

Instant Intimacy
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Whether your goal is to sell more widgets or make more friends, you'll be more successful the quicker you can connect with people. And of course, the more intimate the connection, the better. So let's discuss how you can capitalize on the many brief interactions at your next conference or social gathering.

Someone recently asked me if instant intimacy is really possible. Well, perhaps "instant" is too strong a word. But the point I'm trying to make is that you can definitely get quicker results than you're used to if you'll just get out of your own way, if you'll set aside your fears, insecurities, and preconceived ideas just for a moment.

If you think the concept of instant intimacy is a paradox, consider this. Recently I was working with room of 7,000 people at a technology users conference, facilitating an opening exercise to help everyone in the room get more out of their time investment in the conference. The focus of the exercise was to get everyone to commit to making each other more successful at the conference; and in so doing, to also get everyone to lower their guard a bit (and yes, be a little vulnerable with each other so they'd be more quickly seen as real humans!).

Across the board, the feedback was phenomenal. We increased the effectiveness readings of the conference by 25%. More importantly, the anecdotal evidence was that this group of high tech engineers, who stereotypically have a difficult time embracing such intimacy, found this exercise to be immensely valuable and confidence-building. Several people actually thanked us for giving them "permission" to practice these principles and take such risks in their everyday lives.

You might say, "That's great, Keith. But it's not so easy when people leave the conference and go out into the real world." Granted, in this instance, we manufactured a safe place for people to show up to new relationships in a different, better way. Then again, how "safe" do you really feel among 7,000 people?

I think all interactions are actually much safer than we imagine them to be. We've just got to take the first step forward, because it's only then we'll realize how easy and welcoming they really can be.

If you still have doubts about more quickly engaging in intimate conversations with new acquaintances, I'll offer this advice: Just approach them like you would a pool of cold water -- one step at a time. Put your toe in and see if you can handle that. Then you might wade in until the water's up to your knees. At some point, you'll get sufficiently comfortable, bold, or probably both and decide, "You know what? I'm just going to dive in."

And remember: No matter how successful you are at jumpstarting relationships, the ultimate goal is to develop deep relationships, and that's going to take time. Be patient. And consistent. Though you might get people to trust you quickly -- and I think you will, because they really do want to trust you -- they're also wanting to see if that lasts over weeks, months, and years.

DON'T WORRY IF YOU'RE NOT AN EXTROVERT

The question is: "What if I'm shy, if I'm not one of those extroverts running around a typical networking event?" And the answer is: "Congratulations!" Because so many of those extroverts running around a typical networking event are actually not being very successful. They're building transactional, peripheral, unimportant contacts. They're making all kinds of introductions without ever really connecting. They're not building relationships. They're passing out business cards.

Even if you're a shy individual, you certainly have friends, and you know what it means to have intimate relationships with people. Although meeting a new acquaintance might be a more frightening context than hanging with your best friend, you can do it. Everybody can.

It's not about working a room. It's about identifying someone you find empathetic, comfortable, interesting, and perhaps valuable to you in some way. It's about approaching them as real people and greeting them in a friendly and genuine way. Then exploring your shared interests and passions to connect a little deeper. Then bonding through real empathy and vulnerability. And above all, focusing on giving -- using any [currency](#) you have to help fill their needs.

REMEMBER WE'RE ALL THE SAME

I recently met a friend of my assistant. Fred wanted to drive the whole way up from San Diego to Los Angeles to meet with me, so the least I could do was find time before my workout to sit down for a cup of coffee. (By the way, given my schedule these days, only mission critical items are in my focus. If it was not for "managing the gatekeeper," Fred would have never got a bit of my time.) Anyway,

Fred is quite interesting. A dedicated student of human behavior and communication, he has a practice and passion for helping individuals sort through difficult times in their relationships. In the course of our conversation, Fred said something that I really enjoyed: "People want to be understood." In fact, he said that one of the deepest desires we all have is to be understood on the deepest levels.

If he is right, the path to creating "instant intimacy" is not about "getting" people to go deep into themselves. It's about "allowing" people to go deep. So how do you do that? I think you start by setting a safe place, one without judgment. Perhaps the best way to lay that ground is to just say it or show it in your actions. The other is to share a little of yourself first. Tell them what really drives you and invite them to share their interests and passions as well. Find out what they really love in life when they're not at the conference. Is it their children, their golf game, or their community service?

The deeper you go, the more permission you give others to do deep as well. Then, listen, listen, listen and enjoy. That last piece is crucial. People know if you don't care what they are saying. But you need to care. You need to focus and enjoy the humanity that is in everyone around us.

Your objective is not to dump all your issues on someone else. You just want to share enough of yourself so that other people can feel comfortable sharing some of themselves. And ultimately, you win when someone feels like they've been deeply understood and when they discover you're human just like them.

YOUR CHALLENGE: SKIP THE SMALL TALK

With all this in mind, next time you're at a conference or a social gathering and you have only a few minutes to meet someone, I challenge you to skip the small talk as quickly as you can. Don't let the recap of the day's weather last very long! Quickly direct the conversation to stuff that really matters - your and their passions and interests, personal or professional. Yeah, there's always the temptation to make idle chitchat about whatever happens to be in front of you -- the appetizers, the table centerpiece, etc. But it's just as easy to say something like the following to someone at a conference: "Hey, what do you think of this conference? Frankly, I struggled in deciding to come. I've been traveling so much lately and my spouse is giving me a hard time and I miss the kids. That said, I'm really finding talks like the last one to be pretty valuable..." With lines like that, you can share a ton in a totally appropriate manner and open up the door for your conversation partner to do the same. Then take care to be understanding of their thoughts and feelings, and you'll be well on your way to quicker, if not instant, intimacy.