

TARKENTON

# IDEAS AT WORK

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## It's Time to Be a Front-Facing Leader Again

### Takeaways

- Why You Should Face the Front
- Basics of Engagement

On the wall in my office I have a framed picture of one of the great mentors of my life: Sam Walton, the founder of Walmart. He was one of the greatest business leaders to ever live, and I had the great fortune to get to know him and see how he did things.

Everything he did was built on the personal touch. He was never one to sit in a big office on the 30th floor and hand down a word from on high. He would fly in a little prop plane and go visit his stores in person—and I got to come along on many of those trips.

He'd walk the aisles and talk to the people. Not just the higher ups, either! He'd talk to the associates, ask them, "What's selling? What's not selling? You're on the front lines, you know better than me, and I want to hear from you!" I noticed that people might be intimidated at first, but he was so genuine and had no ego, so people would warm up and share.

Technology helps us do some incredible things, but there are some things that you can only do in person. Read on for a reminder of what's so great about networking and meeting people in person, and how you can get better if you're out of practice.



*Jim Tarkenton*

## It's Time to Be a Front-Facing Leader Again

The new habits we formed to network and meet people during the pandemic produced some great benefits. Technologies like Zoom enabled us to stay in contact, even when we couldn't meet in public. Talking to people on the other side of the world now included seeing them on-camera. But for all we gained, we made some big sacrifices when we walked away from in-person networking. Now that the fear has subsided, the time has come to restore the balance.

During the shutdowns, we did what we had to do through video conferencing. The lockdowns and quarantines have faded, but in-person networking is still working its way back. We've fallen out of the habit, and there's a price to pay.

Relationships are the core of commerce and trade. From the entrance lobby to the C-suite, businesses rise and fall (to varying degrees) on the strength of human connection. Zoom is a great asset, but genuine connection builds **trust**. Technology still can't completely replace the face-to-face experience.

Will the shift in how we build relationships affect connections we make, going forward? Have we reached a tipping point where face-to-face interaction is seen as "nice, but not necessary"? Let's take stock of what we lost when the pandemic pushed interaction into cyberspace.

In-person networking is more **immersive and engaging**. It's easier to work a physical room than a digital one. Social and nonverbal cues are more obvious. Time limits still apply, but there's less urgency about "keeping the meeting moving." You can get into deep, meaningful conversations with the right people, without feeling like you're dominating a conversation or taking up everyone's time.

**In-person networking compels you to be more attentive**—along with everyone else. Have you ever noticed the difference between watching movies at home on Netflix, versus watching them in the theater with a crowd of strangers? The difference in the tension is enormous. Even if those moviegoers watch the same film at the same time, no one knows how anyone else feels when everyone is streaming from their own separate homes. In the same way, in-person networking connects you to common experience. Video conferencing fails to replicate this.



**Real-time, genuine feedback** is difficult to perceive on video. Spend 30-60 minutes on Zoom, and you'll see it. Technical interruptions (like lags) and human errors (speaking while muted) are just the beginning. People switch off their cameras, look at their smartphones, or deal with pets and children in the background. It's hard to know who's "dialed in" to what you say, and who's "miles away" in a blank-faced stare.

**Approaching people and making introductions** are tougher on video. In-person events have an obvious purpose: to meet people. You can spark a conversation in-person, without disrupting the flow of a call. Others can introduce you; there's no need to set up a "side chat" to exchange numbers or coordinate calendars. The conversation happens on the spot.

**Meeting people who ignore impersonal outreach** is another casualty of the Zoom revolution. If you want to encounter leaders with "big picture" mentalities, statistics show they ignore cold outreach and Zoom networking. But they do seek growth, understanding of the market, exposure to emerging trends, and solutions to their problems by mingling with like-minded peers ... in-person.



## Why You Should Face the Front

One byproduct of video conferencing is “Zoom fatigue.” Most of us have experienced it, but not everyone understands why we get exhausted and burned out. It turns out, video conferencing has “side effects,” according to an article in *The Atlantic*, such as:

- Reduced empathy
- Global positioning confusion (our brains actually have a “GPS” equivalent)
- Stifled creativity
- Depression, anxiety, stress
- Dissatisfaction with life

Video conferencing is here to stay, so use it for its intended purpose. But after that, it’s time to lock your screen, get up from your desk, and get out and do some old-fashioned “gripping and grinning.” Add some trade shows, conferences, and educational opportunities to your schedule. Join a local peer business group where you interact in a public setting. (Or make certain your business development team is doing these things.)

Why? Because people need to talk and interact with other people. And the skills you develop and use during in-person networking are also important skills for other areas of your business, from sales and marketing to customer service. Unused muscles start to waste away, and that affects a lot more than just business development.



### Rusty on Engagement? Here Are Some Basics

Many leaders report awkwardness when they resume networking. They forget what to say, how to say it, or when to say it. If you’re familiar with personality tests and the introvert–extrovert spectrum, you could say the pandemic had an “introverting” effect on most of us.

Nobody wants to appear awkward in a social setting. If you’re ready to network, it’s better to start where you already have familiarity and context—in your own backyard. Get face-to-face with the people you lead, in a relaxed way, and talk to them. If you’re uncertain of what to say, remember that each person working in your company is a living, breathing story. Or better yet, a saga of stories.



You don't need to know each person's entire biography, but there's a good chance they'll share recent wins, current challenges / difficulties, and perhaps even a few hopes and dreams. Take time to show genuine interest in them, and ask these three open-ended questions:

- What's going well for you lately?
- What's not going so well?
- What are you looking forward to?

As you listen, be certain to write down or make mental notes of what people share with you, particularly with the second question. Do this often enough, and you will become known as a problem-solver or connector. You can direct people toward the right person / place to go for help, or coach them through thinking differently.

This practice "transfers" to networking in public gatherings. It's like a go-to recipe, for all occasions. It'll work coming directly from you, or from your business development team, provided it's done with genuine motives. Just try them, the next time you're in a social setting, and sit back and listen. (And they also work on Zoom).

**If you want more insight and wisdom for the human element of your business, anywhere from product and service design to user support, Tarkenton's proven, practical strategies can help. Schedule a complimentary conversation with a member of our business development team today.**



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