

Chapter 2

Involvement



*I present myself to you,
in a form suitable to the relationship
I wish to achieve with you.*

- Luigi Pirandello

A young man walked into the restaurant early and scanned all the tables. He was careful to make sure that he was the first to arrive. He hated blind dates. “The most important thing is to look casual,” he thought as he rubbed his palms against the sides of his trench coat.

After making sure the mystery woman hadn’t arrived yet, he took a table near the door and sat down. You see, *his* best friend had been talking to *her* best friend and both of them agreed that this might be a match made in heaven. The big question was, would she show up?

At five minutes until seven, he told himself yes. At seven o’clock he said, “Sure, any minute now.” At five-after-seven, his confidence began to slip, and so did his hopes. At ten-after, he wondered how he could have fallen for something like this. At a quarter-after, he began to gather his things.

He had draped his coat over one arm and was reaching for his briefcase when from over his shoulder he heard, “Hi, Bob? I’m sorry to be late. Hey, are you just getting here too?”

He put down the coat looked into her eyes and said, “Sure am! Hey, great timing.”

Their first date came within seconds of never happening, but as things turned out, this couple went on to see each other for years. And there were many occasions for Bob to retell how well he covered his awkwardness at the restaurant. Every relationship begins with involvement.

Let’s look at just what involvement means. It’s a way of interacting, and it involves risk.

In its simplest form, involvement can be defined as contact between people. I believe it was Mark Twain who said, “You can’t play unless you show up for the game.”

That’s involvement.

Sometimes involvement is the only element at work for a brand new relationship. One of my friendships began simply because I held the elevator door for someone, and all I said was a simple, “Hi.” We shared the ride and conversation for about 90 seconds, and sometimes that’s all the involvement it takes.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, involvement can be the only thing left of a relationship in trouble. I can clearly remember a woman I knew as a college student who said, “The only thing I have left when I get home is his warm body. I would give anything to have his heart as well.”

For reasons still unclear to me, many people hold onto the familiar vestiges of involvement, even though all other aspects of the relationship may be gone.

You have heard about couples who *only go through the motions*. Generally, that means their relationship is thinning out and their involvement is all that’s left. In a situation like that, we see involvement as the relationship’s primary focus, instead of focusing on the more significant aspects of couplehood such as openness and caring.

Involvement can work a couple of ways. Involvement is initiated with one of two styles. First, there are *one-way* relationships. The second is *two-way interaction*, or Bridge-Building between people.

You may think I’m kidding, but there are actually relationships that work best when they only go one-way and are not reciprocal or give-and-take. A therapy relationship is a good example of a one-way relationship that works. The best path for someone to make progress in a therapy setting is to sit down and *just* talk while the therapist *just* listens.

You see what I’m getting at? The client receives accep-

tance, caring, and understanding without really having to give, and the therapist gives without taking. It's this precise dynamic of the therapist *giving* without *taking* and the client *receiving* without *giving* that makes the therapeutic relationship work, and that's the way it should be.

The care given between a mother and her child is another example of a one-way relationship bridge that works. The mother gives and the child takes.

These are but two examples of one-way relationships that work effectively. It's easy to see how this very specialized one-way relationship functions. Other than these types of relationships, you need *two-way*, or *give-and-take* relating to get your needs met. Effective relationships require the reciprocal interactions of two-way relationships involved in Bridge-Building.

A two-way Bridge-Building relationship is characterized by reciprocal give-and-take. Each partner meets the needs of the other and receives something in return.

There is a mutuality and balance for those involved. Both give something to each other and both receive something in return.

You may notice there are times in your relationship when things are not in balance. You may feel giving and receiving are not equal. And there is a reason for that.

Within this reciprocal, two-way relationship there is more than one kind of relating. In fact, there are three kinds. They are up, down, and sideways. That's right—up, down, and sideways.

Up relating is when you talk to someone who seems a little above you. *Down* relating is dealing with individuals you feel more comfortable with or have the upper hand with. *Sideways* relating is the ability to stand together and

share a moment equally with someone.

I knew a couple who was paralyzed in this up-down type of relating. They came into my office complaining about inequality between each other and difficulty in relating. They couldn't cooperate, and they couldn't solve any relationship problems.

Each was unwilling to see the other person's side of things. Both of them felt angry and resentful towards their partner. They complained about feeling controlled by the other. After listening to five minutes of the blame and shame cast around the room, it was easy for me to understand why each of their index fingers had been splinted permanently in a *pointing* position.

He said she picked on him constantly and made life around the house miserable. During an argument about money, she changed the subject and began nagging him for not cleaning the kitchen.

She said he never paid enough attention to her needs and as a result she felt more like a piece of furniture than a woman.

As a result of their conflict, the husband had chronic panic attacks and bouts of depression. His wife complained of feeling devalued, unsupported, and uncared for. They both were desperately seeking to be accepted, understood, and cared about, yet, both were unwilling to offer those very things to their partner.

Today their relationship is more well rounded. They have learned the basic components of Relationship Bridge-Building, utilizing these very effective relationship skills. When they feel supported by their partner, they are more likely to offer something in return. Now the couple sit and take the time to really listen to each other.

But, don't get me wrong. There are some times when

two-way relationships become *short-circuited*. There are times when the person seeking comfort and support has the tables turned on them. At times, the person who began by seeking comfort and support, ends up emotionally caring for the other.

I was once told a story about a small girl playing with her friends in the school-yard. While climbing on a gym-set, she fell and cut her hand on a sliver of glass hidden in the sand.

The little girl ran home and burst into the house screaming for her mother to fix the hurt. Holding up her wrist, she tried in every conceivable way to communicate the problem at hand. "Ow mommy, this hurts," she said. "Make it go away."

Her mother listened to the crying and washed the wound. As she was covering the cut to protect it from infection, the child's mother began to talk to the little girl in an unusual way.

The mother said, "You think this is a problem? Well, let me tell you about pain. I've got problems too. I feel old and unattractive and your father never listens to me anymore."

The little girl listened through her tears in absolute confusion.

"What I really need is a job so I could change my money situation. No one would push me around then. If this meaninglessness and confusion keeps up, I just don't know what I'm going to do! This has got to stop. It just isn't fair."

The girl was left with more pain than simply the cut on her hand. She had the pain of someone else's problems dumped on her as well.

Even though this is a story of a relationship between

a mother and a daughter, I'm sure you could remember a time when the tables were turned on you in a similar fashion.

The last, very important element of involvement is you can't ever have a relationship without it!

I know someone who works every day of his life and sits in an easy chair every night. He never leaves that place to try something new. He never talks to strangers on the street and he doesn't like crowds. I'm sure he doesn't even know why.

You see, the alter-ego of involvement is risk-taking.

That's what Bridge-Building eventually boils down to—the willingness to take risks. You can see quite easily how involvement is really nothing more than our willingness to negotiate a series of risky steps, can you not?

For many of us involvement may feel like an obstacle course. An obstacle course that will from time to time activate many of the fears we hold about getting close to another person. Fears we hold about being accepted or rejected, being liked or shunned, being exposed for what we believe that we are or successfully keeping somebody at arm's length.

But without our willingness to take risks, our world shrivels up as we cut ourselves off from so much of what feeds us emotionally and spiritually. For involvement is the conduit for much of what we need to create a life of purpose and meaning. And it will always boil down to our willingness to go the extra mile, to find ways of growing beyond the obstacles in our relationships or being kept captive to those very obstacles that keep us on the outside looking in.

Bridge Builder's Toolbox

Let's talk more technically about some of the aspects of Relationship Bridge-Building. Each of the issues we are going to discuss in these chapters will have two sections. The first part of each chapter will be an overview of the subject. The second part is something I am going to call the *BRIDGE-BUILDER'S TOOLBOX*. The *BRIDGE-BUILDER'S TOOLBOX* sections will explain in more detail the nuts and bolts of specific Relationship Bridge-Building concepts. I can present the idea more completely and try to draw some points of clarification. Sometimes looking closely at why an idea works will allow it to work more completely in our lives.

But before you read on, let me explain something; explaining the *relationship principles* that make up these chapters is often the least effective way to communicate them. I will dissect several aspects of Relationship Bridge-Building, but I suggest you not put a lot of energy into finding out how this stuff works. I sometimes tell people, "You may not know the mechanics of how breathing works, but you are able to breathe just fine."

It's like that with many of these relationship principles, simply being aware of them is the goal. We all use them every day, and many of us do just fine without dissecting them.

I spoke to one woman who was intent on pulling apart every one of these relationship components, but, at the same time, she was unwilling to stop and absorb their meaning.

It was clear, after our short conversation, she wanted to see the *nuts and bolts* of a relationship. But she could never put them to good use without relating

them to her own life.

Finally, I sat down with her and said, "Most of us would find it impossible to build a car from scratch, but that doesn't stop us from being good drivers. You don't have to understand all the parts in order to use these things in your own life."

So with that said, here goes:

In the first part of the chapter, we created a snapshot of what involvement is. Now let me describe how it is created.

Think about involvement. What is it that you want from being with someone else? We all long for the emotional benefits only a relationship can provide for us. Some people talk about these benefits as being the attributes of a relationship. Things like acceptance, caring, openness, understanding, support, and emotional connection. These are the *goodies* of a relationship. These are the reasons people build emotional bridges with one another. These are the attributes that are *up for grabs* in the adventure.

Afterall, getting our emotional needs met can be one of the most rewarding aspects of any of our relationships. At the same time, we often feel at a loss as to how to make that happen. We stumble around not knowing what to do or say, not feeling comfortable with our own longings.

So how do we secure for ourselves those *goodies* that we hunger for? How do we quench our emotional thirst for understanding and acceptance? How do we create a climate in our relationship that supports our efforts to be involved in an emotionally fulfilling way?

There's a very simple answer to that question. And it starts by understanding what your partner needs from you.

Bridge Builder's Tip



You can get anything you want in a relationship, as long as you are willing to help another person get what they want from the relationship.

How do you go about attracting acceptance, caring, openness, understanding, support, and emotional connection to your life? They come through effectively using involvement skills.

I want to emphasize this is a process. The mastery of these involvement skills will help you achieve the emotional fulfillment you so richly deserve.

Lets talk about the details of how this process works best. When we are in a relationship with someone, we literally offer the things talked about in each chapter of this book. We offer involvement, acceptance, caring, openness, freedom, and responsibility. And we seek those things in return! We should. All of those things are the true benefit of being in a fulfilling relationship.

I talk about the process of offering and seeking these benefits like this. There is a scale, or *spectrum*, of seeking and offering that will be helpful to talk about in this chapter. It is a tool I use in my work that helps me explain the dynamic of offering and seeking in relationships.

Imagine in your mind a line running from right to left. It is a sort of imaginary gauge or scale. On the far right, this line has a position called *extreme seeking-spirit*. On the far left, this line has a position called *extreme offering-*

spirit and in the middle it has a place called *ideal balance*. In an ideal situation, the goal of any relationship is to balance the act of offering and the act of seeking.

We've talked about the ideal situation that we all want—a relationship filled with many benefits. It's achieved by balancing what we offer and what we seek. When things are out of balance, it's usually because people are too far on one side of the continuum or the other.

People who constantly ask others to disclose things about themselves without being willing to give back the goodies, like acceptance, caring, openness, understanding, freedom, and/or responsibility, would fall on the far right of this imaginary scale. They are constantly seeking and not offering.

In everyday conversation these people say a variety of things. They tend to ask many questions without talking about themselves, or they may talk about themselves in the third person. Either action retards the growth of a real relationship.

There are people on the opposite end of the scale who only offer of themselves. These individuals are constantly trying to figure out what their partner wants from them. Their belief is, "If I only offer to my partner without seeking, I will be loved and safe."

The person who only offers is trying to avoid being viewed as being selfish so they won't be rejected and abandoned by their partner. I hope you can see this is a formula for disaster, not safety and acceptance.

Well, that's how it works, but any discussion about involvement would be incomplete if it did not talk about some of the obstacles to involvement.

One of the biggest obstacles to overcome is fear. Fear is insidious and it can prevent you from creating the kind of relationships you really want.

Bridge Builder's Tip



We fear the things we want the most.

One of the most amazing of all paradoxes in the world can be seen in people who genuinely want fulfilling relationships, yet consistently sabotage them. Fear is the fuel that powers the movement of your relationships. Relationships are fluid, constantly in a state of change. Sometimes we are on target with involvement skills, other times we are not. Invariably, I have found fear to be the well-spring of energy which powers this constant fluctuation.

Fear generates an imbalance in the equation of reciprocal give and take. In an effort to create self-protection, individuals retreat into either only seeking or only offering—thus undermining the stability of the relationship.

One of the big keys to dealing with fear is understanding it. As you begin to understand how these elements all fit together, you will find fear begin to wain.

Relationships in which people only seek from others, or only offer of themselves to others, will be less than satisfying. In fact, they won't work.

Attempts at intimacy dominated by seeking safety, acceptance, and unconditional love, without offering anything of yourself, are doomed to fail. On the other side of the coin, relationships dominated exclusively by offering these emotional attributes without risking disclosure of your own needs is a formula for disaster as well. I have noticed that anything less than offering

yourself wholeheartedly in balance with the things you are seeking will be unsatisfying.

The elusive key to happiness in this process is balance.

Balancing what you offer and what you seek from your partner is the key to succeeding. And let me encourage you. Anyone can learn this skill.

A young man came in one day to see me. After some polite conversation, we began to talk more seriously. He told me he felt as if there was no way he could learn to relate to anyone. After listening for a while, it was clear this man had learned very few involvement skills and never really thought he could master them. I suggested if he could grasp these skills and if he could practice them, things would get a lot better. He laughed when I told him he didn't need a therapist as much as he needed a coach!

I told him if he wanted to succeed, he had to be willing to change. I can tell you this man, who had *no hope*, is in a long-term relationship today. But I won't kid you, he worked hard at it. And so can you.