

“Alan shares clear and pragmatic tools to accelerate productivity at work through increased connections. This is a must read for any leader on the journey of building a high-performance organization.”

— RYAN SMITH, HEAD OF GLOBAL HUMAN RESOURCES, GE BUSINESS INNOVATIONS

THE CONNECTION CHALLENGE



How Executives Create Power and
Possibility in the Age of Distraction

ALAN S. COHEN

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ISBN-13: 978-1-947480-10-0
ISBN-10: 1-947480-10-3
Library of Congress Control Number: 2017963607

Designed by Joni McPherson, mcphersongraphics.com

Author photograph by David Perlman Photography

INDIE BOOKS INTERNATIONAL, LLC
2424 VISTA WAY, SUITE 316
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	v
Chapter 1 - Braver Than a Badass: Connecting the Dots ...	1
Chapter 2 - How Connecting to Purpose Makes You a Better Leader	11
Chapter 3 - What's Your Connection Energy?	25
Chapter 4 - Brain Power: The Connectors Inside of Us	39
Chapter 5 - Connected Leadership: The TAGs that Bond (Trust, Authenticity, and Gratitude)	47
Chapter 6 - Coaching for Connection: The Most Important Techniques Any Leader Can Master to Create Rapport	61
Chapter 7 - Connecting with Your Team	77
Chapter 8 - Tell Me a Story: How Stories Help Us Connect ..	89
Chapter 9 - The Connection Killers: How to Spot Them and How to Course-Correct	101
Chapter 10 - The C.R.U.D: Those Inner Connection Blockers and What to Do about Them	113
Chapter 11 - Shiny Objects, Technology, and Other Distractions	127
Chapter 12 - Finding Connection Through Difficult Conversations	137

Chapter 13 – Connectworking: How to Network from a Place of Connection	145
Chapter 14 – Prologue	151
Works Referenced	155
Acknowledgments	161
About the Author	163

INTRODUCTION

“No man will make a great leader who wants to do it all himself, or get all the credit for doing it.”

ANDREW CARNEGIE

Connect to the Magic of Possibility

Maybe, if you are really lucky, you are given an opportunity to make a difference in the world. It may show up in one perfect moment, in which all the stars align, and you accept the challenge.

Twenty years ago, I was handed a gift—an opportunity that would change my career. But more than that, it would affect millions of people. I didn’t know how amazing the gift was at the time, or even that it *was* a gift.

I was publicity director for Scholastic Publishing, a children’s media company. An editorial director gave me a manuscript to read about a young wizard who would become famous.

You guessed it. The manuscript was *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, a book to which America had not yet been introduced, which would be retitled for United States audiences and quickly find its way to breaking virtually every publishing

record. Two decades since the book's publication, Harry Potter is a household name, connecting millions of children around the world to reading, and changing the face of publishing.

But that, for me, is only part of the story, and I am not the star of it.

Let me tell you about the person who is: Kris Moran.

I had hired Kris, a former employee, as my assistant director a few years before the Harry Potter craze began. I hired her away from a former boss of mine, who, as a result, did not speak to me for years (that story could be its own chapter on how to tear down a ten-year connection in a single phone call). I was willing to take the risk because Kris was a solid, reliable public relations professional, a good friend and confidante, and a hard worker with a great attitude. She was incredibly likable, honest, and willing to do anything she was asked without complaining. By the time the *Harry Potter* manuscript arrived, not only was she one of the best people working for me, but also a great friend and confidante. Kris's only shortcoming was that she didn't know how amazing she was. She lacked confidence and stayed in the background. Humble, Kris didn't advocate for herself and rarely got all that she deserved. That would soon change.

Kris had no children's book experience. Together, we learned on the job and had to deal with occasional pushback on our ideas from those children's book veterans, who knew much more than we did about the workings of that peculiar world.

We had been warned that publicizing children's books

could be dull, a far cry from the glamorous world of agency publicity where we had worked on corporate brands and mega-entertainment properties.

At Scholastic we worked together in the trenches, promoting books that tweeted and chirped, novels about teenagers dealing with boyfriend angst, and some very dry historical fiction.

While we didn't miss the fast-paced world of agency PR, we yearned for something more exciting to keep us motivated.

And then our prayers were answered.

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone was on its way to breaking records in the United Kingdom, but the book and its author, J.K. Rowling, were unknown in the United States. I was told in no uncertain terms by our publisher, who had paid what was then a large sum for the American rights for the book (something like a now-laughable \$100,000), to “make the book huge.”

With a modest marketing budget, my job was to help sell millions of books. I was made responsible and accountable for the results. I also had to nurture the publisher's relationship with J.K. Rowling.

Our highly driven publisher gave us a list of ten things that had to happen for the book: among them, a *Newsweek* story (spoiler: we got the cover), a National Public Radio (NPR) feature, bestseller status—little things like that.

I was paralyzed with fear. I liked the book a lot—it reminded me of books I had loved as a young boy, such as *The*

Hardy Boys series. But I had no idea how to build vast recognition for a children's book. I felt out of my league, and the pressure to achieve was huge.

Fortunately, there was quiet, reliable Kris. She loved the book more than anyone. She connected to everything about it. Her enthusiasm to make something happen for the book surpassed mine by proverbial leaps and bounds.

Kris was dogged in her outreach to the media. She also quickly bonded with J.K. Rowling during their first American book tour together—a book tour that management expected me to take instead. I pushed back, knowing that it was a perfect role for Kris to play.

Rowling, no doubt, felt Kris's authenticity, enthusiasm, and humility.

I remember Kris running into my office to say that National Public Radio (NPR) wanted to do a feature on the book, which was clearly a result of her tenacity and the way in which she communicated her passion about the novel. "Al," she said, "hold onto your seat. NPR is doing the story. They love the angle about the Wiccan trend. They love the book."

Against the strong preference of my supervisors, who believed I should own the project and take credit for the results, I could not and would not do so. For it was Kris, confidently employing her superpowers, who was landing the big publicity results. I stepped aside and let her do her thing—something I now realize is what a leader *does*. It was my job to remove any

obstacles that impeded her ability to do her job and to encourage her and give her the credit she deserved. It was my job to be grateful and to show it.

Soon after, the *Harry Potter* books took off in America in ways no one could have imagined, and I started to see what my calling was. It was to lead others and to coach and encourage others to do great things. Perhaps I was inspired by J.K. Rowling's greatness as a philanthropist and leader, or by the character Dumbledore, who brought out the greatness in his students. But I knew that now was the time for me to move on and to hand over the publicity directorship to Kris. I then enrolled in an MBA course to begin training for a coaching career.

Kris and I have remained great friends and often reflect on the moments we shared working on the *Harry Potter* books. We recall the countless hours spent at midnight book parties, knowing that we were responsible for connecting children (some of them nonreaders) to the world of Harry Potter and reading. We smile when we remember how working on such an amazing book series connected us to a sense of purpose, to something much greater than helping make millions of dollars for our company. Virtually every person working on that book promotion was motivated, not by fame, glory, or money, but instead by creating a movement of reading.

Today, Kris remains good friends with J.K. Rowling and recently told me she would be taking over PR for Rowling's United States foundation.

While Kris does not crave the spotlight (although she admits enjoying the fact that her last name, “Moran,” was written into *Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire* as one of the Quidditch players), she is comfortable knowing she played a pivotal role in creating the worldwide phenomenon of Harry Potter. She is confident about her talents and recognizes that it was the magic in her that helped to produce unimaginable results. She is as humble today as when I met her more than two decades ago. Kris says working on these books changed her life, creating twenty years of professional and personal opportunities she could never have imagined.

For me, my proudest Harry Potter achievement was stepping into my own authentic leadership role, trusting my gut, and allowing Kris to seize the reins. It was stepping out of the way and letting her create results—and not listening to others who told me that I had to be the star of the Harry Potter publicity story.

The best leaders, I have learned, are like the best conductors—they reach beyond the notes to reach the magic in the players.

This book is dedicated to Kris Moran and to the unsung heroes of your organization. You, too, can reach beyond their notes to help them connect to their magic.

How do you do that? First, step beyond your ego, which may tell you to falsely take credit when it belongs to someone else. Then, listen and be present to the unvoiced needs of others

who have a song to sing. You will see and appreciate the talents of your employees and all those you serve. You will tap into your intuition of what is right, connect to your purpose, and help join others to theirs. No small order—but that, then, is *your* Connection Challenge. Are you ready to take it?



CHAPTER 1

Braver Than a Badass: Connecting the Dots

“You can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backward. So, you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something—your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down, and it has made all the difference in my life.”

STEVE JOBS

Sometimes you can only identify what connection is by experiencing what it isn’t. A few years ago, I had the “seemed like a good idea at the time” thought to leave my own business for a corporate job. Within minutes of having my ID picture taken, I knew I had made a huge mistake.

On a daily basis, I walked into work feeling numb, a sense of doom and gloom washing over me. The reality had set in: I had accepted a job I was not meant to do, in an organization whose

values did not align with mine. I couldn't trust my coworkers, who were given to gossip and backstabbing.

I stuck it out for a year, and when I became physically sick, I quit. I was completely disconnected. This was the tipping point. I needed to get back to doing the work I love, coaching the clients I was meant to serve, and helping them find connection. I quit the job and found my way back to my own connection.

Perhaps you, too, have had an experience where you found connection through disconnection? Read on.

How Did I Get Here? Where Am I Going?

Our lives and careers are a rapid-fire series of choices, events, relationships, missteps, and questions. It's the best connect-the-dots puzzle *ever*. Every day you think, "Where do I want to go, what will get me there, and how can I make sense of where I have been?"

The dot marked "start" was that fateful day when you arrived on planet Earth. From that dot you move along, day after day, traveling from place to place, drawing lines or pathways to the next place or next contact, finding your way as the bigger picture becomes clearer and more detailed. The destination isn't always clear. Sometimes you zig when you should zag. And just when you assume you are rudderless and drifting—*surprise!*—you get back on course.

Life, Career, and Relationships are all in the dots. Business is all in the dots.

Connections and connecting are *everything*.

What Successful People Know about Connection

The most successful CEOs, executives, entrepreneurs, and leaders know the key to success (e.g., more sales, increased productivity, better results, satisfied clients, better employee engagement, and a happier culture) is the ability to harness the power of authentic connection—that ability to be real with another person. This is even more difficult today amid high-tech distractions—social media, smartphones, instant messaging, and texting.

What Is the Connection Challenge?

We are wired for connection, yet in this age of distraction, we are challenged to stay focused on what matters most. A million things compete for our time and attention 24/7. Staying curious and present can be difficult. Our stress levels are high, and our patience can wane.

It takes courage to take on the challenge of staying connected. It requires badass commitment and work. Do I still have *your* attention? Great.

Let's do a little poll.

- Are you an executive tired of feeling as if you are the only one who cares about producing quality work?
- Do you feel as if you are not getting through to your team members?
- Are you a CEO who wonders why business walks out the door and why sales are down?

- Are you an executive wondering why your staff isn't motivated and why retention is lousy?
- Are you an entrepreneur who is unfocused and stressed?
- Are you a business owner who wastes time chasing leads that go nowhere?

If you answered yes to any question, you've come to the right place.

Interconnected, Yet Disconnected?

With the rise of technology, we are connected to everyone and everything. Our devices and cutting-edge technology have immense value. Every device and app we own can potentially create efficiencies and shortcuts. We can keep on top of what our friends are doing every minute of the day; texting and email are great tools to confirm or make an appointment or share an article or video. But everything in moderation, right?

Has the convenience of having the world at our little texting fingertips left us more separated than connected? Have multitasking smart phones brought us closer to our inner purpose or further away from it? Are we staying connected to a dream, a goal or a relationship, or are we lost in the noise of what everyone else is doing?

The Energy of Connection

Noted social anthropologist, Brené Brown, in her book, *Daring Greatly*, defines connection as, “the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.”¹ She examines connections in the context of living a daring life: how do we put ourselves into the world courageously and take on what challenges us most? I believe that the energy she describes is the essential component of connection. It’s the heart of what we do



¹ Brown, Brené. *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. London: Penguin Books, 2016.

and who we want to be. And heart may be the perfect word, with the experience of connection feeling like what I imagine “two hearts beating as one” might be.

Six Degrees of Separation

We are all separated by only six people—an idea that emerged out of nearly a century of mathematical and psychological research (and the basis of a great movie and Broadway show, too). One relationship can open the gateway to a world of possibilities. Relationships give us a sense of belonging to a group, a sense of identity, and a reason not to feel lonely. We learn from our experiences and perception of others, not just from ourselves. Compelling human exchange makes all the difference when it comes to connection.

The Benefits of Connection

There are other benefits.

Shawn Achor, the author of the international bestseller, *The Happiness Advantage*, has conducted studies proving that if we can get someone to deepen his or her social connection, it improves every single business and educational outcome we can test for. Achor’s studies reveal that companies where employees have strong social connections significantly outperform their competition.

Now we know there’s a defined science to connection, as well. Scientists can monitor the powerful, positive effect of

hormones and natural drugs in our systems when we feel a sense of attachment.

What's It to You?

So, what is connection for you, as a leader? Is it fate? Or something that's "meant to be?" Is it synchronicity or a moment when the stars are aligned? Is it knowing exactly what to say to a team member because you "get them?" Is it instinctively knowing how to break through resistance to an idea, or lifting the spirits of team members because you understand what really makes them tick? Is it experiencing long periods of flow and creativity, or knowing whom to know and how to meet them? Or, maybe, it is about making connections for others? Is it knowing why you are here and what you want your legacy to be—then living your life accordingly? Is it being a masterful strategist, always able to connect the dots?

The Laws of Connection

As I worked on this book, several themes emerged. The Laws of Connection are:

- Connection is the gateway to possibility.
- Connection is about the journey (process) rather than the destination (outcome).
- Our ability to connect to others is in direct proportion to our connection with ourselves.

Read further to decide how these concepts may resonate for you.

Take the Challenge

I thrive on challenges. My brain craves novelty, and I love to stretch myself: to grow, transform, learn new things, take risks. I decided to write this book because I believe that by challenging you to explore your own experience around connection, you can reach a breakthrough in your own business and life.

By understanding the choices you make around your connections, consciously and unconsciously, you can tap into your own personal sense of power and gain a greater understanding of yourself and your world. Through this process, you can find the key to new possibilities and opportunities you may not have been aware of. The connection you build with your team members can be the gateway to an amazing new idea, venture, or possibility. The difficult conversation that you finally have with a customer, for example, can restore integrity to the relationship, leaving both parties feeling empowered and possibly closer.

The Connection Challenge asks you to dig deep and to tap into new ways of thinking about your current and past behavior. This book offers a methodology for being more self-connected, which will, in turn, positively affect your business and relationships.

Connection in Fourteen Chapters

The book's challenge means making a commitment to connection, no matter what. Each chapter highlights a core component of connection, which together weave into all aspects of your life.

- In chapter 1, which you are reading now, you will discover just what connection is and why it is so important.
- In chapter 2, you will learn how connecting to purpose is fundamental to understanding how the dots of your business line up.
- Chapter 3 presents a new way to think about the interplay of different “Connection Energies” and how this relates to your success.
- Chapter 4 will reveal how your brain’s wiring affects your ability to create rapport.
- In chapter 5, you’ll discover the key qualities of a connected leader—trust, authenticity, and gratitude.
- Chapter 6 shares tools and techniques you can use to create stronger bonds.
- Chapter 7 explores how to connect to your team.
- Chapter 8 delves into the power of storytelling to build relationships.
- Chapter 9 focuses on connection killers and how to avoid them.
- Chapter 10 explores overcoming the C.R.U.D.—the inner blocks that create power leaks and affect your ability to rock your relationships.
- Chapter 11 offers strategies to hack those shiny

distractions and the behaviors that negatively affect connection.

- Chapter 12 explores how difficult conversations can actually enhance relationships.
- In chapter 13, you'll discover how to network from a place of true connection rather than transaction. Let's reframe it as *Connectworking*.
- Chapter 14 will tie everything together.

At the end of each chapter, you'll find exercises and questions to consider which comprise your very own Connection Challenge journal entries.

The ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step." Today, it begins with one turn of the page.

Let's start.