

# Forge Genuine Relationships, Make Strong Connections

How you can recognize and cultivate intangible skills to be a better AE.

There's no doubt you need people skills to do your job. Whether it's building working relationships with leaders who are very different from you or uniting volunteers to achieve a particular task, AEs need to know how to work with people.

That brings us to this column, the third in a series exploring the intangible skills great CEOs possess. Of the 10 intangible skills identified in my study earlier this year, there are five pairs that are mirror images and may be exhibited differently by two CEOs, depending on their personality or style. In this issue, I discuss the intangible skill pair of relationships and connections.

Everyone wants to be the CEO whom everybody likes and respects. But how do you get there?

## What is the skill of relationships?

CEOs with the ability to foster relationships can connect with a variety of personalities in different situations and establish a positive personal or working environment. It's often called "people skills." These CEOs make an impact through other individuals.

The skill mentioned most often when associations search for new CEOs is relationships; in other words, it's the ability to work with all types of people in virtually any situation. Among the intangible skills AEs desire, relationships is at the top of the list. Everyone wants to be a CEO whom everybody likes and respects. But how do you get there?

High-performing CEOs with this skill engage people actively and build friendships with intent. Relationship-focused CEOs

enjoy the process of getting to know people, and the more complicated the personality the more challenging (and rewarding) the ensuing friendship. These CEOs strive to establish positive, professional, and lasting bonds with virtually everyone they meet.

## Develop better relationships

One approach to developing better relationships is to focus your conversations on the other person, which results in them feeling good about themselves. This is especially useful with association leaders when discussions are on challenging issues.

Rob Authier, RCE, CAE, CEO of the Massachusetts Association of REALTORS®,

has the skill of relationships. "When I have an issue to discuss with Rob, he listens intently and then proposes alternatives," one of his association leaders said. "We come to a consensus. Regardless of the issue—even if it is contentious—I always feel good after talking to him."

People like Authier who have this skill find something they genuinely like about each member—even those that get on their nerves. Certainly, members come with a wide variety of temperaments, but successful CEOs look for the positive, the admirable, or the trait they have in common with the member and focus on that.

Begin by getting to know members through research and personal conversation, such as by asking about their business,

family, and interests to uncover points of commonality. There are sites online to conduct personal research, but nothing has more impact than direct conversation.

## Take the long-term view

Although volunteers and leaders often think in the short term regarding their relationship with the association (such as the few years of volunteering or the one year of presidency), CEOs take the long view. They know patience usually is more productive than quick decisions. So, they work ahead with leaders as they are ascending through positions of responsibility to build deep and lasting relationships.

According to Travis Kessler, CEO of the Texas Association of REALTORS®, "There must be a desire for common ground and goals. This means adapting and learning new ways, but the reward of flexibility is immense." This echoes sentiment of other successful CEOs: Relationships change over time, but if built on listening and consensus, the bond will strengthen. This is most valuable in times of stress or confrontation.

## Start with small steps

A simple but effective way to grow your people skills is to be available. Take member calls and have daily in-person contact with others. Make eye contact as you engage others and meet everyone with a smile. Learn members' names and use them often in conversations.

For positive relationships to move the association forward it can't be the CEO alone who practices good people skills.





Successful CEOs prioritize and institutionalize relationship-building by ensuring that staff know and practice basic techniques, including clear instructions on appropriate relationships and confidentiality, and even formal policies, such as always having a person answer the phone. Provide training if necessary on ways staff can enhance relationships with members, leaders, and others contacting the association.

### What is the skill of connections?

CEOs with the ability to build a network of people to accomplish specific goals are said to have “connections.” They are people with influential personal contacts throughout an organization or industry. Unlike the hundreds or thousands of LinkedIn connections you may have, these connections are a group of trusted individuals that the successful CEO deploys to accomplish a result.

Connections are not technology-based. They are not social media friends. They are human-to-human, genuine, and personal. Many CEOs view them as extensions of themselves. Of the intangible skills, “connections” has the greatest reach.

Having connections is an especially useful skill since it enables the CEO to accomplish things quietly in the background. Connections are stealth power and also valuable in maneuvering in complex organizations with multiple layers.

Connected CEOs are thoughtful in the composition of their network. They are built step-by-step and person by person. However, when completed, connections become a powerful tool.

### Leverage multiple networks

Successful REALTOR® association CEOs have fine-tuned connections within the real estate industry. The purpose is to accurately and deeply know the “real world” of the real estate business and become the expert.

Connected CEOs create multiple networks and have connections in the extended real estate world such as homebuilders, chambers of commerce, economic development entities, and financial institutions. Some CEOs have groups without any discernible connection with real estate or association management. They find that this involvement heightens their creativity and

awareness. As one said, “It gives me new antennas.”

### How to build connections

Start honing your connection skills by building a network of the REALTOR® leaders you work with every year. Focusing on advancing the interests of a leader can strengthen this network. Enable leaders to recognize their own particular skills and ability.

When considering connections, do not neglect the strength of the REALTOR® organization and its natural interconnectedness. Top CEOs not only leverage the REALTOR® three-level cooperative arrangement but also support it. If there are problems at any level, they seek to be part of the answer.

### Take connections seriously

Average CEOs may comment that the relationship skill is a natural part of being an executive. But highly successful CEOs are more serious about their connections. They focus on an area and even specific individuals to include in their network. It’s more intentional than making friends.

These CEOs also know it must be a mutually beneficial relationship. They must contribute in order to acquire.

Create your own group based upon your interests and needs. Building inside the REALTOR® organization enhances your career, but building outside it enhances you.

### How to Acquire Intangible Skills

Set out to cultivate these intangible skills in the same way you’d learn a language or another hard skill, such as event planning or financials.

- Contact a successful CEO who has that skill and seek advice.
- Request a successful CEO to mentor or formally coach you.
- Search the business literature, carefully noting the corporate view bias.

- Search business videos; TED talks are particularly valuable.
- Attend AEI, ASAE, and other executive education events.
- Consider local university advanced management programs.
- At education events, focus on personal contacts with successful CEOs, not just course content.
- Join or create peer networks of like-minded executives.



**Jerry Matthews’** executive career spans more than 20 years as a REALTOR® state association CEO and more than 12 years as an industry consultant. His consulting practice focuses on facilitating change for executives and organizations. [JerryMatthews.com](http://JerryMatthews.com).