

**Harvard
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Interpersonal Skills

How to Build Real Relationships at Work

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Summary. Doing your job is only part of your job. The rest comes down to being seen, heard, and known — none of which is possible without strong relationships. But the hybrid office has made relationship building even more awkward than it used to be. In this piece, the author offers helpful advice for how to spark conversations when you're in the office — and how to build on those conversations when you see the same person again. As he writes, “breaking the silence is the hardest step because it’s the easiest to overthink: *Am I bothering this person?* A voice in our head asks. *What will this person think of me?* Another voice wonders. *What do I even say?* A third voice adds. Before long, doubt sinks in and the opportunity slips away. The easier we make it to break the silence, the more likely we are to do so. The good news is, opportunities to transform strangers into acquaintances are all around us, all the time.” [close](#)

Does stepping into the office feel awkward? It might — especially if you’ve been working remotely or find yourself surrounded by more empty desks and chairs than people at work. If anything, the experience can start to feel a lot like the first day at school, but every day: *Where should I sit? What do I say? How do I make friends?*

Building professional relationships can feel even more overwhelming if you are an introvert or are new to your organization, especially if all of your other coworkers already know each other in three dimensions. But, as I’ve learned from interviewing more than 500 professionals across industries and job types for my book *The Unspoken Rules*, relationship building in a hybrid environment is easier than it may seem. It all begins

with breaking down the otherwise overwhelming and unhelpful advice of “Put yourself out there!” into smaller steps that anyone can take:

Step #1: Break the silence

This is the hardest step because it’s the easiest to overthink: *Am I bothering this person?* A voice in our head asks. *What will this person think of me?* Another voice wonders. *What do I even say?* A third voice adds. Before long, doubt sinks in and the opportunity slips away.

The easier we make it to break the silence, the more likely we are to do so. The good news is, opportunities to transform strangers into acquaintances are all around us, all the time.

- Work in an office with a “hoteling” or “hot desking” model where employees can choose where they sit? Try stationing yourself near high-traffic areas such as entrances, meeting rooms, kitchens, and bathrooms. Doing so can make it easier for you to run into people, make eye contact, nod, smile, and say “Hi,” or “Good morning,” which is how relationship building begins.
- Invited to a meeting, town hall, happy hour, or event? Try showing up a minute early, standing or sitting beside a stranger who doesn’t look occupied, making eye contact,

extending a hand, and saying, “Hi, I don’t think we’ve met. I’m _____. Nice to meet you!”

- Just finished a meeting? Overcome the urge to dash out immediately and, instead, approach someone and drop an “I’m _____,” followed by a “loved your comment about _____.”
- Traveling for work? Try asking, “Would anyone like to share a ride?” and use the carpool time to spark a conversation.
- Have some lead time before entering the office? Try messaging a colleague you’ve only met virtually and saying, “I’ll be in the office tomorrow. I’d love to put a face to a name if you’re around!”

These opportunities aren’t just strategies for introverts or shy people. They are the secrets of the most effective relationship builders. Look around before your next meeting and you’ll soon realize, for example, that the time when some are burying themselves in their phones is also the time when others are sparking relationships.

Step #2: Turn “Hi” into “Hi again.”

The first time you do anything is always uncomfortable. The second time is always easier. If you’ve said “Hi” to a stranger, you’ve already overcome the most awkward step — and given

yourself permission to say “Hi” again. This is your chance to transform acquaintances into allies.

- Have a moment when you return to your computer?
Consider sending an email along the lines of: “Thanks for the fun conversation. Love that we’re both _____. Looking forward to crossing paths again and hopefully working together soon.”
- See them in the hallway again? Smile and drop a “Hi again!” and then follow up on whatever you discussed, whether it’s “How was the wedding?” or “How did the presentation go?”
- See them in a group call? Message them with a “Nice to see you again” or slip them a private message of encouragement if they fumble over their words.
- Come across information that might be relevant to them? Forward the website, email, podcast, video, article, or white paper with an “I just came across this and was reminded of our conversation about _____.”
- Find an opportunity that they might be interested in? Share it with an “I was invited to this event and thought of you. Check it out if it’s of interest.”

- Meet two people who could help each other? Offer an introduction by saying, “Have you met _____? She’s also _____. Let me know if it’d be helpful to chat and I can ask if she is interested.”

Step #3: Turn “Hi again” into “Let’s chat.”

Most people you come across professionally will remain acquaintances. This is natural. After all, we have only so many hours in a day and only so many relationships we can maintain at once. But, when we come across the special few who are several steps ahead of us and are eager to pay it forward, we have an opportunity to learn from — and avoid — their mistakes. Here are four options for transforming allies into mentors:

- Need a second opinion? Try asking for their *input* by saying, “I’m working on _____ and would love your perspective on _____ since you are the expert on _____.”
- Not sure which path to take? Try asking for their *advice* by saying, “I’m trying to _____ and would love your advice on _____. Might you have a few minutes to chat?”
- Interested in following in their footsteps? Try asking for their *story* by saying, “I’d love to follow in your footsteps given _____. Might you have a few minutes to chat? I am available at the following times...”

- Working on a project that overlaps with their interests and expertise? Try asking for their *involvement* by saying, “I am recruiting advisers to guide the direction of _____. I immediately thought of you.”

Step #4: Turn “Let’s chat” into “Let’s build a relationship.”

Some people you’ll meet will become “mentors” who give advice. Others will become “sponsors” who open doors. This person has the power to invite you to closed-door meetings, pull you into high-profile projects, and even advocate for your promotion.

Meet someone senior who seems invested in you and your career?

- First, try sharing your *goals*. For example, “As I reflect on where I’d like to be five years from now, I’d love to follow in your footsteps and _____. What’s your advice on what I should start doing, stop doing, and keep doing to reach such a goal?”
- Next, try sharing your *progress*. For example, “I just had my performance review and wanted to let you know that it ended up saying exactly what we had predicated and discussed. My manager told me _____. Next quarter, I plan to _____. No need to reply — I just wanted to keep you in the loop and to thank you for _____.”

- Along the way, try sharing some of your *struggles* as well. For example, “I was reflecting on _____ and feel like I could have done a better job of _____. Am I thinking about this the right way, or what would you do differently if you were in my position?”

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As the son of an immigrant single mother who spent her career working in a sewing factory, I was always told to put my head down and let my hard work speak for itself. But, after unpacking the differences between professionals who build fulfilling careers from professionals who stumble and don't know why, I now have a different perspective: In the corporate world, doing your job is only part of your job. The rest comes down to being seen, heard, and known — none of which is possible without strong relationships.

While not every relationship you spark will lead to a long-term relationship, at the very least you will have another friendly face at your next meeting, another person to run ideas by, and another person to call upon in a time of need. Make your next in-office visit more than just a commute.

Gorick Ng is the *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author of *The Unspoken Rules: Secrets to Starting Your Career Off Right* (Harvard Business Review Press). He is a career advisor at Harvard, specializing in coaching first-generation college students and professionals. He also teaches the unspoken rules of career navigation at UC Berkeley. He has been featured in the *New York Times*, CNBC, the Today Show, and more, and was named one of the top 30 thinkers to watch by Thinkers50. Find him at www.gorick.com.

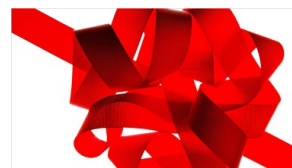
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