particularly by those who strongly prefer intimate interactions. Another myth is that strategic interactions are too structured toward the result, or they lack authenticity. But when action is required, economy of time and energy is important. Frequently actions must be taken without much shared awareness. The ability to invent actions that can sustain the energy to achieve a goal speaks of a strategic alliance that can be highly creative. When enough “cushion” of trust, connection, and “softness” have accumulated in the past experiences of people with each other, it is easier to see how good work requires a complex strategic alliance that can accomplish a larger goal. Thus, intimate and strategic interaction can reinforce the value of each, destroying the myths.

An anecdote helps to illustrate this: One of the authors did graduate work in a psychology department headed by a well-known psychologist who loved to hold parties at conferences and conventions to which he invited his graduate students. These were lively events in which conversation flowed freely and hierarchy was temporarily suspended. On one such occasion, the professor said to us, “You can call me by my first name here, but if you do not address me as Professor back at school, you are dead in the water.” The clarity of this statement made it easier for all of us to know how to behave at different times, and when to shift from one mode to another.

QUALITIES OF STRATEGIC INTERACTIONS

We define strategic behavior as intentional actions directed toward the achievement of a desired goal. It usually involves an exchange of influence among people who are in a hierarchical relationship, or who have developed a system with each other for giving and receiving influence. While connectedness is desired, strategic interactions override mutuality: two people do not necessarily want the same thing, but they have an unspoken acceptance of the rules of leadership and followership.

Some qualities of strategic interactions are:

- The ability of all to stay focused on a goal without being deflected by emotions.
- The ability of those on each side of the hierarchical system to be abrupt, intrusive, or bold in the service of economy of time.
- The ability of those in the system to make/follow an unpopular decision.
- The ability of all in a system to disagree or fight for alternatives and still maintain the hierarchical alliance.
- The ability of all to mobilize energy in the face of disappointment.

- The acceptance by all those involved of hierarchical differences relative to accountability. "As your father, I am responsible for you, and you are not getting the car tonight." "Dad, it is not fair." "Perhaps not, but you are not getting the car."
- The ability to take command or follow others who have momentarily taken command in order to form a new strategic alliance as needed.
- The ability of all to share only the information necessary to effect an action.
- The ability to bear the loss of complete dialogue and the isolation or loneliness that it creates, and instead enter into the excitement of an action-based exchange.

QUALITIES OF INTIMATE INTERACTIONS

We define intimate behavior as any communication, verbal or nonverbal, that aims to enhance closeness. Our focus, however, is not on isolated behavior, but on the interaction that takes place between people. Such interactions require a giver and a receiver, a sense of mutuality, and the experience of little or no hierarchical difference. Some qualities of such interactions are:

- Expressions of interest in another that are perceived by the other as interest.
- The ability to ask questions and give answers, with the goal of knowing more about each other's thoughts and feelings.
- The ability to suspend or avoid the use of hierarchy during the exchange.
- The ability to commit to sustained dialogue.
- Humor, to keep the interaction "soft."
- All involved are open to influencing each other and to being influenced by others.
- Exchange is spontaneous and without a definite outcome in mind.
- The ability to stay focused on the here and now, the present moment.
- The ability to modulate the speed and tone of the exchange as a way to accommodate the "rhythm" of others.
- A commitment to not blame oneself or others.

INTEGRATING THE TWO MODES

As we said at the beginning of this paper, effective relationships require the ability to use both strategic and intimate interactions. Our opening case of CJ and the White House press corps showed how this can work in practice, and how one mode can support the other. Here are two cases demonstrating how integration of the two modes can be effective:

Case A

A short while ago, a client asked me to consult with the general manager and director of marketing of a division of a company that was experiencing difficulty. Once the second best performing division in the company, changes related to the downturn in the telecommunication industry had reduced sales significantly, and several key people had left to join competing firms. It was obvious that some difficult decisions had to be made.

I had been working with this firm for almost 10 years, and had a good relationship with these executives. In this relationship, I was functioning in part as a human resources executive.

I was asked to intervene on the basis that I had developed an intimate alliance with them. The President of the company knew that because of my connection, I would get the "followership" needed to respond to the challenge facing them. Sending someone with whom they did not have a caring, supportive relationship would only make them guarded and possibly defensive. As I saw it, my task was to help them look at the situation with a sharp eye, and to get all relevant data on the table in a way that did not provoke defensiveness on their part. Then, they would meet with corporate executives to present an action plan. This was important because some possible actions would involve relocating the managers from a geographical area in which they loved to live, and corporate executives speculated that they would resist this.

We met for 15 hours over three days. Every possible problem or potential action item was reviewed in depth. Because of the intimate alliance that had been created between the two managers and myself, I felt confident to challenge them, to ask difficult questions, and to push them for more comprehensive answers. I felt that they would follow my lead, looking at things I suggested. I also felt confident that they would be free to disagree with me. For example, the President of the corporation wanted the marketing director to change her work essentially to that of a salesperson making cold calls. As a Vice President of the firm, she was working at more challenging global marketing assignments and did not want to give them up. I helped her to see that she could continue to work at both of these jobs with some assistance from others, and I bluntly said that her responsibility was to sign onto the larger company goal or consider leaving the firm. I also met with some of their key people, and had the executives do an analysis of their capabilities. After listening to this, I told both of them that they

were not utilizing their people well, and helped them to see that they were being too soft in their supervision.

All through this discussion, I took care to make empathetic and reassuring comments. I did this to soften the conversation and to continue to strengthen the intimate bond that we were using to support ourselves through our difficult work. For example, close to the end, I said that they had convinced me that corporate headquarters had an incomplete picture of their situation, and that I could help them prepare a report that might give the corporation's executives a better picture of the situation.

I also helped them to design a plan for presenting their report. In addition, we had a long talk about personal and family considerations about relocation, and what they wanted for themselves. In the course of this discussion, I discovered that the executives were now more open to relocation, but were still greatly concerned about the practical consequences to the firm of such a move. They knew that I also cared about the impact on their family lives.

This assignment is still in progress, but the executives and I were confident that they had a better way of dealing with the situation. They sent an action plan for improving the situation and will soon have a meeting with the President and his staff.

In looking at this case, two things are important to consider. The first is that, for the entire consultation, we went back and forth between reliance on intimate connection and reliance on strategic connection. Unless one was studying the detailed exchanges in this meeting, they would experience this as a seamless process.

The second point is that, although I am a consultant, this case is a concrete example of how an effective executive can manage relationships. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that our model defines one aspect of good leadership, as well as good subordinateship.

Case B

An executive at a medium-sized firm asked me to help her with some advice on a small problem. She said that her boss was in the midst of a difficult divorce and since it was close to Christmas, she could guess that he was having a particularly difficult time. She said she wanted to say something sympathetic to him but didn't know if it would be stepping over a boundary for her to do that.

I asked her a lot of questions about their relationship. Did she

ever talk to him about his divorce? She said, only when he brought it up, and then she only listened. How long had he been her boss? She said, about seven years. How is the working relationship between the two of you? She said that this was the question bothering her. She had been working hard to establish a good working bond with him, and was working to have him see her in that capacity since he tended to undervalue the contributions of women. She thought she was succeeding and didn't want to undermine it.

I told her that I thought she could offer her empathy to him since they had a long enough relationship, that the strategic connection was solid, and that their relationship would only be enhanced if she now could find a balance between intimate encounters and strategic ones.

She said, OK, I have another, similar dilemma. One of my subordinates has had a death in the family, and I wanted to stop and talk to him about how he and his family were doing. She said that she remembered hesitating to do that and had decided not to say anything to him, but now she wanted to know what I thought. Again I asked her questions. How long have you been his boss? About a year she said. How is your working relationship? Getting better, she reported, saying, "At first I think he was startled to have me as his boss especially since I am younger than he is." I asked her whether she expressed her condolences to him when the death occurred. "Of course I did," she said.

I suggested that she not offer more condolences now, even though it is probably particularly hard for him during the Christmas season. I said that it sounded to me as if the strategic connection were not yet solid enough. She could engage in short intimate encounters with him, but since she felt that she needed to strengthen the work connection, it might be better to work at this before she could balance it with an intimate exchange.

She seemed satisfied and said she would try both suggestions, and see what she could learn from them.

IMPLICATIONS

There are several implications of the model presented above. Our perspective should be instructive for those who have positions of accountability, such as executives and parents, and who, for some years, have been exhorted by social scientists and organization theorists to reduce the hierarchical differences between themselves and those for whom they are

accountable. We show a more differentiated perspective, one that not only allows for hierarchy to count, but also insists that it is appropriate and necessary when people have a job to do. What our argument does say, however, is that strategic interactions will be more effective when relationships have a history of some intimate interactions. For example, physicians and consultants might give bad news to clients more effectively if there were a good base of intimate connection between them.

Finally, we think that our model deals with an important aspect of executive leadership, and shows that a well-rounded leader can function best with well-rounded followers.

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