



ESSAY

Interdependent Relationships

DesignIntelligence®
Quarterly

**DAVE GILMORE**

President and CEO,
DesignIntelligence

Interdependent Relationships

DI's Dave Gilmore examines the essence of mutual dependence in sustained social and business contexts.

Effective leadership moves through a continuum of reflection to articulated strategy to effective communication that results in inspiration, learning and results. Yet the essential skills of effective leaders and managers are their abilities to build relationships. That's where the highest value lies. Effective leaders understand that relationships sustain successful business initiatives. While short-term transactions may be accomplished without a relationship, longer term systemic success cannot. Wise words from the late Stephen Covey reinforce this point:

“A cardinal principle of Total Quality escapes too many managers: you cannot continuously improve interdependent systems and processes until you progressively perfect interdependent, interpersonal relationships.”

At DesignIntelligence, we believe relationships serve as the foundation upon which all other leadership elements find their support. The interdependencies of these relationships make or break business initiatives. In a business, human or any social setting, success comes when people align, connect and respect the power of their mutual needs.

If that is true, how do we go about achieving it? Over the years I've encountered many executives who see people as resources to be managed like chess pieces on a chessboard - tokens to be deployed for strategic advantage. To these kinds of leaders, people are expendable commodities. Eventually this management philosophy runs its course. Having ignored the needs of her colleagues and exhausted her resources, the practicing leader is left standing alone, unable to execute like she once did. She has burned so many bridges she is left with no place to cross over her next business valley and is now isolated.

The effective leader understands personal relationships as the prime mover in whatever strategy they might envision for success. They express this value and exhibit this behavior in their own interpersonal dynamics. Relationships are nurtured and grown with peers, direct reports, and others in and around their business. Relationships with vendors, suppliers, customers, and market influencers become core values of the business just like other essential assets. Time is devoted to asking, listening, and caring about others' needs, not merely advancing one's own agenda.

Interdependence occurs when leaders recognize one thing: life is better together than alone. Resident in this awakening is a measure of trust - an essential element to all functional interdependence. As an example, take the multiple dimensions and layers of interdependence required to design and build a building. Developers depend on architects who in turn include subconsultant engineers. The construction team relies on multiple building suppliers and trades for expertise, materials and labor. Examples of such mutual interdependencies are myriad, but many are marked with mistrust as evidenced through the piles of risk-mitigating legal contracts and clauses that have long papered the industry.

Trust is essential to healthy interdependence. But how can you cultivate it? Not by manufacturing or demanding it - rather, by earning it - through your actions and behaviors. The challenge comes in crossing the chasm from mistrust to trust. It's a curious thing to observe mature businesspeople enter interdependent business relationships where both parties' success depends on the other, yet mistrust exists between them. Most would express such mistrust as "*just in case*" posturing. For instance, one might say:

"I eliminate all risk through confining contractual instrumentation just in case the other fails, is unreliable, doesn't follow through . . . then my rear end is covered, my assets are secured, and my receivables are assured."

Honestly, in agreements such as these, let's delete the word relationship and call them what they are: arms-length, mistrust-based coercive transactions to sell services and earn enough to pay the bills. Hopeful, but doubtful. When this is the way, the parties involved focus on what the other parties might do wrong instead of what they are doing right or could do better together- for mutual benefit. In this context, Abraham Lincoln's reminder comes to mind:

“When you look for the bad in others, you'll surely find it.”

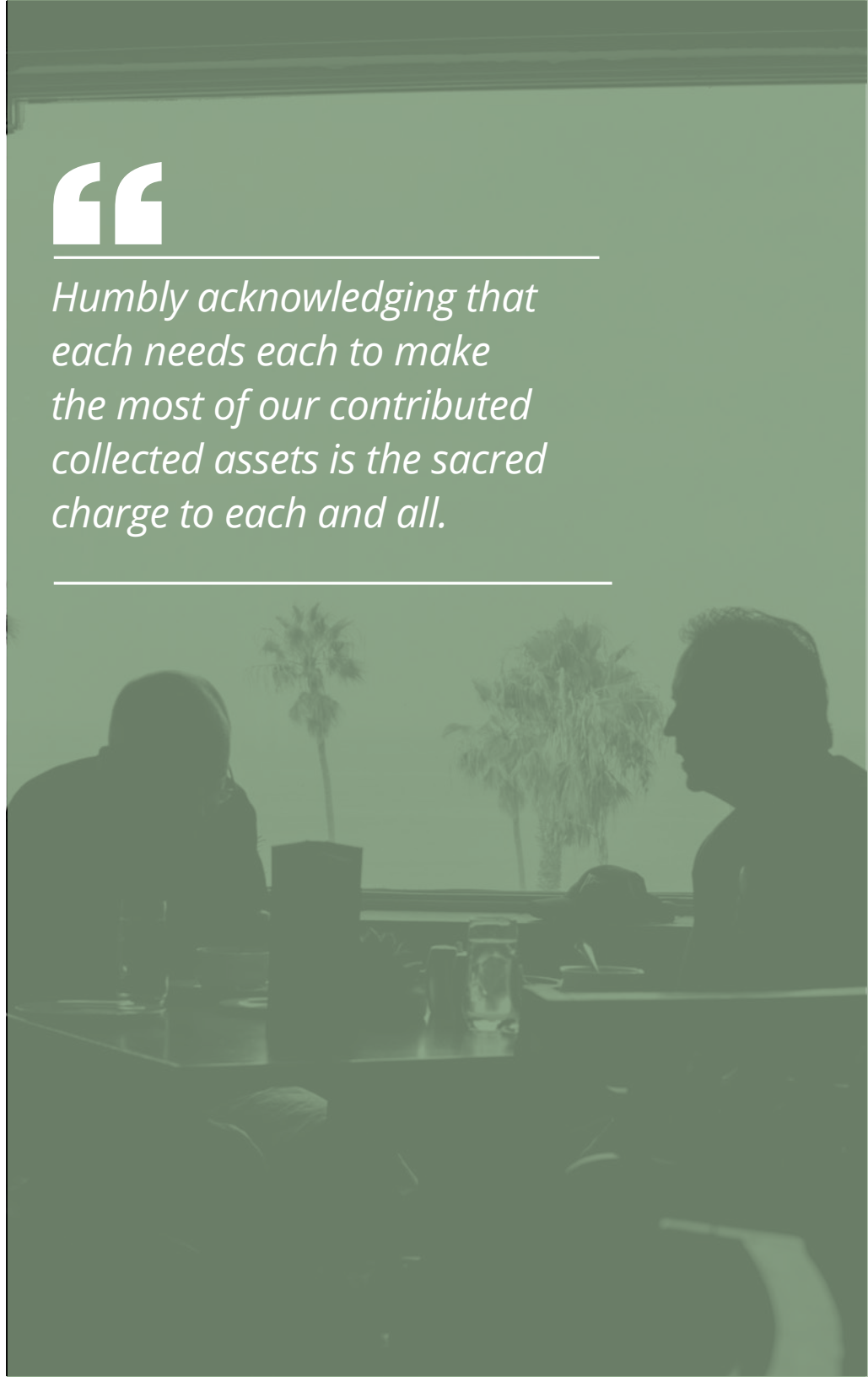
In these instances, the opportunities for, and value of, interdependence are lost. The joy of collaboration and potential for synergy disappear.

Every relationship carries risk. People are human and will sometimes be inconsistent, irresponsible, or disappoint us. We all exhibit these tendencies from time to time, but hopefully not when so many and so much depends upon us. To prevent such failures, effective leaders embrace the investments necessary to create and sustain relationships built on trust and integrity. When these kinds of symbiotic conditions are nurtured, relationships flourish. Everyone wins. Let's win. Together.

I recently worked with a firm that was bringing several organizational entities together into a single structure. Prior to this reorganization, each unit had operated as adjacent silos. Each carried a budget with revenue and profitability expectations. Each felt the pressure to perform against the P&L statement. In many cases this dynamic drove aberrant behaviors between the units as they postured and positioned for individual success.

“

Humbly acknowledging that each needs each to make the most of our contributed collected assets is the sacred charge to each and all.



In their unified form, what is now making the difference in this new combined entity is their acknowledgement of the value and necessity of interdependence. When exploring how they might work better together - in crossing traditional lines and allowing for synergistic overlaps - they discovered the power of multiples. They suddenly experienced how acceptance, new perspective, and continuous learning yielded unexpected insight, client enthusiasm, and relationship strengths.

As this organization continues their evolution, the challenges they experience are rooted in their daily choices to remain openly postured. Each day presents opportunities to re-converge into closed siloed independence, to guard their perceived intellectual property, to posture for competitive advantage against their own firm peers. In the spirit of interdependent relationships, humbly acknowledging that each needs each to make the most of our contributed collected assets is the sacred charge to each and all.

Relationships require effort to grow, maintain, and deepen. Of all creatures on the planet, humans may be the most

complex and psychologically challenging to interact with. Much of the unifying work among teams is getting to know one another. But the yield of such investments is incalculable.

In the best software development initiatives, forming a team prior to launching the project begins with an extended period of socialization. Games, food, lots of beverages, time outside the office... all are designed to convene the team as humans connecting with one another relationally. As the team begins to coalesce, the significant effort comes in maintaining relationship cohesion through the development work. When people are connected, their production and quality excel.

Interdependence offers power not found in standalone constructs. Effective leaders embrace this as a core value for the organizations they lead. They prioritize relationships above every other dynamic.

What kind of leader are you?

Dave Gilmore is president and CEO of DesignIntelligence