

entrepreneurs

The Godfather of all lessons: Business is personal



Al Pacino in "The Godfather." PARAMOUNT PICTURES



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For The Tennessean

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"It's not personal, Sonny. It's strictly business."

Unless you're Al Pacino's character in "The Godfather," or impersonating Al Pacino's character in "The Godfather," you should never utter those words.

If you want to run a successful business and be a successful leader, business must be personal.

The only offering that truly sets you apart from your competition is people. Other companies likely have the ability to develop your exact product, follow the same business manual and hire the same accountant, but they can't clone you or your people.

As a leader, it's your job to develop your own, and your team's, people skills. Though these are often referred to as "soft skills," they can be the hardest ones to refine.

It's worth the effort, though. When your team members are united by personal relationships, it

transfers to their client relationships. It all comes down to quality interaction. Here are a few ideas that have worked for me in developing strong internal connections:

1. Ask open-ended questions — Business managers often bury themselves in their corner offices with a cityscape view. This positions them as authority figures who are unapproachable, which stifles engagement and interaction and, in turn, undermines the concept of "team" and the importance of soft skills.

Switch it up. Managers who want to be leaders should take time to walk around the office, peek into team members' offices and ask: How are you? What's working well for you? What's not working well for you? What can I do to help you improve? What can I do to be a better leader? The key is to listen and be genuinely interested in team members' responses.

2. Channel your inner Godfa-

ther (or Godmother) — One of the best ways to understand and then develop meaningful relationships with your team members is to discover their goals and dreams. What I'm about to suggest may sound corny, but you've been warned.

I ask team members to build an "aspiration list." This is a document with 100 bullet points that catalog professional and personal dreams and goals. I then take time to sit down with each team member and see which points I can make come true. It's a thrill for me to have the opportunity to positively affect another human being, and that positivity is sure to permeate throughout the office.

3. Host individualized Top Task Huddles — Every two weeks, leaders should sit down with each individual on their team and discuss top priorities for the next two weeks. This creates alignment through the business, keeps team members on track and furthers that personal

connection that's so vital.

To get the most out of these steps, leaders must foster an open environment where honesty and out-of-the-box brainstorming can flourish. The best way to establish this safe zone is by exposing your own vulnerability. We are all human, which means we have flaws, embarrassing moments and skeletons in our closets. Effective leaders are open about their own personal flops and struggles.

This often sounds counterintuitive to leaders; they feel exposing their weaknesses makes them weak. I challenge you to stop pretending to be perfect in front of your team. Let them get to know you and they'll return the favor.

By building a business that offers not only the best product or service but also a personable and irreplaceable team, you have a winning combination and an offer your clients can't refuse.