WHY BEING 'LONELY AT THE TOP' ISN'T GOOD FOR YOU, OR FOR BUSINESS

by Glenn Williams

Leaders are no more exempt from loneliness and isolation than the rest of the population. In fact, they can be more susceptible to these feelings. As their responsibilities grow, the quality of their social and intimate connections declines.

Our careers and lives are a culmination of many small decisions that, over time, create our life's trajectory. We all know it, but few of us start out planning the choices we will make in the name of "success". It's only after achieving success that we realise what it has cost, often at the expense of our closest and most important relationships.

Regrettably, these relationships may be difficult or even impossible to restore because the breakdown in connection often results from the culmination of many small, seemingly harmless decisions before leading to more profound consequences.

We've grown accustomed to the idea that the more our roles demand from us, the more we must give. And yes, there's pressure to sacrifice investing in critical relationships to meet urgent organizational deadlines. But the compelling evidence shows that those sacrifices erode a leader's capacity for sustainable success. Why? Because leadership doesn't happen in isolation; it is always in the context of relationships.

Effectively managing up and down, increasing staff engagement, empowering collaboration, and building organizational trust are fostered through quality relationships. Your ability to cultivate meaningful relationships directly impacts your work performance and, as a result, your business outcomes.

So, why are so many leaders lonely at the top?

Transactional versus transformational relationships

The reality is relationships are currency; we transact in them every day. We make short-term and long-term deposits, making withdrawals and investing more in some while neglecting others. At times, we might even notice that the 'balance' in our relationships is dwindling, heading towards bankruptcy.

When we find ourselves sacrificing meaningful relationships, our connections tend to be purely transactional. The value of our relationships is reduced to what they contribute to our quest for success rather than fostering mutually beneficial and supportive collaborations that have the power to positively transform us and those we care about.

It sounds calculated, and people don't usually consciously sacrifice their closest relationships to succeed in business. The issue lies in our failure to intentionally prioritise the most important people in our lives—leading us to unintentionally sacrifice them for the job's demands.

How do you define "success"?

When you envisage "success", what do you imagine? Everyone's definition will be different, so what does "having it all" look like to you? Does it include your family, spouse, and closest friends? And if you achieved all the success in the world, would it still be worth it if you lost these relationships?

Throughout generations, we've engrained the belief that the path to success involves compartmentalizing their lives and allowing our businesses and professional pursuits to dominate. The crazy thing is that most are doing it, at least partly to provide for the people they love, but instead, it's often resulted in leaders feeling isolated and families torn apart.

The question arises: Is it truly worth it to pursue success at the cost of meaningful connections with the people we cherish?

When Leaders are lost

A lonely leader is a lost leader. Leaders are lost for many reasons, but at the core for many is the loss of relationships. The good news is that it's never too late to take stock of where you're at and make

changes. I've worked with hundreds of leaders worldwide in my capacity as the CEO of LCP Global, as part of my research for my doctoral thesis, and more recently when I wrote When Leaders Are Lost. In this excerpt, I document an eye-opening conversation with fifteen current and former executives in Dallas, Texas.

> *"As we discussed some of the highs and lows of leadership, I learned that five had experienced complicated and painful family situations. These included marital separation and divorce, with some estranged from their children. I asked, "Was there any one thing that they could identify as contributing to this?"*
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> *Almost without fail, their responses were along the lines of "I overrated corporate success and underrated the importance of those relationships closest to me. But by the time I realized things had deteriorated, I felt trapped or that it was too late to turn things around."*
> *[1]*

The research is clear. Leaders with significant relationships outside work are far more likely to recover from setbacks and bounce back to achieve outcomes beyond what they initially imagined. On the other hand, loneliness "undermines individual performance, team performance and a sense of connection between employees and their organization"[2].

A 75-year longitudinal study by Harvard University[2] measuring optimum health and potential found that those who invested in relationships were the most successful. Global analytics company Gallup found that leaders with close friendships "are more engaged, produce higher quality work and have a higher state of well-being"[3]

Meaningful relationships and business success are not mutually exclusive; they impact each other. How easy is it for us to bring our work stresses into our personal lives, projecting the frustrations of the job onto key relationships? And how do breakdowns and relationship stresses impact our work performance, focus, energy, and capacity?

Be intentional

We're intentional in business and leadership. We plan and prepare. We have meetings with colleagues and staff. So why would we believe that our closest relationships somehow happen or continue without us making and taking the time to cultivate and nurture them?

Getting intentional starts with getting real. We must be honest about the quality of our relationships outside work. Are they a priority, or is there a history of cancelled plans because something "came up at

work"?

We need to stop pushing our significant connections down the line, being away from our family, because we'll make up for it later. The research and lived experience of thousands of leaders doesn't support it.

Consider taking decisive action within the next seven days to demonstrate your commitment to investing in your most significant relationships. What outcomes do you anticipate from this choice?

Quality relationships are good for business

People are at the core of every business. We can fool ourselves into believing that we must sacrifice our closest relationships for the sake of the organization. The irony is that we'll fail our companies if we don't care for our most significant connections.

And if we don't take care of those connections, failure at work will challenge our very identity. Knowing who we are outside of work, in the context of our closest relationships, will help us weather any storm. Conversely, if we become siloed and isolated in our position when storms come—and they will—we will be at the mercy of circumstances.

The fundamental human need to belong applies to all of us. If we've sacrificed our sense of belonging to further ourselves as business leaders, we risk becoming less effective to those we lead.

It's not uncommon to reach a point where we wish we could turn back time and undo some of the damaging decisions we have made in the past. Often, this leads to guilt and shame, along with a sense that it's too late to make amends. However, I firmly believe a regrettable decision doesn't have to define us or determine the future.

Consider this: Is there a conversation you've been avoiding with someone affected by something you said or did? What if you chose not to delay it any longer? What potential opportunities for healing and growth might emerge from having that conversation?

Leaders set the culture.

As a leader, you have a significant influence on the culture of your organization. As Simon Sinek shared on X, "So goes the leader, so goes the culture. So goes the culture, so goes the company."[4]

Lonely leaders will lead teams without trust. If people aren't working together – they're working against each other. Fostering successful relationships is the key to building relationships that help to effectively manage up and down, build organizational trust, increase staff engagement, and empower collaboration.

As leaders, we must acknowledge, develop, and prioritize relationships within and beyond the workplace that withstand the reality of leadership demands. Failure to meet this most basic human need inevitably results in disastrous consequences. Conversely, when we intentionally invest in relationships and create a culture where everyone can flourish, we transform what often seems too challenging into a realm of new possibilities. It's a reminder that tending to our connections can lead to positive outcomes and open doors that were once considered too difficult to approach.

> "To neglect the relational component is to neglect the higher order needs… for both leaders and followers."[5]

But more than just a buffer against hardship, quality relationships anchor you amidst an ever-changing organizational landscape.

What's the bottom line?

Lonely leaders aren't good for business. We need to help each other redefine success in terms of our whole lives, not just as it relates to climbing the ladder. If you value and take care of your relationships

outside work, the evidence is that you'll lead others well. Healthy leaders breed healthy business cultures, which in turn breeds encouragement and support and leads to innovation and breakthroughs.

As you reflect on your significant connections, inside and outside work, here are some questions worth considering:

- Which of your relationships energize and motivate you to pursue your goals?
- How are you investing in these significant connections?
- Who do you need to surround yourself with that can encourage and spur you on to succeed in every part of your life?
- Where are you "paying it forward" to others?

References

[1] Williams, G. (2023) When Leaders Are Lost, Moving Beyond Disappointment, Failure, and Hurt to Redefine Success, 63.

[2] Ozcelik, H., & Barsade, S. (2011). Work loneliness and employee performance. Academy of Management Proceedings. 1-6.

[3] Rath, T., & Harter, J. (2010). Your Friends and Your Social Well-Being. https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/127043/friends-social-wellbeing.aspx

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[5] Rath, T.,& Harter, J. (2010). Your Friends and Your Social Well-Being. https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/127043/friends-social-wellbeing.aspx