

High Performance Relationships

The Heart and Science behind Success at Work and Home

Dr. Jacqueline Peters

Executive Book Summary

By Colleen Lemire, B.A., M.Ed., CERTMED

High performance relationships are the key to success in life. This applies to all our relationships—work, family, couples, social, and professional. Luckily, certain cornerstones can help us enjoy the benefits of safe and nourishing relationships. Dr. Jacqueline Peters has drawn from years of experience as an executive coach, team specialist, and in-depth academic research, as well as from her training in couples therapy, to bring these cornerstones together in this book. Her focus is on leaders, teams, and couples, since much of the data overlaps and supports effectiveness at both work and home. By putting into practice the concepts and exercises in this book, you too can build high performance relationships.

Preparation

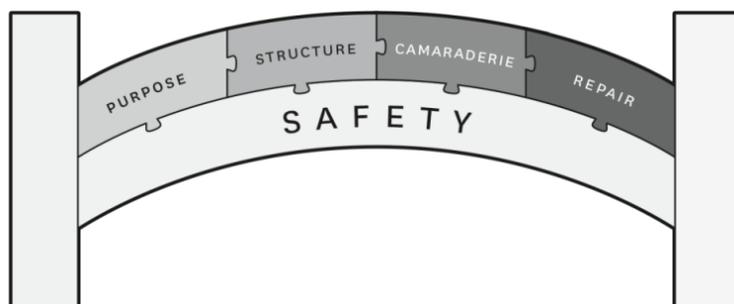
The book starts with exploring personal preparation. The first and most important relationship we have is with ourselves, and it's one we can develop in many ways. Self-awareness and self-regulation, foundational to emotional intelligence (EQ), are concepts made popular by psychologist Daniel Goleman. Strong EQ aids us in creating lasting relationships as we engage in empathy, sharing, and helping. Mindfulness, also essential to EQ, brings feelings and ideas that hide in the subconscious out in the open to examine. Once they are brought to light, we can choose to experience them more fully or discard what hurts or harms us.

Our mindset is also important. The concept of a fixed mindset is that intelligence, capabilities, and qualities are hardwired and cannot be changed through effort or focus. In contrast, the concept of a growth mindset is that people can develop and nurture their capabilities and qualities. Those with a fixed mindset often succumb to fear and worry, whereas those with a growth mindset are more flexible, resilient, and open to learning, change, and improvement. Our beliefs about ourselves are often reflected in our beliefs about others, so mindset can shape our optimism or pessimism about our relationships with others.

The goal of this self-preparation is to create and maintain high performance relationships. Peters uses three measures of high performance relationships: quality results; engagement and commitment; and growth and development. These measures help us assess our relationships based on their effects. Her exercise *Measuring Relationship Success* will guide you through this assessment. Don't worry if some of your relationships aren't high performing or even effective: the concepts and tools in this book can make all relationships better—you can then decide which ones you wish to invest in more heavily.

The Five Building Blocks

Peters explains the five building blocks of high performance relationships: Safety, Purpose, Structure, Camaraderie, and Repair. These blocks form a bridge that links our commitment to others to the outcome of successful relationships, with Safety the underlying foundation.



Building Block 1: Safety

In relationships, as in other aspects of our lives, we succeed best when we observe the core principle of Safety First. Just like any other skill, we must learn and practice how to create safe and secure bonds with others. Over the past several decades, physical safety practices and conditions in industry have improved: statistics show that when people feel safe talking about safety incidents and transgressions, safety is increased, because the situation is managed better. The same holds for psychological safety. When we have a profound sense of safety in our relationships, truth telling, innovation, and positive growth can occur and the best results achieved.

What is psychological safety? Peters cites team researcher Amy Edmondson's definition: "A climate in which people feel free to express relevant thoughts and feelings without fear of being penalized." Thus, it goes beyond the absence of danger and fear to include a willingness to be honest, vulnerable, and exposed without worry of repercussion.

Our primary tool in relationships is conversation. Through conversation we establish or destroy safety, and ultimately trust. Peters asserts that trust develops over time, an outcome of having ongoing experiences of feeling safe with others. Trust is either built or broken based on the quantity and quality of safety in the relationship. Trust takes time to build but can be broken quickly; however, if we focus on the root of trust—psychological safety—it becomes easy to notice when people are uncomfortable and likely feeling unsafe, allowing us to make adjustments before trust is irreparably damaged.

Neuroscientists tell us that our brain is organized around essentially two states: threat (pain) and reward (pleasure). We are cautious and guarded until we feel safe, even though the threats we face in relationships are not physical. They are perceived attacks on our character or well-being. If we want to interact in positive ways with others, we must access a neural circuit that is available only when we feel safe. It's possible to create this safe place for yourself in three steps: (1) take a risk and be vulnerable, (2) calm yourself down, and (3) give a different message to your brain about what is happening—tell yourself that you are not in mortal danger and can handle what's happening.

Peters also explores the work of attachment theory, which describes how we interact with others based on the safety we experienced as children in key relationships. (You'll find a link to an assessment in the [Resources](http://www.HighPerformanceRelationships.com) section of www.HighPerformanceRelationships.com.)

Peters, referencing the work of couples researcher John Gottman, describes behaviors that build or bust safety. The four key safety busters of criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling, and contempt, among others, can be shifted to safety builders using these practical tools in Peters' **SAFETY** toolkit: **S**low down, **S**hift your state and story; **A**sk and **A**cknowledge; **F**ocus on alignment; **E**mpathize; **T**ake turns; **Y**es or **Y**ield. These six key strategies make up the go-to model for creating, restoring, and maintaining safety for ourselves and others—creating a sense that the other person “has our back,” the feeling we strive for in all our important relationships.



Building Block 2: Purpose

The clearer we are about our purpose in life, the happier we are. Purpose means having a clear goal; it's a belief that what we do serves a greater cause. Purpose directs intentions, motivates actions, and produces results. Just as businesses and teams benefit from having vision and mission statements that articulate their purpose, personal relationships benefit from having a clear purpose. When commitment wanes, the purpose needs to be refreshed, to be inspiring enough to generate effort and renewed commitment. A compelling purpose moves people from being strong individual contributors to being on a team or in a couple that is actively and willingly playing together. Team members not only perform better, they perform better together. This is also true for couples, a team of two with 'benefits', says Peters.

Values are fundamental to articulating a relationship's purpose, and help us align with others to achieve goals, make a difference, or leave a legacy. Several exercises in the book will help you define common values and a compelling purpose.

Building Block 3: Structure

From amateur to professional, anyone who constructs something knows that “we get what we design,” and that whatever we create needs a structure to keep it together. This goes for building and maintaining relationships also.

For teams, structure includes who belongs on the team and how these members work together. When you identify roles and responsibilities, align resources for success, agree on guiding principles, and make clear working agreements, you are building the structure needed for success. These concepts work for couples and families too.

Once agreements are in place, it is easier to hold one another accountable. When you have a strong structure and create safety, you can “correct the course” and monitor progress. If purpose is the glue, then structure provides the resources and design for high performing relationships.

Building Block 4: Camaraderie

Camaraderie is the important aspect of building friendship and connection; the “light side” of relationships. It’s a key force behind positive interactions and helps us build feelings of engagement and commitment. Even when we “bust” safety through our behavior—and these relationship accidents do happen—the relationship has a high chance of being repaired if the people involved still like and respect each other.

An important concept here is positive and negative sentiment override. Our safety and trust levels with people cause us to see them in positive or negative lights, often irrespective of what they do. With positive sentiment override, we give the benefit of the doubt, even when people do something wrong or annoying. With negative sentiment override, we see people in a negative light or refuse to give them credit even when they do something good. Clearly, it is desirable to build a positive history and overall positive experience with others, especially with those in our important relationships.

For teams, communication patterns are the greatest predictor of team effectiveness and are as significant as personality, skills, and individual intelligence put together. Team members feel more engaged and energized when they communicate frequently with each other. For both teams and couples, the more people feel a spirit of “we-ness” and actually use the pronoun “we” over “I,” the stronger the team or couple will be.

Our personal attitudes and how we interact with others affects camaraderie. One of the top three predictors of happiness is optimism. Happiness is contagious, and our happiness can affect the happiness of others. The bottom line is that people prefer to work and live with happy, optimistic people—Peters discusses several ways optimism and happiness impact relationships.

Appreciation and gratitude help develop camaraderie. In research on notions of what is motivating in the workplace, employees put appreciation at number one. Finally, humor, play, and fun at work and in our personal relationships contribute to camaraderie.

Camaraderie is what brings and keeps us together, and is thus one of the five building blocks of high performing relationships.

Building Block 5: Repair

So, how do you get reconnected when you fall out of alignment with someone? We all know that relationship accidents and conflict occur, even in healthy relationships. Peters emphasizes that it’s important not to ignore our transgressions or avoid conflict—this only damages the relationship further. Repair is imperative.

Conflict typically arises from differences over one or a combination of these factors: facts and data, goals and objectives, methods, values and beliefs. One of the best ways to deal with conflict is to change our mindset, reframing conflict in a way that serves rather than enslaves us. It is helpful to think of conflict as a means of growth and opportunity and to not avoid frank conversations with others because of a fear of a setback.

We can choose to turn toward, away, or against another’s repair offer. Contempt, apathy, or avoidance kills relationships. We want to feel safe and connected to others, especially the important people in our lives. We want to know that they will work with us to resolve the issue and not turn their backs on it—and us. Turning *toward* repair efforts helps maintain connectedness.

Conflict-resolution strategies alone rarely repair relationships. We must be self-aware enough to recognize our emotional wounds, which trigger us and cause reactivity, and to clear them out. Reactivity, when the reaction is overblown for the situation, is a sign that we are in a threat state and that we may have been triggered by what is buried deep in our unconscious mind. We must do the difficult but rewarding work to heal these wounds or they will take over us.

The REPAIR Toolkit provides proven strategies to rebuild safety and continue dialogue. We cannot change others, but we can lead our relationships with courage to say what is needed without *attacking, blaming, criticizing, or defending*—the ABCDs that almost guarantee continued conflict.

The six key strategies start with personal reflection to realign and resume. Next, we connect with the other person and engage gently, taking equal turns to talk. The third strategy is to be, if possible, playful and positive in our approach, keeping the tone light while not making light of the issue. Authentic apologies and appreciations are helpful when repairing, as are making I statements that identify your accountability and responsibility in creating and fixing the issue at hand.



Finally, once each person feels that they have been heard, it is important to make and respond to requests for changes, and recommit to creating a productive relationship together. Being clear about what we *do* want versus what we *don’t* want helps us focus on a better future.

It is critical to apply these tools with honesty and a good heart, otherwise they become weapons. The other person will respond to our positive intentions, even if we are clumsy in the application.

Giving constructive feedback is an important skill to employ during difficult conversations. Self-awareness and creating safety in the conversation are essential. Focus on what can be done better in the future. Avoid the “feedback sandwich”—placing negative feedback between two positives. Instead, make it two separate conversations. Give positive feedback regularly through messages of praise and thanks. Before giving feedback, be clear on your intentions. During the conversation, offer your own contribution to the situation, and afterward, reflect on the result and what you need to do to move forward.

The *Issue Reconciliation Process* is a practical exercise to do when you are stuck, as it may uncover underlying issues, needs, or wounds that can be addressed and can help you achieve a breakthrough. Also identify what is and is not negotiable for both of you. Ask, “What makes this decision or issue so hard?” and “What keeps us revisiting this issue?” Stop trying to resolve intractable problems or conflict using typical problem-solving techniques and start creating agreements about what will work, acknowledging that some issues are actually style or value differences that may be irreconcilable.

Assessing and Investing in Relationships

All our relationships do not have the same importance and value to us. *The Relationship Investment Matrix* helps you determine if you want to invest time and energy in using the five building blocks to make a relationship higher performing. The matrix identifies six patterns of relationships, based on two key factors: the importance you place on the relationship, and the level of fulfillment you receive from it. Each relationship pattern has a corresponding strategy, described fully in the book:

Nourishing—Love it.

Energizing—Leverage it.

Entertaining—Like it.

Distracting—Lose it.

Draining —Load it or Limit it.

Harming—Leave it.

Use the *Relationship Investment Matrix* to determine which relationships to focus on and which investment strategy to use. Then complete the *High Performance Relationships Assessment* and use your results to determine which building blocks would best help you improve those chosen relationships.

Actions to Close the Intention-Impact Gap

If we don't achieve the results we want, it's useful to understand the intention-impact gap. Intentions, although similar to goals, are less specific and often contain a subset of goals or actions. Intentions are less concrete and involve a certain amount of faith, because we are not in total control of the outcome.

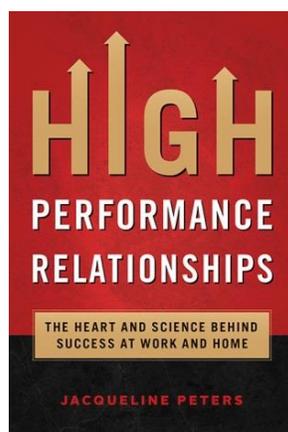
Soliciting feedback is a tool to understand your impact and how others see and hear you. When the responses indicate you are not getting the results you want, realign your impact and intentions by setting relationship building goals, remaining mindful of how you make yourself and others safe in your conversations. Employ the simple and effective *Think, Feel, Do* preparation tool by asking, "What do you want the other person to think, feel, and do at the end of the conversation?" This helps create safety for ourselves and the other person as we get thoughtful and intentional about our approach.

There are times when our relationships simply aren't working or getting the results we want. When that happens, call a temporary truce, agree to disagree, or walk away after a deliberate assessment of how fully vested you are in the relationship. Consider using the five building blocks to bolster it, using heart and good intention as you apply the strategies.

Investing in a relationship takes commitment. Reflect on the level of commitment you feel in your key relationships. Ask yourself, "Which ones do I feel excited about? Morally obligated to? Most committed to? Least? Is there a relationship in which a stronger level of commitment would be beneficial?" When we commit to a common purpose, we take a step toward committing to each other and the relationship. Commitment provides the energy and motivation needed to persevere when relationships stumble.

Conclusion

High Performance Relationships shows us how to improve the relationships that are the bridge to our success and what we want in life. Relationships must remain the center of our focus. Our greatest need is to connect with others and to enjoy the safety and trust good relationships give us. This book provides the critical heart- and science-based strategies we need to build high performance relationships in all areas of our lives.



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Colleen's career has centered on teaching and learning, facilitating, and team leading with a specialization in leadership development and interpersonal effectiveness. Her thirty-plus years' experience is in education, transportation, and oil and gas. Colleen holds a Master of Education, with a specialization in Adult Education and Organizational Effectiveness. She is a certified practicing mediator with the Alberta civil court.

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Dr. Jacqueline Peters is an executive, leadership, team, and relationship coach. She inspires insights, action, and accountability when supporting clients to attain success. She has authored numerous articles and two books on team effectiveness, along with *High Performance Relationships*. Her high performance team and relationship systems have been actively applied by individuals and organizations around the world to achieve greater results.