With Valentine’s Day smack in the middle of the month, February gets painted red and full of heart information. In many cultures and spiritual traditions the heart represents connection. Learning to generate and use connection in healthy ways is one of the most effective tools a good leader can cultivate. In times of COVID safe connection is one of the most important things we can do to maintain our physical and mental health. Connection matters.

On a physical level it matters because as mammals we are social creatures. Our brains and nervous systems are built and maintained with other mammals. When we connect with others we raise our oxytocin and balance our vasopressin. These neuropeptides are closely related and often intertwined in our experiences of connection, protection, and stress.

When we feel connected to others we are better able to manage and mitigate the exhaustive effects of stress on our physical systems. Although relationships offer stress, too, they also protect us against its damaging effects through oxytocin’s management of homeostasis in our endocrine system. A good leader can capitalize on this process by offering ways for staff, employees, and others to connect.

The definition of a good leader includes the ability to inspire and engage those around them. It is a person who can connect and create environments of motivation, which comes from connecting to the individual enough to know what inspires them to be part of something larger than themselves. A good leader knows how to draw out individual strengths and work with weaknesses to build something better than we could accomplish on our own. In honor of February let’s look at the ways we can lead from a place of connection.

Many fear becoming “too close” to those they supervise. Now, I’m not advocating for inappropriate boundaries, however it is important to connect to your staff, co-workers, and customers. Call them by name, look them in the eye, ask about their families, work, interests, weekend outing, and get to know them. Show interest in their interests, what was the last book they read? Do they read? What’s their favorite sport? These are all great places to start learning about those around you. Connecting with interests helps you learn about what inspires a person. When you know what inspires them, you can generate motivation. Motivation is a product of inspired experience. Connect to inspire, motivate, and challenge your team.

Make sure to create time for socializing. Often this can be an overlooked area of connection that is relatively easy to create. Make sure to have spaces and places where people can check in and visit throughout the day. I’m not talking about a leisurely 3 hour lunch, however that 10 minute conversation at the copy machine each week matters. Those monthly potlucks and happy hours go a long way to helping your team connect. When we are connected we show up for each other differently. We are more willing to lend a hand, work a little extra this week, or add to the supply of ideas than if we feel disconnected and not needed. And remember that little bit about stress above. A connected team manages stressful events more successfully.

There are a few things to make sure you don’t do.

Don’t be fake. For connection to be strong, we must feel that the person trying to connect with us is genuine and authentic. Ever been to a sales meeting where you knew the person was just asking you questions to use in arguments later? That they were working to make it harder for you to say no on closing the deal so they could make some money off you? It feels icky. Don’t be that person.

Don’t overshare too quickly. Although it is important to show vulnerability we also want to create appropriate boundaries for the type of relationship we are connecting in. I’m not asking you to bear your soul’s deepest woundings, but sharing some of your struggle helps others relate to you. It is important to share appropriately with different people. Not everyone has earned the privilege of hearing your story. Be discerning and share appropriately. Different relationships have different levels of intimacy. The way you build intimacy is sharing a little and seeing if the other person will match your share. They share and you share, Over time these sharing pieces deepen knowing and understanding between people. This step takes time, trust, and respect. Remember it is an honor to be given someone’s story, be reverent.

This month, make a commitment to connect more. Connect to yourself - personal goals, inspiration, and physical sensation. Then “reach out” and connect with others. Connection can look a lot of ways. It can be as simple as meeting up with a friend, finding an online interest group you can share in, smiling at the convenience store clerk, or hugging your partner everyday. Make eye contact, ask questions, and offer compliments. Tell someone you enjoy their company. Take the daily uplifting comment challenge and send a short text, email, or voice message to someone, try to make it different people each day, you care about telling them a positive thing about them.

When we relationally connect we help build our immune systems, repair damaged tissue, and mitigate stress. When we connect we build understanding, as we build understanding we are more likely to find common ground and it gets harder to oppress and marginalize others. Connection helps our society get better; connection heals us from the inside out.