



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 58, No. 2  
(First published: October 1954)

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, FEBRUARY 1977

## *Strategy in Working with People*

ABILITY TO get along well with people is the prime attribute of a good executive. It is a necessity for all of us if we are to enjoy peace of mind.

Life cannot be lived in an impersonal way. In manufacturing, transportation, trading, finance, and all the other areas of production and commerce, as well as in social life, we deal with men and women, men and women who are filled as we ourselves are with feelings of pride, the ambition to achieve, and the desire for esteem and affection.

No executive can do his best work or attain notable success in business without the concurrence of other people's endeavours. Facing the human equation and solving it satisfactorily are urgent needs imposed upon leaders in all walks of life. The competent leader takes many precautions that lesser people neglect.

To understand people demands first of all that we admit two truths: we are all different, and often we are not aware in what respect, to what degree, and why we are different; and we are all acting and reacting in different environment.

When a person realizes these truths he will be inclined to begin understanding people by studying them. He will go out of his way to encourage them to talk about themselves and their interests. Only so can the executive learn what makes employees unhappy in their work, what qualification young workers have for advancement, what mistaken ideas are prevalent in the office or factory that should be corrected.

No one in authority can ever do too much listening; the best leaders know that people prosper not in proportion as they inform but as they elicit.

They take special pains to win the support and confidence of other people by paying attention to their special interests. It is more important to know people's thoughts and to anticipate their reactions than to draw up a semantically correct manifesto of the firm's aims and regulations. Able managers and supervisors, whose skill in working with people has been called uncanny, merely are careful to watch for bits of evidence which others ignore.

But it is not enough to listen and observe: one must

examine and appraise. By looking at the subject from the other person's viewpoint, you perceive the things that need to be cleared away so as to let him see the good points of your plan or proposal.

Those who go in for mottoes might add this one to their stock: "Every human act can be understood if we know all the pertinent facts." When we see a person whom we believe we know very well acting in a manner that is different from our expectations, we may be shocked or confused. But we need not rest there. By showing a sympathetic interest, by demonstrating our desire to understand, and by taking all the appropriate steps toward becoming informed of the cause, we may find what is wrong with the person — or with our own interpretation of his actions.

We must be prepared to meet resistance, if the attitude we seek to change is a deeply-rooted one. We need to offer something more concrete than generalities. If we take the pains to think out and elaborate our thoughts and our plan in clear consistency we are likely to reap a reward beyond our hopes.

Our clear-cut ideas can be presented so as to dominate the undisciplined aspirations and the prejudices of the person we seek to influence, but they must be presented in terms of that person's interests. Lord Macaulay's saying has the air of a platitude, but it conveys a lesson: "It is not by his own taste, but by the taste of the fish, that the angler is determined in the choice of bait."

### *Communication of ideas*

To deal with people requires the communication of ideas. This is a two-way project. Executives cannot possibly put across their ideas unless they know what ideas are already in the minds of the workers — ideas which may clarify or confuse, help or hinder. Workers must understand what management is trying to do before they can be counted upon for enthusiastic support.

This means that management must have crystal-clear in its own mind just what is to be attempted, or the result will be confusion and frustration. Napoleon wrote to his General Murat: "You will so manage that



the Spaniards may not suspect the course I intend to pursue. This will not be difficult, for I have not fixed upon it myself."

Time is needed to communicate ideas and cultivate their growth. In view of the complex conditions to which we human beings must accommodate ourselves, and the number of conflicting ideas from which we are compelled to choose, it is no wonder that an effort to rush us into decisions should antagonize us and rouse our opposition. The miracle is that so many leaders, by taking time and trouble, succeed in having their ideas accepted.

The person who allows himself to appear in a hurry gives himself a needless handicap. The onlooker is likely to conclude that the hurrying man has found his responsibilities too big for him, and to decide that he, for his part, is not going to be rushed into a decision reached in an environment of excitement.

### *... all but little people*

None of us like to feel that we are being told to do something; we prefer to feel that we are acting on our own ideas, or that we are thoughtfully agreeing with the ideas of someone else. People who are adroit in working with people have mastered the method of giving instructions, proving a point, or winning agreement in such a way that those to whom they convey their ideas feel they are their own.

The purpose of all but little people is not to dominate but to inspire, not to strike fear into men or women but to enlist their goodwill, not to gain a point by fighting but to win support by making people want to get behind the plan.

There comes, in every person's life, a time to fight, but it must be tested by asking: "Is the cause worthy? Cannot I persuade rather than compel? If I do win my point by force, will the response be favourable among the people who count in my life?" If there is no other way to achieve a worth-the-while purpose, then it is necessary to "lay down the law". Dogmatism is a powerful device when justifiably used, but it is a fighting weapon, not calculated to make friends.

To those who insist upon fighting their way through life, having it in their nature to do so, there are some points of strategy that should be attended to. It was a principle among the ancient Greek fighters not to cut off the enemy's retreat, because when bottled up he would fight more desperately: in our modern business life it is well to give an opponent a chance to "save face".

To beat a person down out of our sheer joy in raising our ego at his expense is not only a breach of good manners and good sportsmanship, it is bad business, because there are no persons so insignificant but may, some time or other, have it in their power to be of use to us.

Violence in an executive makes enemies unless the people surrounding him are wonderfully tolerant — something on which no one has the right to count. Violence takes toll of one's health, too, wears one out

more rapidly than does persuasion, and it is not so gratifying to the person of intelligence. Persuasion, as Matthew Arnold phrased it, is the only true intellectual process.

### *Strategy in criticism*

Able people take pains to spare others humiliation, even when it is necessary to criticize their actions. It is foolish to scold. John Wanamaker confessed: "I have enough trouble overcoming my own limitations without fretting over the fact that God has not seen fit to distribute evenly the gift of intelligence."

The purpose of discipline in business, school or family life is to prevent repetition of an offense. It should be constructive. Impatient tearing down is likely to breed distaste for necessary regulation.

Criticism should begin with praise and honest appreciation of what the person does well, and then go on to point out how this other thing can be done better. This mode of criticising will appeal to the worker because it shows an honest desire to be helpful. It recognizes the truth that nobody ever learns anything except by making mistakes. The better a person is, the more mistakes he will make, because the more new things he will try.

Learning to like people and to get along with them by looking for the good in them is a satisfying way of life. If we complain often about our associates or about the firm for which we work people are likely to think the trouble lies with us.

### *Other people's wants*

One sure way of getting along with people is to satisfy some of their wants. We can be alert to notice and remember their wishes and preferences. Every executive knows that it is not sufficient to give a worker good wages and stable employment and comfortable working space: other, more personal, needs must be met if the working force is to be a contented, harmonious and efficient team. To build others' feeling of self-respect, to give them the feeling that they are respected: these are important techniques for the person seeking to work with people.

How can we be of greater service to people than by detecting their emotional disturbances, quietly learning the cause, and instilling confidence while helping toward good adjustment? When you help someone to be right you are satisfying one of his greatest needs.

It is good strategy to be positive rather than negative. People most willingly obey those whom they consider most able to direct, and they are most willing to follow those with a positive way of doing things. The manager who gives a worker a fine reputation to live up to is thereby inspiring him to do his best and to form one of a team, participating rather than just working. It is well, sometimes, to arrange a little triumph for a worker, tempting him to try something more difficult.

Look favourably on people's motives. The most unhappy person on earth is the one who goes through



life suspecting everyone with whom he comes into contact of trying to do him some ill turn. Friendships do not grow out of suspicion, nor is loyalty in a working organization built up of distrust.

There are times to concede and conciliate. He is a wise organizer who lets people beat him a little in discussion of some plan he is trying to "sell", so long as he keeps the main issue clear and unspoiled, and gives in to change of detail in order to win principles.

One can often get done what one wants done — the other person's way. Joseph Chamberlain, the British statesman, remarked: "Much can be done by a concession which, valued by the receiver, demands little of the giver beyond perception of its acceptableness."

Sometimes it is wise to retreat and await a more favourable time. A pliable plant on a river bank, dipping its branches into swiftly running water, will save every twig and leaf, whereas a stout tree will be torn away. And, having decided to yield, do so with good grace.

### *Personal recognition*

To enjoy good human relations we need to recognize the craving of people for personal recognition. They desire prestige. By giving them a sense of importance we attract them to us, arouse their interest in our ideas, and make them eager to help us bring our plans to fruition.

A true leader does not hog the limelight, but draws friends and fellow workers into it, thus inspiring them with enthusiasm and loyalty. It is dangerous and unrewarding to ignore subordinates. Charm, poise, personality and efficiency — attributes of leadership — all arise from a feeling of genuine interest in people and thoughtfulness for them.

The person who waits until trouble looms with friends, customers or colleagues before turning on his charm is making a mistake. Children will have temper tantrums, feeling that it is better to be punished than not to be recognized at all; adults will get sick or go on strike in order that people will pay more attention to them.

The person who sincerely satisfies our hunger for recognition as individuals will hold us in the palm of his hand.

A compliment, particularly on points where we wish to excel and yet are doubtful whether we do or not, is an effective way to gain our goodwill, if the compliment be true and not fabricated flattery. Nothing is less laborious and irksome than to give praise, and as the Duc de la Rochefoucauld put it in his *Maxims*: "To praise good actions heartily is in some measure to take part in them."

Flattery is quite unlikely to be affective for a person whose only weapon it is. But there is something distantly related that will win friends and influence people your way: it is to watch for opportunities to commend them sincerely on some act or triumph or promotion, however little, that is to their credit.

Another way to give personal recognition is by suggesting a point in such a way that the idea seems to originate in the other person's mind. It must be presented in terms of his experience.

If we take the gentle, the favourable, the indulgent side of most questions, we retain our poise under trying circumstances. Even though we are bested in an argument, we keep our self-respect, our feeling of being on top, and we win, too, the respect of our opponents.

When we make a mistake we take the wind out of the opposition's sails by admitting it quickly and emphatically. An outstanding example is given by Lord Macaulay in his *History of England*: When Queen Elizabeth was challenged in granting of monopolies, "she with admirable judgment and temper declined the contest, put herself at the head of the reforming party, redressed the grievance, thanked the Commons in touching and dignified language for their tender care of the general weal, brought back to herself the hearts of the people, and left to her successors a memorable example of the way in which it behooves a ruler to deal with public movements which he has not the means of resisting."

### *Four virtues*

There are many virtues, but four are of leading importance to the person seeking to live and work successfully with people. They are consistency, sincerity, courtesy, and friendliness.

We feel more secure in our relationships with consistent people, even though they are always unreasonably demanding, than we do with those who are reasonable part of the time and unreasonable at other times. We can learn how to deal with the person who is consistent, even if he is consistently wrong, but we are utterly incapable of developing a strategy for the person who is guided by whims and notions.

Sincerity is important, because it deserves friends. You can't talk your way into friendship in social or business life. If you are going to make friends, people must recognize you as worthy of friendship.

It is not necessary that we should agree with people on every detail, or that either party should admit that the other is infallible in wisdom or justice, but each should be sure of the other's sincerity, so that they feel free to work out the problem for the good of both. "A deep, great, genuine sincerity," said Thomas Carlyle in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, "is the first characteristic of all men in any way heroic."

### *Don't ignore courtesy*

No one who aspires to getting along well with people can afford to ignore courtesy, which means being considerate of others in little things. To refuse a request gracefully, to show respect for what others revere, to treat even bores with consideration, to be eager to do a favour, to be calm under provocation and affable under pressure: these are evidences of courtesy.



Courtesy is the easiest quality to lift one above the crowd. Very often it is lacking in any masterful quality, but in it abides a wistful appeal that wins friends.

It is far more interesting to out-think an opponent, to persuade a wife or a husband, or to "sell" an idea to the group of which you are leader than to gain your way by bulldozing and throwing your weight.

Friendliness with a person means that you have, over and above your general merit, some particular merit to that person. It means that even if you are not in position to benefit people materially you take pains to oblige them and show your amiable spirit.

The person in search of success and peace of mind needs friends. Xenophon, the historian, remarked: "It is far less difficult to march up a steep ascent without fighting than along a level road with enemies on each side."

Leadership has been written about for thousands of years, and scores of books are published every year giving advice about how to become and remain an executive. Yet all these years and words have found no substitute for these four virtues: consistency, sincerity, courtesy and friendliness.

### *Some principles*

In addition to the basic virtues, getting along with people requires us to practise certain principles, to use proven tactics.

You would not appoint a person to a managerial position if he were more interested in the question "Who is right?" than in the question "What is right?". The manager, supervisor, foreman or other person in a position of command over people needs to be careful not to allow personalities to corrupt principles. Sometimes the executive is right; sometimes the worker is right; sometimes both are partly right: but both need to seek the procedure which will be most in keeping with their desire for the best outcome.

The person who gets along with people avoids focussing on their weaknesses rather than on their strengths, or on their disabilities rather than on their abilities. Everybody has problems and everybody is short-suited in some quality. The thing to do is not to wail about these, but to do something positive to help solve and overcome them.

Practice of this sort means going beyond the stark, necessary demands of business and social intercourse. It calls for willingness to go more than half way in friendly overtures. It is a practice that distinguishes the really great person from the person who is merely adequate.

Great men and women are not quick to take offence. They ascribe annoying acts and sayings of colleagues and acquaintances to defective knowledge, and merely observe without feeling. They know that many criticisms are made because making them gives the critic a feeling of importance. They measure criticism by the value there is in it for them as a guide to doing something better, and not by the degree in which the criticism hurts. Like swordsmen, they take on their shields the thrusts they cannot parry.

### *Passion displaces intellect*

Self-control is necessary to successful working with people. It is the first virtue taught by Socrates, necessary to make the other virtues effective.

Not only does falling into a passion tend to make enemies instead of friends, but it displaces intellect and gives your adversary an advantage over you. When one person is furious and the other cool, onlookers are very likely to suppose that the man who keeps his temper is right, even though he is not.

In his novel *The Laughing Man* Victor Hugo writes: "Wind, hail, the hurricane, the whirlwind — these are wild combatants that may be overcome . . . but nothing is to be done against a calm; it offers nothing to the grasp of which you can lay hold."

The person seeking to work in harmony with other people is modest and moderate. He does not exceed what is necessary in discipline or in praise, in strife or in entertainment.

There is a certain dignity attaching to modesty. As the Archbishop of Canterbury said on a visit to this side of the ocean: "Dignity is many things, each in its right place. It's always unselfconscious. It is being worthy of any given situation, in its proper context."

Modesty prompts a person to refrain from boasting of his success. When a person is satisfied that he has succeeded in an effort, he means that his striving for success is over, and that marks him as a failure. Modesty is self-defensive, too. Southey says in his *Life of Nelson* that the great admiral might have lived had he not been so proud of his medals. They drew snipers' fire upon him.

Courage is needed in working with people, but not braggart daring. The wise person knows that in the olden days many more thousands were killed in flight than in battle, but he also knows that there is a time to retreat. As the philosopher said on giving up an argument with the Emperor Adrian: "I am never ashamed to be confuted by one who is master of fifty legions." When his chief hit his slave Hajji Baba on the head, Hajji boasted: "Though I rubbed the sore place, I still could laugh at the jokes of my chief."

Successful human relations are essentially the results of a complicated interplay of these virtues and principles, but every person must play the game within his own particular environment and according to his own personal qualities and ideals.

There will be understanding, nonunderstanding and misunderstanding in every human relationship of two or more people.

The art of working and getting along with people lies in applying fundamental ideas of kindness and seeking understanding. It prompts us to allow everyone the right to exist in accordance with the character he has, whatever it turns out to be. It leads us to conform where we cannot alter, and to maintain our serenity when friends and fellow workers seem perverse.