

# Strategic Conversation



strengths-based  
building relationship  
relational

## Connection, Reflection & Relationships— Why it Matters

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**I want to chat about intakes—or interviews, or chats. These first meetings with community members are crucial because the way we approach them sets people up for success.**

For many of us, there is pressure to get the paperwork done and the boxes ticked before someone can even start their learning journey. What if we shifted our viewpoint from the intake being about paper and boxes and made it about connection, reflection and relationship?

### **Connection: Building Trust from the First Moment**

Have you ever thought about when connection starts? Connection can start before we even meet with someone. Often, before they even reach out to us, they have seen us in community or heard about us from friends and community partners. Our actions influence intake before we even meet. **Connections in the community matter to the success of our participants and our programs.**

Next is the first meeting, which is not when you sit down with someone but the first call, text or random meeting in the community. Connection is always happening. We need to understand this and intentionally make it part of our work. This means that we need to check ourselves, our body language and our tone. We need to try with every encounter to be fully present and listen, truly listen, so we can validate people's emotions and experiences. This all happens before we start ticking boxes. **Connection takes time.**



## Reflection: Noticing How We Show Up

Reflection is the tough work that we do when we look inward and recognize how we react, both physically and mentally. Reflection helps build connections and relationships. Practicing reflection can be the most valuable tool for us to improve our work. Reflection needs to be practiced. It is best practiced with guidance and support from others.

We need to be asking ourselves questions like:

- Am I making space for others to have or find their voice?
- Am I rushing to place them in a box?
- Are my own experiences affecting how I interpret theirs?
- Is this about me or them?

These are hard questions to answer on the best of days, let alone while we are trying to connect and build relationships with people. This is where having someone else to ask you reflective questions to help you dive deep becomes important.





The other big part of reflection is being able to develop the ability to reflect in the moment when you are with other people (coworkers, community members or clients). When you can reflect and check yourself right then, you can move to becoming more responsive. This is difficult. It can feel like we are just catching ourselves being wrong. Instead, can we move from thinking it is wrong to reflecting on:

- Where is it coming from?
- Can I move through it?
- How is it affecting the connection and the relationship being built?

Reflection is about gaining the ability to notice, adapt and learn. Reflection can lead to personal growth, better self-care and improve the intake process.

**Reflection is a part of being a lifelong learner.**

## Relationship: Builds the Foundation for Learning

If we connect and reflect with others—especially while meeting clients—we hope that a relationship will form. Why does this matter? Good and healthy relationships will enhance lives. These relationships can increase motivation, engagement and learning.

For many of our clients, these relationships are the beginning of their learning journey. Within this relationship, we are privy to a great deal of information, and we must remember that boundaries are kindness. Knowing our boundaries and our organizational boundaries is important. Boundaries create and sustain healthy relationships. These initial meetings are key to setting up clear expectations of each person's role in the relationship. **With boundaries, people can clearly see their role in the relationship and that they are leading this journey.**

Each of us will form and hold relationships differently, but there are key actions we can take to build, maintain and enhance relationships:

- Always start with connection
- Be curious
- Ask open-ended questions and ask follow-up questions
- Listen with interest and empathy
- Be aware of your body language and tone
- Be consistent
- Acknowledge when they are brave or vulnerable

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Relationships take work; we should celebrate accomplishments, embrace challenges, always notice, and be grateful for these relationships. **It takes two people to be in a relationship.**

When we focus on the person and not the paperwork, we open the doors to change and learning—not just for the people we support but also for ourselves. **Connection** reminds us to be present and intentional, creating trust from the very first interaction. **Reflection** reminds us to be honest and curious, allowing us to adapt and grow. Together, connection and reflection foster **relationships** that offer space and opportunity for the learning to unfold.

This is a big topic and there is a great deal we can learn from each other about connection, reflection and relationship. I hope that you read this article and start a conversation with others on how we do our work and live our lives. ◇

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