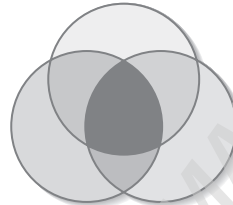




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The Power of TouchPoints

THE ACTION IS IN
THE INTERACTION



It's nearly three-thirty in the afternoon. You're holed up in your office, trying to grab some time to finish a proposal that's critical to the future of your department—and your own career—when a team member knocks on your door to ask for advice with a tricky problem. How do you respond? Do you give in to the flash of irritation you feel at being interrupted and tell him to come back later? Or do you stop what you are doing and help him right now? It's your choice.

As a leader, you make those choices all day, every day. The “knock on the door” happens over and over again—phone calls, meetings, emails, and text messages,



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all with questions to answer, concerns to address, problems to solve, and fires to put out. There are big issues and small issues, planned sessions and surprises, and they come at you constantly and from every direction. You have to make decisions without having all the information, and you need to make them *now*. The workload is expanding, and the time you have to deal with each issue is shrinking. Some days it feels as though the information age has morphed into the interruption age.

But what if you could step back and look at all those interactions with a fresh perspective? What if, instead of seeing them as interfering with your work, you were to look at them as latent leadership moments? What if these moments were the answer to leadership in today's busy world?

In our experience, that is precisely what they are. Each of the many connections you make has the potential to become a high point or a low point in someone's day. Each is an opportunity to establish high performance expectations, to infuse the agenda with greater clarity and more energy, and to influence the course of events. Each is a chance to transform an ordinary moment into a TouchPoint.

TouchPoints take place any time two or more people get together to deal with an issue and get something done. A casual conversation with a colleague becomes a TouchPoint when the focus shifts to an impending contract. An email exchange with a team member turns into a TouchPoint when she tells you about a production



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delay. The chit-chat before an afternoon meeting shifts to TouchPoint mode when the last person arrives and someone says, “Everyone’s here—let’s get started.”

In fact, each day is an elaborate sequence of TouchPoints: interactions—with one other person, a couple of people, or a group—that can last a couple of minutes, a couple of hours, or a couple of days. Those TouchPoints can be planned or spontaneous, casual or carefully choreographed. They take place in hallways, on factory floors, in conference rooms, on the phone, and via email or instant messaging. Some deal with straightforward, relatively minor issues; others involve complex challenges with wide-ranging effects.

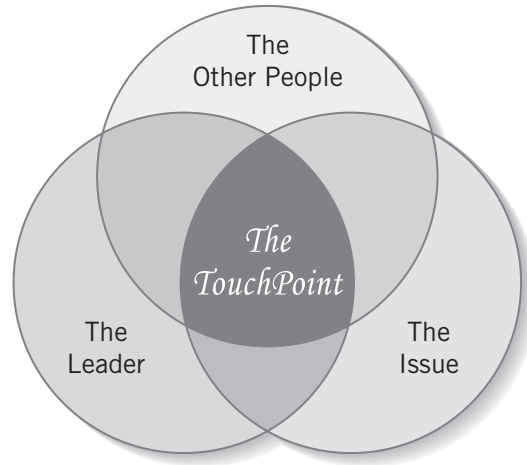
Sadly, leaders often see these interactions as distractions that get in the way of their real work: the important work of strategizing, planning, and prioritizing. But in our experience, these TouchPoints *are* the real work. They are the moments that bring your strategies and priorities to life, the interactions that translate your ideas into new and better behaviors. That is, providing you take these TouchPoints, no matter how brief, and infuse them with greater clarity and genuine commitment.

THREE VARIABLES, ONE TOUCHPOINT

Although there are many ways in which TouchPoints differ, they all have the same three variables: the issue, the other people, and the leader.



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The Three Variables of a TouchPoint

The issue is something important, such as a question, a problem, or a decision that affects the performance of individuals, teams, units, or the entire organization. Such issues come at you fast and furiously from every direction. In many cases you have to make a decision quickly, even without having all the necessary information.

The issue could be how to address a customer complaint, cross-train employees, reschedule a meeting so that the right people can be there, find resources for a project after the budget has been cut, or replace a key team member who has suddenly resigned. The issue may even be building a relationship. In fact, many leaders initiate a large number of brief interactions whose sole purpose is to make positive connections so that when the



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leader needs to make a tough call, people will know they are valued and will trust the leader's intentions.

The other people are the stakeholders who are involved in the issue. In this book we will focus on internal stakeholders, such as the individuals who report to you directly and indirectly, your colleagues, and the people with whom you have a straight or dotted reporting line.

In today's interdisciplinary and international workplaces, these stakeholders may have diverse norms and values, which means they often make differing assumptions about what it means to be on time, deliver quality, show respect, and be loyal. Consequently, you need to be tuned in, because the behaviors that turn one person on may turn someone else off completely.

The leader is the person who brings a little magic to the moment. Taking the lead in a TouchPoint is not a matter of title or position; it is a matter of behavior. The leader is the one who listens carefully, helps others frame the issue, brings a sense of urgency, and creates confidence about the next step. When you are the most senior person in the room, that responsibility will be yours. In many situations, however, you may want to use that moment as an opportunity to guide and develop others.

To take the lead in a TouchPoint requires dual vision. That is, you need to be able to address the most pressing need and do it in a way that makes the others more capable, ready to take on the next issue. In other words, you



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must zero in on the needs of the *now*, while being mindful of the *next time*.

MY ISSUE, YOUR ISSUE, OR OUR ISSUE

Of course not every issue is your direct responsibility. That is why one of the first things you listen for in a TouchPoint is whether the issue at hand is “my issue,” “your issue,” or “our issue.” If you own it, you can make the calls. If they own it, you want to help them make the best possible decision and be ready to move forward. If it is “ours,” you share the responsibility with the other people.



When You Own the Issue



David has a visceral appreciation for the power of TouchPoints. When he was a plant manager for P&G, running sites with five hundred to a thousand people, he made it a habit to walk through the plant every day. In the course of a week, he would make sure he spent time with each of the four shifts. Among other things, he used his walk-throughs to deal with several of his own issues.

“I would routinely walk through the plant and connect with fifty to a hundred people in an hour. I always had a little slip of paper in my pocket with ten or twelve to-dos I needed to handle. They could range from getting an update on a safety issue to telling people about an award





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we had won.” In David’s experience, the biggest mistake plant managers make is that when they get really, really busy, they stop doing these kinds of tours. They think they can get more done by staying at their desk. But the exact opposite happens. “Walking the plant,” David says, “you get so much done in a minute. You get little updates, you feel the pulse, you quietly reinforce the standards when you pick up a piece of trash and remind someone about ear protection. If people are busy, you just wave.”

The walkabouts not only gave David a chance to deal with his issues but also served as opportunities for people to bring up their own. One person might walk along for a few yards to tell him that someone’s husband was in the hospital; another might stop him to discuss a concern. In this way, his tours would shift from dealing with his own issues to helping other people with theirs.

The merit of such walkabouts is that they create dozens of proactive TouchPoints. By being ahead on the issues, making yourself available, and setting the tone, you anticipate and prevent a number of problems. By making time for interactions, you can prevent unnecessary interruptions.

When Someone Else Owns the Issue

When a direct report owns the issue, the challenge for many leaders is to leave the responsibility where it belongs. This is particularly difficult for leaders who were promoted



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because others trust them to get the job done. That was Nancy's challenge. In her previous position as the head of a national accounts team, she had always been the go-to person. When the customer had a problem, she would do everything she could to fix it, and fix it fast! She would ignore the chains of command and go directly to the person who could get the job done.

The problem was that, having been promoted to VP, Nancy was now going around her own people. She kept forgetting that as a leader of leaders, it was no longer her job to fix the problem directly. Her role now was to help others figure out how to deal with it.

To curb her impatience, Nancy developed a small TouchPoint habit. When her team was addressing a problem, she would first go around the room and hear from each team member what he or she thought should be done. Only at the end would she add her two cents' worth. "It was really hard at first. I felt I was inadequate because I wasn't *doing* something. But it was also fulfilling, because soon I began to see people step up in ways they had not done before. Today, it's exciting to see how each individual is so much stronger. In fact, the whole team is becoming really impressive."

What Nancy learned was that it is not enough to get the job done *now*. As a leader, you need to get the job done in a way that builds the individual's and team's capacity to do even better *next time*.



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When You Share the Issue with Others

At other times, the leader and the other people are jointly responsible for the issue. That was the case when Jerry, a senior VP for public affairs, needed to bring Kim, a new director, up to speed.

Kim's role would be to lead an initiative to reduce childhood obesity and hunger in Camden, New Jersey, by 50 percent in ten years. "One Friday I took Kim and three other members of my team on a three-hour tour of the city," Jerry said, "and we visited our partners at a day-care center, an elementary school, and a community garden. It was a really good morning. Most important, it gave her an affirmation that what we are trying to do is needed and doable."

Bringing Kim up to speed was an issue that Kim and Jerry shared. By taking her on the tour, Jerry provided her with both a physical understanding of the city and a strong beginning to the relationships, which would help her get a head start on her new job.

THE POTENTIAL OF A TOUCHPOINT

Every TouchPoint is spring-loaded with possibilities. Each one can build—or break—a relationship. Even a brief interaction can change the way people think about themselves, their leaders, and their future.

Doug had such an experience that has stayed with him to this day. When he was in graduate school, he had a professor



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who had extremely high standards. One day, after Doug had handed in a carelessly done assignment, the professor called him in and said, simply, “Doug, you can do better.”

“That’s all he said,” Doug recalls, “‘You can do better,’ and of course he was right. Moreover, he never needed to say it again.” Now when Doug reviews work that doesn’t meet his standards, instead of giving people negative feedback, he challenges them to do better in some specific way. As it did with Doug, the statement “You can do better” often goes a long way toward increasing people’s confidence and encouraging them to stretch.

Mette, in contrast, remembers an experience of her own that shows the negative potential of TouchPoints. It happened when she was product manager for a mid-size multinational company. After discovering that a new product was failing to meet the company’s quality criteria, she recommended to her immediate boss, the director of marketing, that they stop production until they figured out what the problem was.

When Mette’s boss took the issue to the vice president, however, he was told in no uncertain terms, “This is the fourth quarter. You’ve got to keep the line moving so we can make the numbers.” After that meeting, Mette’s boss called her into his office and told her that her job was to keep the line moving at all costs. When Mette protested, he snapped at her, “If you can’t do it, I’ll find a real man for the job.”

Mette’s boss got the job done—the production line kept moving—but he lost her respect. What was worse, she also lost respect for herself. She thought her superiors



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were making the wrong call and wished she had shown more backbone. This experience shows that when a leader goes for compliance instead of commitment, he may erode a person's confidence and damage the relationship.

Have you had these kinds of experiences—positive TouchPoints that increased your confidence and commitment, or negative interactions that left you feeling worse about others or yourself? If so, you already know the power and possibilities of a moment. You know the potential of a TouchPoint.

TouchPoints can inspire people to give the very best of themselves, and they can cause people to shut down. Like money, TouchPoints in and of themselves are neither good nor bad. What matters is how you use them. They are a resource that you can either invest or squander.

Like Doug's professor, we all have times when we say just the right thing. Like Mette's boss, we also have times when we botch it.

That's a fact of life. What is important is that you continuously strive to increase your ratio of "That went well!" to "I blew it." If you reflect on the TouchPoints you've engaged in during the past few weeks, what is your ratio? What would you like it to be?

It's important to remember that improving that ratio is not about becoming nicer; it is about becoming more effective. It is about engaging people and moving forward faster, instead of tripping up and slowing down. It is about gaining commitment instead of settling for compliance.



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Whether you are a manager, a mentor, or a parent, you want to touch others in a way that makes them *want* to do the right thing. You want to guide them in a way that helps them make good decisions, even when you are not in the room—which, if you are a leader of leaders, is 99.9 percent of the time.

THE EXPONENTIAL EFFECT OF A TOUCHPOINT

TouchPoint leadership capitalizes on the social networking effect, what we call the *exponential effect*.

Every person you engage with is embedded in webs of relationships. Whatever you say or do in a TouchPoint may be quickly transmitted to five or six people in that person's network—and then relayed to their colleagues, and so on. Therefore, when you impart a sense of urgency, people may pass that on; when you inspire confidence, that too may be transmitted; and when you blow it, everyone is bound to hear about it.

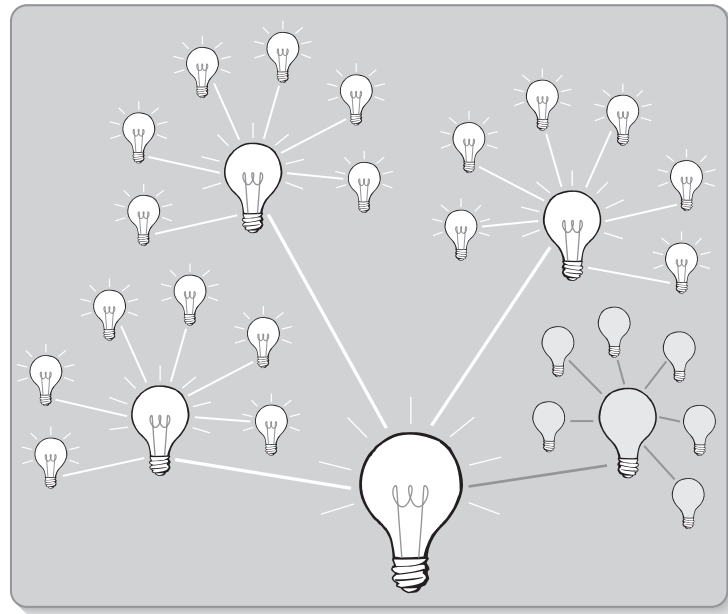
George, head of an R&D department with five hundred people, recalls a recent TouchPoint that illustrates the exponential effect. “It was one of those very contentious meetings with the senior executives where people were debating a specific and rather narrow point,” he explained. After listening intently for a while, he realized that the issue had been framed too narrowly. Though George was not the most senior person in the room, “I found myself articulating the broader strategic view, one where R&D had the right



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to make certain decisions. It was a very lonely point of view, yet I advocated it quite passionately.”

Later that day, George ran into a colleague from the legal department, and he was surprised to hear that she knew about his argument. How? It turned out that his team members were excited that he had taken such a strong stand, felt proud of the way he had represented the department, and had spread the word. “When we are leaders,” George said, “others are watching everything we do. The issue I raised was of great importance to our team. Hearing how my people felt, it made me think later, ‘What if I had stayed silent?’”



The Exponential Effect



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Organizations are living systems in which people are connecting all the time. In fact, you can picture each TouchPoint as a synapse in your organization's central nervous system, the small distance across which an impulse must pass in order for the next person to engage. Positive impulses stimulate change; negative ones block it. Thus, creating networks where people are poised for change requires transmitting positive impulses, frequently and consistently. When you are fully aware of the exponential power of TouchPoints, you will see every conversation as a chance to give people a reality check, inspire a sense of the possibilities, or stimulate the desire to change.

TOUGH-MINDED ON THE ISSUE, TENDER-HEARTED WITH PEOPLE

Times are tough. Whether you are the director of a health clinic, the superintendent of a school, or an entrepreneur creating business software solutions, you must be tough-minded to prevail. Difficult situations pop up every day, performance problems need to be dealt with, and thorny issues need to be addressed in the here and now. In this sense, the global workplace is very Darwinian. You either adapt and prevail, or you die under the weight of mediocre performance. In reality, there is no in-between.

Being tough-minded, however, is no excuse for being brutal. You can be tough on the issues and still be caring with people. In fact, as Doug discovered when he set out



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to turn Campbell around, you need to build strong relationships and help the people around you grow if you want to achieve sustainable results.

When Doug began his tenure at Campbell, the place was in a funk. Tall fences topped with barbed wire circled buildings that were equally depressing. The carpets were worn, the walls were faded, and the people looked as tired as their surroundings. They had been through a decade of aggressive pricing followed by bone-deep cost cutting, and the company was in a severe downward spiral. Given that reality, Doug began with the premise that for the company to win in the marketplace, it would first need to win in the workplace. That is, Campbell would first need to win the hearts and minds of twenty thousand employees.



Show That You Care

On Doug's first day at work, a company-wide meeting was held to introduce him as the new CEO. At that meeting, he made a promise to all the employees that ultimately became known as **The Campbell Promise**: *Campbell Valuing People, People Valuing Campbell*. His point was that the leaders must show that they cared about the employees' agenda before they could expect the employees to care about the company's agenda. To show that he meant what he said, Doug began to look for ways to tangibly demonstrate that he cared, by asking everyone he ran into, "What can we do better?" "How can I help?"





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One day Pat, the head of the global supply chain, answered, “This place looks like a high-security prison. How about we get rid of those rusty fences and all that barbed wire?” Doug replied, “Let’s do it!”

To follow up and show his support, Doug dropped by Pat’s office regularly, asking, “Where are you on the plans for more security?” “Have you picked a contractor for the new fencing?” “Can we put a fresh coat of paint on the curbs?” “How about sprucing up the landscaping as well?” Those kinds of small interactions are the best-kept secret of leadership. They are the TouchPoints that take an idea and make it real.

Within a few months, there was clear evidence that someone cared: improved security, discreet fences, and bright yellow curbs. On a roll, the maintenance group then tackled the building interiors by painting the hallways, putting in new carpeting, and hanging up new pictures. Over time, other people began to come up with ideas that went beyond the physical environment: What about starting affinity networks? What about experimenting with more flexible hours? Before long, the exponential effect was spreading throughout the company, infusing everyone with a revived sense of the possibilities: What about better-for-you soups, more convenient packaging, stronger brand messages . . . ?

The Campbell Promise was compelling because it was heartfelt and relevant to the situation, and also because it



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spoke to people in a language they understood. The leaders showed they genuinely cared about the people, and the people came out fighting for the company. A promise had been made and kept.

Set High Standards

While Doug was seeking to inspire trust, he also established tougher and measurable leadership standards. This led Campbell to use the Gallup metric to track the level of employee engagement.¹ In this case, the gold standard was an engagement ratio of 12:1, meaning that, broadly speaking, each leader would need to have twelve employees who were enthusiastic about their work for every one who was disenchanted.

In 2001, Doug got the baseline results from the Gallup survey. He knew things would be bad, but even he had not anticipated an engagement ratio that was less than 2:1. It didn't help when the Gallup engagement manager said,

¹The Gallup employee engagement database includes more than thirty years of in-depth behavioral economic research involving more than seventeen million employees. Gallup's latest meta-analysis (an analysis of data from more than 152 organizations) shows dramatic differences between top- and bottom-quartile workgroups on key business outcomes. Beyond the significant differences engaged workgroups show in productivity, profitability, safety incidents, and absenteeism versus disengaged workgroups, the research also proves that engaged organizations' earnings per share growth rate is 3.9 times greater than that of organizations with lower engagement in their same industry. For more information, see Gallup, "Employee Engagement: A Leading Indicator for Financial Performance," www.gallup.com/consulting/52/employee-engagement.aspx.



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“These are the worst results I have ever seen for a Fortune 500 firm!”

To raise the engagement level, Doug needed all of the 350 global-level leaders to do their part, because they were the ones who touched every department and corner of the company. But after two years of training, coaching, and cajoling, the engagement level had barely moved. It was clear that too many leaders were only modestly on board, and a modest commitment was simply not good enough.

Doug began the 2003 global leadership meeting by putting up the latest engagement level scores—a 4:1 engagement ratio. Then he looked at the group and said quietly but in a forceful tone, “Enough is enough.” He told them that his expectations were *not* changing; in fact, they were becoming more demanding. “I hope all of you want to be part of this company going forward, but you have to lead in a way that’s going to build the world’s most extraordinary food company. If you don’t want to sign up for that, you shouldn’t be here.” The room became very quiet. People were stunned. Doug was always so composed, but at that moment there was no doubt he had had it. People still reminisce about that TouchPoint: “That was the day Doug got up his Irish.” “It was great to really see the man’s convictions.” “Doug was pretty strong, but it was time.”

By the end of that year and less than three years into his tenure, nearly 300 of the 350 global leaders had left or had been asked to leave the organization. These were



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gritty and trying times for Doug and everyone involved, which required a massive number of very difficult conversations and encounters virtually every week. Leaders had to make tough decisions, people had to be let go, organizations had to be reengineered, and employees had to be reassured. No one was immune.

On the positive side, the leaders who were let go were replaced by a new breed of leaders who were highly competent, knew how to tap into people's potential, and were very performance oriented. Soon things began to change. In 2006, the Gallup ratio was 6:1; in 2007 it was 9:1; in 2008, the 12:1 gold standard was reached; and by 2010, the engagement ratio was an astonishing 17:1!



WHAT'S YOUR APPROACH?



No leader can succeed by being only tough-minded or only tender-hearted. Every day there will be TouchPoints in which you need to focus on results and others in which you deal with relationships, moments when you must push to make a deadline and others when you need to stop everything and listen. Every day, you need to be both tough-minded on the issue *and* tender-hearted with people.

Of course, some leaders tend to be bold and direct and others more considerate. Some are more adept at confronting the facts and others at tuning in to the feelings. Which approach feels more comfortable to you?





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The Tough-Minded Approach

Many leaders love to take on issues related to performance. They enjoy focusing on goals, setting the standards, creating a sense of urgency, sticking to the task, and competing to win. If that is your strength, you probably like to keep things simple. When faced with bad news, you tackle it head-on. When people fall short, you tell them directly. When there is a conflict, you deal with it. You move quickly and act decisively.

But you need to be careful, because any strength taken to an extreme can become a liability. When that happens, the people on your team may hold on to the ball when they should be passing it. They may ignore problems that do not affect their own personal targets and rewards. As a leader, you may even cross the line between not tolerating poor performance (which results in high standards) and not tolerating mistakes (which leads to compliance).

Leaders who prefer the tough-minded approach sometimes get twitchy when we talk about being tender-hearted. To them it sounds too touchy-feely, and they get visions of sitting in circles and singing “Kumbaya.” But being tender-hearted is not about group hugs or invading other people’s privacy. It simply means that you see each employee as a human being and therefore worthy of respect.



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The Tender-Hearted Approach

For other leaders, the people come first. Such leaders like to set the direction, provide a few guidelines, leverage people's talents and passion, and get out of the way. They like to build high-trust partnerships and push for win-win solutions. If that is your strength, then you are good at listening, you involve others, and you focus on people's potential. You expect the members of your team to look out for one another, and you make it clear that anyone's failure is everyone's failure.

But just as being tough-minded can become a liability when it is taken to extremes, there is a dark side to the tender-hearted approach. For example, the team may become wonderfully inventive at passing the ball, but no one drives for the goal. People may value consensus more than progress or get bent out of shape over little things. In addition, you may forget that it is more important for a leader to be trusted (which sometimes involves making tough calls) than to be liked.



As you reflect on these two approaches, where are you strong? When things get tense, what is your default setting? Where could you do better?

If you are out of balance, the solution is not to lower the volume where you are strong but to dial up in the area where you are less comfortable or feel less capable. For example, if you are intensely competitive, you must



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also be able to show compassion when someone is going through a difficult time. If people usually come first with you, you must still be prepared to step in—forcefully at times—when someone violates a principle. In either case, you want to act in a way that is genuine and that leads to stronger results and relationships. When you are strong at doing both, you can be amazingly effective.

In addition to reflecting on your own approach, think about the people you work with. What is their dominant style? If you and your colleagues approach a TouchPoint in meaningfully different ways, you might have to work harder at making a positive connection.

For example, Lisa, a VP who led an innovation team of eighteen people, was struggling in her attempts to influence some of her peers. She was especially concerned about her relationship with one colleague whose support was critical to the success of a new initiative. Finally, she asked him to meet with her privately and did something she had never done before: she let down her guard. She talked about her values and explained why she cared so much about her work. Then she said, “I want us to have a strong working relationship. Can you tell me what you look for in a colleague? What does it take for you to trust someone?”

It turned out that whereas Lisa valued being tough on results, her colleague really cared about relationships. She thought it was admirable to take the issues head-on; he trusted people who were loyal and open to other people’s points of view. These were powerful insights for both of



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them, and this TouchPoint became a turning point in the way they worked together.

Be Tough-Minded *and* Tender-Hearted

When you are both tough-minded and tender-hearted, you can deliver ever-higher levels of performance. One summer evening, Mette received a phone call from Jens Moberg, a former client. He had just finished his first year as corporate VP at Microsoft, responsible for customer service and sales, and his team had aced it! He was excited about the year ahead: “Mette, here is my idea: I want to make \$7 billion in 2007 by building high-trust teams.”

That one-sentence statement was vintage Jens, because it captured his intense commitment to both the results and the relationships. To Jens, the secret to hitting the \$7 billion mark was to get out and work directly with each of the fourteen regions and to design a way to stay in touch throughout the year. Over the next year, Jens invested about twenty days of his own time helping people move from thinking “me” to thinking “we,” and it paid off. By the end of the year, trust was up, the top performers were collaborating, and the teams beat the company’s forecast.

THE POINT IS . . .

In this fast-moving, intensely complex, global workplace, many things are beyond your control. Fortunately, there are two things that are entirely within your control. The first



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is that you can choose to bring a sense of positive energy and direction to your very next TouchPoint, and then do it again. The second is that you can choose to stretch yourself as a leader and aim for mastery (more about that in the next chapter).

To get started right away, simply take the next unplanned interaction as an opportunity to help. Maybe you can ask the right question to help someone get a little clearer, or maybe you can reinforce the importance of a project to help a team become a little more committed.

Now think about what might happen if you were to be helpful to others three times a day for the next week. How would that feel? What if you were to do it again next week, and the week after that? Twenty TouchPoints a week in which you made a difference would add up to more than a thousand such TouchPoints in a year. This would be a very small commitment, yet the impact would be significant, because you would not only feel more in control of your time but also gain more influence.

The beauty of TouchPoint leadership is that it is both approachable and aspirational. Although it is easy to do well in two or three TouchPoints each day, doing it a dozen times a day, and doing it consistently day after day, is an entirely different matter. The pursuit of mastery is a lifelong journey, and that journey begins on the very next page.