

When I'm in a business, church, or ministry meeting, my tendency is to get to the issues as quickly as possible. If I give into this urge, I usually regret it.

When we rush into addressing business or ministry issues before we've connected with others at a heart level, our discussions are more likely to be guarded, superficial, and even competitive. This often results in less-than-ideal outcomes.

But when we take time to connect personally with others, our conversations are almost always more relaxed, authentic, and collaborative. Such meetings usually lead to better decisions and more fruitful long-term results.

I learned this wisdom principle from one of my dearest friends and mentors, Don Bubna.

Don served Peacemaker Ministries for many years as a volunteer Board member, chaplain, fundraiser, trainer, and highly respected conciliator. Moreover, he was a true friend and confidant, calling me regularly to learn what challenges I was facing, to offer encouragement, and, best of all, to pray with me.

Perhaps his greatest contribution to our ministry and to me was his frequent reminder: "***R before I, except after T.***" This catchy little saying stands for "**Relationship before Issues, except after Trust has been established."**

Don challenged us to apply this principle every time our Board met. He taught us to start our meetings by reading Scripture together, sharing transparently about life struggles, telling of the ways God was refining or comforting us, and joining together in prayer. Having reinforced our personal relationships and our bond in Christ, we entered into our business discussions with greater humility, sensitivity, and willingness to listen to one another.

But that was just the beginning. "R before I" eventually penetrated every part of my life.

When I was dealing with a tense management issue, I heard Don's voice, "R before I." If my wife or children frustrated me and I was about to go into lecture mode, there it was again, "R before I." When I was mediating a volatile dispute ... you guessed it, "R before I." Even when teaching in Cairo or Beijing, I sought to apply his wisdom. Don's voice and example affected every corner of my life.

Whenever I listened to his voice, I was more successful at navigating difficult problems. I took time to pray for understanding, to listen to others' perspectives, to ponder their feelings and needs, to affirm their value, and to do all I could to serve them and look out for their well-being (see several model questions in the reflection section below). This deliberate effort to be other-aware never failed to pay dividends.

In contrast, my biggest blunders, both personally and professionally, can all be traced in part to my failure to remember Don's words.

I recall one failure in particular. I was facing a difficult issue that would impact others deeply. At a time when I should have been especially sensitive to others' concerns, I failed

to invest time and prayer seeking to understand the situation from their perspective and to engage them in a way that protected their interests and feelings, as well as our relationships. As a result, I deeply hurt some people whom I dearly loved and respected.

Whenever I think about that meeting, I can't help but ask myself, "Why, oh, why did I forget Don's timeless counsel and proven example?"

And then I smile inside as I imagine what Don would say if he could speak to me from heaven. I know that he would not berate me, but would simply say, "Yes, you stumbled, Ken. Now get up and move on, never forgetting, '**R before I.**'"

- Ken Sande

Reflection Questions

- Why do many of us want to "get down to business" as quickly as possible in the meetings we attend? What price do we pay for giving in to that tendency?
- How does Philippians 2:3-4 support the R before I principle? ("Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.")
- How and why can taking time to strengthen relationships by sharing personal concerns change the dynamics of a church, ministry, or business meeting?
- The next time you're in a meeting, ask these types of questions to help people connect at a personal level:
 - *Why have you taken time out of your busy life to be part of this meeting (or organization)?*
 - *What's the most rewarding thing we've accomplished together in the last year?*
 - *What are you most thankful for in your personal life in the past two weeks?*
 - *How can we pray for your walk with the Lord? For your family? For your work?*
 - *If you could change one character quality in the next year, what would it be?*
 - *How have you seen the gospel of Christ transform someone or lead to a reconciled relationship?*
 - *What would you do tomorrow if you knew you could not fail?*

The closer the group, the more personal your questions can be. The point is to tap into matters of the heart and forge a personal bond that enables you to work whole-heartedly together to advance the mission of your organization.

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