# Connection Culture is a Differentiator

*An interview with Michael Lee Stallard, author of Connection Culture: The Competitive Advantage of Shared Identity, Empathy, and Understanding at Work*

When do you feel fired up and energized by your work? And when do you feel bored or burned out? The difference can be traced to feeling connected, or not, according to Michael Lee Stallard.

Stallard's personal experience of disconnect led him to scrap a career on Wall Street to research and work with people and organizations to improve workplace cultures and boost productivity. He found that the ups and downs he felt over his career were common — and connection is tightly wound up in the equation.

Stallard recently spoke with CCL about his new book, *Connection Culture: The Competitive Advantage of Shared Identity, Empathy, and Understanding at Work*, and why connection is vital for productivity — but also for healthy people, families and communities.

Each month the Premium subscribers of *Leading Effectively* have access to an interview with a thought leader, author or expert. Through these interviews, we offer different perspectives on topics related to leadership. Featured in the May 2015 issue was author Michael Lee Stallard.

**CCL: What do you mean by connection? What are people connected to — or not — that makes work better or worse?**

**Stallard:** Connection comes in different forms. You may feel connection to the people at work, feeling like friends and family. You may feel connected to your manager, like he or she is doing a good job or has your interests in mind. You may be connected to the mission of the organization or to the specific work you do, that it is important work or the right fit for you. Connection is about positive emotions, about feeling tied (in a good way) to other human beings.

**CCL: Why is connection important? How does it affect individuals? And does that translate to larger groups or entire organizations?**

**Stallard:** My favorite chapter in the book is the research chapter! The research makes the case. Various streams of research — psychology, sociology, neuroscience, organizational management — support the fact that when we feel connection we are more productive, healthier and happier. Loneliness and isolation are debilitating and unhealthy. Lack of connection fuels stress, anxiety, even addition. You can make the intuitive leap that happier, healthier, more productive employees benefit the organization, but the research shows that, too. The Gallup research on engagement, for example, includes findings that business units with higher engagement and connection scores have better outcomes, including 21 percent higher productivity and 22

percent higher profitability.

The short version is that as human beings, we are hardwired to connect. Individuals and organizations without those connections are more vulnerable to premature death.

**CCL: You write about cultures of connection. How do you think about cultures?**

**Stallard:** It's important to understand all organizational cultures are not alike. There are control cultures, where power, influence and status rule. There are connection cultures, which are marked by shared identity, empathy and understanding. And more and more, we have cultures of indifference. In cultures of indifference, we are so focused on tasks and so busy we don't take time to build supporting relationships or cultural values. We developed a nine-question culture quiz people can take at ConnectionCulture.com that tells which of the three cultures an individual works in.

**CCL: As a manager of others, what should I do differently? Where do I start?**

**Stallard:** Creating connection isn't a one-size-fits-all process; it depends on you, your role and the people among whom you are fostering connection. But you absolutely can influence a subculture of connection, regardless of the larger organizational culture. I help leaders focus on their attitude, language and behaviors so they can better create connection.

One thing I suggest is to get your team together to understand your top-five priorities, why they are important and how you see getting there. Then ask them what's right, what's wrong and what's missing. Let them know you want to get the best thinking of the team. Encourage conversation, take notes and follow up. Let them know what you will implement, what you will think about or keep an eye on, and what is a "no." When you do that, you clarify the vision for everyone, show you value your team and create space for everyone to have a voice and get on the same page. Together, vision, value and voice unite people and create a positive work environment. The trick is to take it all in, with respect, without reacting or being defensive - then keep it going. Build that connection consistently.

**CCL: What else strikes you about connection?**

**Stallard:** I write about connection at work, but think about your culture at home. Do your kids feel connected and supported and that you have their back? What about your spouse or partner? Your friends and family? Are you connected, part of a community, part of something that matters to you? If not, invest in those relationships and seek out connection. Isolation is not good for you.