

CHAPTER 14

OUR POTENTIAL NETWORK

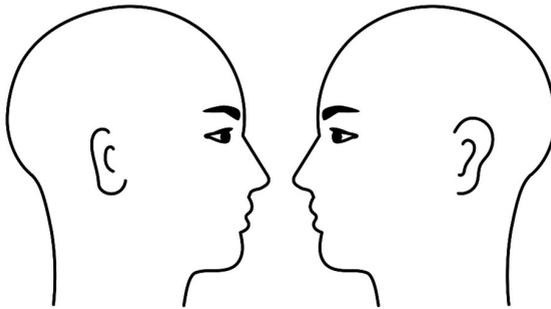
“He was a self-made man who owed his lack of success to nobody.” – Joseph Heller

I was flying home from a four-day session with Dr Riggio in New York. My flight was delayed by the cold weather, so I found myself passing the time by people-watching in the departure lounge.

There was a small girl, around five years old, who sat with her mother. She watched another similarly aged girl playing with a doll at the opposite end of the departure lounge. Finally, she climbed out of her seat and moved slowly, hesitating several times, before eventually engaging her in conversation. Over the next hour, I watched a friendship emerge. They talked, played and had a wild old time. The two mothers began to speak and were soon in deep conversation.

The two children disembarked hand in hand at Heathrow, with the parents still deep in conversation behind them.

I was left thinking. At what point do so many people lose this desire and ability to connect with strangers?



The self-made man is a myth.

Achieving any meaningful goal requires us to build purposeful relationships with others.

We need to collaborate with, teach, influence and persuade others. We also need to be taught, influenced and persuaded.

There are 7.8 billion (and rising) people to choose from, and it is estimated that we are only six connections¹⁹ away from any one of them. Technology has given us the ability to connect to more people through social media and global communication tools.

This can easily overwhelm us because we have limitations in our capacity for holding relationships with others.

A British anthropologist, Robert Dunbar, studied the relationship between brain and group sizes in primates and established a ratio. When applied to human beings, he calculated that we could have meaningful relationships with around 150 people²⁰ (5 loved ones, 15 good friends, 50 friends, 150 significant contacts, 500 acquaintances and 1500 recognisable people).

In reality, for relationships to be meaningful, they need to involve physical presence as this allows for body language, facial expression and tonality, not just curated words and images.

From a very early age, we pay close attention to others' noises, actions and facial expressions. We become sensitive to how others see us and where we fit in the pecking order because our survival is dependent on the tribe.

We could plot everyone we are connected with, at any point in time, on a spectrum between those we deeply

19 An application developed for Facebook calculated the separation between any two users to be 5.73.

20 This coincided with the average size of hunter-gatherer tribes. This number appears to repeatedly show up in large organisational structures of any kind.

love and those we wouldn't pee on if they were on fire, with all shades in between.

The dynamics of relationships are constantly shifting. Like bank accounts, every interaction either deposits or withdraws from the reserves of goodwill we have built.

Our uniquely complex and deeply embedded story plays a huge role in how we show up and are perceived by others.