

## Relationships and resilience: The interpersonal realm

### Why effective communication is the key to authentic connections

How C-suite executives can master active responding and difficult conversations

*Editor's note: This is the third article in an ongoing series that examines the different elements of resilience and how they can be leveraged by C-suite executives.*

Every meaningful interpersonal exchange involves a measure of authentic connection. That sense of understanding fuels our ability to be resilient and to feel engaged with our counterparts. And for C-suite leaders, who spend [a quarter of their working day](#) on people and relationships, that authenticity can help them build the types of high-quality connections that boost team performance and, ultimately, the leaders' own resilience.

A few basic conditions can help foster these connections: When we trust that people have our back, know that they're supporting our goals, and feel reassured that we can be our authentic selves. To achieve true connection and empathy, however, also requires

paying close attention to the communication environment we create.

In Deloitte's recent Executive Resilience Academy, a six-week virtual series that immersed cross-role C-suite leaders in the latest science of resilience and laid out the foundational pieces of "whole-person" resilience, participants explored these qualities and learned powerful, proven communication techniques to put the lessons of these moments into practice.

In our previous article, "[Unlocking the core antagonists of resilience: The personal realm](#)," we explored the moves of Meta-Cognition, Self-Command, Realistic Optimism, and

Character Strength, critical elements of self-mastery and empowerment. In this follow-up, we explore how the additional moves of Connection and Empathy can allow leaders to enhance relationships in the interpersonal realm.

To shortcut the building of these moves, we will be laser-focused on language and communication. After all, when we talk about resilience in the interpersonal realm, communication matters. It's the only way that relationships begin and exist between people, as collections of moments that manifest through communication (verbal and nonverbal) regardless of the task at hand or the nature of the relationship. This insight

allows us to skip much of the theory behind positive relationships and concentrate on real-time communication action—specifically on two core communication practices: Active Constructive Responding and difficult conversations.

### Active Constructive Responding: “The joy multiplier”

Vast research into positive relationships has revealed a surprising finding: The way we respond to people’s *good news* is among the most impactful relationship builders or breakers. If you’re a leader on the receiving end of dozens of interactions per day, there’s a very specific way of reacting to positive information that serves as a trust and authenticity builder and is, in fact, a major relationship hack: Active Constructive Responding.

The times when people share exciting news can be the most critical moments in a relationship. In those instances, you want to be an active constructive responder, which means paying full attention to the person who is talking and even going further by helping them to relive that positive experience. You might ask: *What did it feel like? Who was there? What else was happening?* That type of engagement is called the “joy multiplier” because you’re helping the storyteller experience more of the positive emotion associated with the event. The interaction, in turn, can build connection and trust, while all the mental gears of empathy are working in the background.

“Show me an authentic listener and I bet they’ve practiced this skill,” says Jennifer Veenstra, managing director and executive leader of Deloitte’s Global Chief Marketing Officer Program. “It’s an effective way to build trust, and others can’t help but multiply their joy when they share good news.”

Still, sometimes we’re distracted by whatever crisis that pops up during the day and, therefore, are only passively listening to the person addressing us. In other cases, we minimize the other person’s news and make the conversation about ourselves. Worse yet: We become naysayers, literally killing the other person’s joy by pointing out negatives or switching topics altogether.

There are powerful forces that prevent us from being active constructive responders. Sometimes, we see positive news as anything but an opportunity to multiply someone else’s joy. Other times, we lack a level of familiarity with the other person’s life, values, or passions to make an authentic connection. We also may be distracted by our own physiological or emotional barriers, or there may simply be ways we are trying to evaluate whether what’s being said agrees with our version of the truth.

Regardless of the reason, responding to someone’s positive news in a suboptimal way (which in a business context would include sharing their work) is a major trust

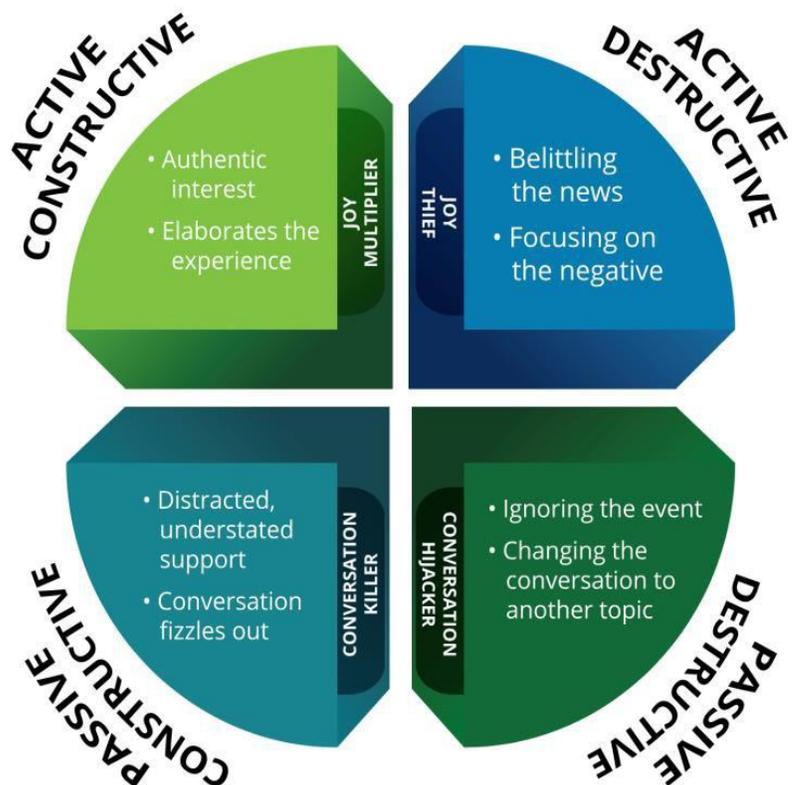


Figure 1. Active Constructive Responding Model <sup>1</sup>

breaker. Think about it: When we share our good news—something we're excited or positive about—we are being inherently vulnerable and authentic. To have that moment met with indifference, self-centeredness, or even outright hostility feels like an outright violation to our authentic selves and can be profoundly damaging.

### Building connection and trust through difficult conversations

Turning difficult conversations into trust and connection builders is another core communication practice. After all, it's human nature to remember the high points and low points in relationships. And we especially tend to remember whether people did (or did not) show up for us when dealing with situations that require difficult conversations.

There are ways to pre-analyze and plan these conversations beforehand with key considerations that can turn a

difficult moment into exchanges that, rather than damaging the relationship, actually fortify the connection.

As a first step, affirm the overall goal of the conversation, starting with your own perspective. The goal should involve increasing understanding and seeking mutual benefit. The point is never to “win,” prove yourself right and others wrong, or to exert power.

Next, start to test your information by checking your assumptions. Are you assuming the other person knows what you're thinking or believes the same? Do you have complete information, or are you jumping to conclusions? It's also critical to acknowledge how you contributed to the situation, how you'll own up to it, and how you'll make it right.

Finally, seek to understand more deeply. Be objective (not emotional or opinionated), and get curious.

Focus on listening, not speaking. And avoid assuming or asking why, which can put people on edge. Rather, concentrate on what's observable and obvious. Literally ask “what” and “how” instead of “why” questions (which put people on the defensive). Your objective is to create a dialogue of discovery.

“Any difficult conversation is about increasing connection and trust,” says Ash Robinson, co-leader of the Executive Resilience Academy. “It's not about winning, being right, or getting your point across. Rather, it's a positive and authentic human experience where both people come out ahead.”

Taken together, the art of active responding and the ability to handle difficult conversations are powerful tools in the C-suite. Along with knowing how to hit reset in relationships when things get tough, they help us become better communicators and, ultimately, better leaders for our teams.



## More in the Resilience series:

[Building Resilience – A roadmap for the modern C-suite](#)

[Unlocking the core antagonists of resilience: The personal realm](#)

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## Endnote:

<sup>1</sup> Ash Robinson, Deloitte Executive Resilience Academy, 2021.

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