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SAVING FACE:

THE NEW SOCIAL CURRENCY OF OUR TIME

Maya Hu-Chan

What drives a company's success?

When companies thrive, we often attribute their success to characteristics such as efficiency, technology, or innovation. But taking a closer look behind those metrics shows a trait that's far less tangible but equally vital—human connection.

It's the soft skills of empathy, thoughtfulness and effective communication that binds companies (and teams) together. Today, everyone—from CEOs to managers, entrepreneurs, and even individual contributors—must adapt to increasingly diverse clientele, workforces, and business partners. They need to attract, retain, and motivate teams and employees across distances, time zones, and cultural differences.

True leaders know that managing a company requires far more than just issuing instructions or setting targets. Leaders must move in many circles, think in many styles, and run their businesses through a global lens.

At the heart of human connection that makes all this possible is a concept that is deeply rooted in Asian culture, but universal to all: the concept of face.

So, what is face?

Face represents a person's self-esteem, self-worth, identity, reputation, status, and pride. It speaks to a deeper need for dignity and acceptance, and the ways we grant dignity to one another. Understanding this universal human concept can help us make the most of our interpersonal relationships.

When we lose face, we lose a sense of dignity and acceptance. We can grant dignity and acceptance to one another—that is honoring face. When we help someone recover after losing face or help them avoid an unnecessary negative consequence, we help them save face.

Honoring and saving face requires authenticity. The authentic act of saving face requires a positive intention and understanding others' frame of reference without judgment. Without positive intention and acceptance, the act of saving face can be perceived as manipulative, superficial, or phony.

Even in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, there are many examples of leaders honoring face in their decisions to support their own employees. Whether it's Delta Airline's president forgoing his salary for the year to do his part in diminishing potential layoffs or Aldi markets giving each store employee a 10 percent bonus for their efforts while working during the crisis, successful leaders understand their actions serve not only the needs of their employees, but send a powerful message—that their employees efforts are valued and appreciated.

Think of face as a type of social currency and every employee is a bank account. From that perspective, one can imagine how we build a supply of face with someone by continuously making deposits. The more deposits are made, the larger the account and the more each employee is empowered to contribute to the cause. The sum of deposits in trust and/or credibility, are the building blocks of successful business relationships.

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How does one go about building these relationships? How do you build that supply of face with someone? I've found there are five keys that are crucial building blocks to forming strong, productive business relationships. It's what I call the BUILD model.

BUILD stands for:

- Benevolence/Accountability
- Understanding
- Interacting
- Learning
- Delivery

Benevolence & Accountability. Benevolence, when applied in a workplace setting, is much more than just about being nice. It's about nurturing and supporting a team. The key is to put thought into actions big and small that are, most importantly, genuine. For example, @Pizza's CEO Michael Latoria recently notified his employees that the company is offering free, unlimited pizzas to them and their immediate families during the Covid crisis.

It could be as simple as remembering an employee's birthday. Without a manager's benevolence toward their direct reports, it's hard to develop a team with any sense of loyalty. If the relationship between manager and direct report or peer-to-peer is primarily a transactional one, meaning that they work together only to serve their own needs and not anyone else's, there is very little cohesiveness.

In another example of a company's leaders acting benevolently towards their employees during the Covid crisis, *Forbes* reports:

Starbucks, perhaps identifying the anxiety piece of this crisis, has extended its mental health benefits. In partnership with Lyra Health, Starbucks is offering its partners personalized, confidential mental health care, 20 free in-person or video sessions every year for partners and each of their eligible family members, online scheduling with most providers available within two weeks, and access to a provider network of mental health therapists and coaches.

I view "benevolence" and "accountability" together because, without accountability, benevolence might leave the impression that lasting business or personal relationships depend on never challenging or correcting behavior in order to maintain harmony, which obviously doesn't work. It's not about simply "going along to get along." It's about addressing issues and problems in a benevolent way.

Understanding. The ability for a leader to truly understand the dynamics within a business team requires the leader to view situations from different perspectives. In order to be able to save face for those on your team and get the clearest understanding of complex problems and obstacles, you as a leader must be able to view the situation from different angles.

There's a Chinese saying that simply translated says, "Don't be a frog living at the bottom of a well." Such a frog has a very narrow view of the world. All the frog can see is a tiny sphere of sky. Only by climbing (or leaping) out of a well can a frog really get a fuller perspective of the world.

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A perfect example of this is from a scene from the Tom Hank's movie, *Castaway*. Towards the beginning of the movie, Hank's character wakes up after a tumultuous night of clinging to a life raft in the ocean during a monster storm and finds that he's landed on the beach of a tropical island.

After collecting as much debris and other material to help him survive, he wanders along the length of the beach and into the jungle to determine where he is, or at least the nature of his situation. He doesn't know if he's on an island or larger territory, and he doesn't know whether there might be others on the island that might be able to help him.

It isn't until he climbs up to the highest peak of the island and walks along the circumference of the peak and sees nothing but ocean surrounding the tiny island that he discovers that he is truly alone, and he will have to survive completely on his own.

Every complex organization is a web of communication between people working near and far—a global leader must see how every decision has an impact far beyond what they might normally expect. The ability of a global leader to clearly understand situations that arise within a complex business environment, and come up with solutions that will address the situation directly and completely, ultimately keeps the team working productively and saves face even during a crisis.

Interacting. In order to be an effective global leader, your skill set must include the ability to thoroughly interact with your boss, peers, direct reports, business partners, and customers, whether they are in your office or located thousands of miles away.

To interact means far more than the ability to communicate verbally or electronically via email or text—as much as 93 percent of a message is conveyed through body language, recognizing cultural differences and idioms, the tone and rhythm of the voice, and the pace and volume of the voice.

I once had a Singaporean executive come to me, looking distraught. I asked him what was the matter. He said, "My boss thinks that I'm stupid. He thinks that I'm an idiot". Having met his American boss, I immediately thought there must be some kind of mistake. I said, "Are you sure? What exactly happened?"

He said, "I was giving him a report on an important project we've been working on. An issue came up and I needed to make a decision, which I did. So, I reported back on what my decision was and I told him what I'd done, he said, "Alright, that's a no-brainer."

After a bit of discussion around the choice of words, we both shared a laugh. The point remains, however, that effective communication, from both sides, requires thoughtful deliberation and clarity.

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Having a deep connection and rapport with your audience also strengthens interactions. When you've established rapport, the message conveyed by someone is informed by what you know of them—their desires, their preferences, their motives, and their personality.

Interaction involves both the message and the method of conveying the message. It's also about creating the context in which clear conversations can be had. And of course, the ability to interact effectively creates an environment where "face" is protected and strengthened.

Learning. The most successful people on earth, and its greatest leaders, have a constant urge to learn new things. They know that, in the grander scheme of things, their personal knowledge base is minute, and the rapid change of the world demands that they make the effort to stay current. They manage to keep the curiosity of youth throughout their adult years.

Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft and one of the wealthiest men on earth, recently revealed that one of his biggest regrets was not learning a second language. During a Reddit chat, he said, "I feel pretty stupid that I don't know any foreign languages."

Think about it. This is a man who created a company that produces software that over 90 percent of computer users use. And if that wasn't enough, he may have the most notable second act of anyone in history.



He and his wife's foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is the largest charitable foundation in the world and is rapidly working to cure many of the globe's greatest ills—poverty, water sanitation, and even funding the development of several potential Covid-19 vaccines. Still, even with all of those accomplishments, there's more that he'd like to learn.

I tell my clients that there are four "P's" when it comes to learning: passion, practice, persistence, and pattern recognition. Passion indicates someone's motivation to learn. Unless you can muster the passion to learn something new, you probably won't. As the saying goes, "Practice makes perfect." Persistence is what pushes people to go beyond what they think they can do. It's the persistent ones who manage to accomplish the hard things.

Once you've mastered the first three "P's," your efforts will inevitably lead you to the fourth "P," pattern recognition. Pattern recognition occurs when you've begun to master a particular skill or subject and you've learned enough to spot patterns or trends that others don't see. You become stronger in your skills and the task at hand becomes easier.

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Delivery. Delivery is where the BUILD model all comes together. You've demonstrated to your team that you practice benevolence and accountability. Those on your team, through your actions, can see that you have their best interests at heart. You've made an effort to understand the dynamics of your team both locally and globally. You've looked at the team from different angles—face-to-face and from afar. You interact with your team on a regular basis, getting to know their interests and their personal and professional goals, and show a general interest in them. And you push yourself to learn more about the functions of your job, of the team at large, and what the company is setting out to do. Delivery is simply putting it all together.

While the BUILD model will certainly benefit leaders working in any capacity, it's particularly relevant for global leaders working cross-culturally because it gives them the tools necessary to overcome differences in language, culture, time zones, politics, and geography. It's a powerful combination.

The BUILD model is the key to being a powerful leader. It puts strong teams on a solid footing and it can turn around teams that succumb to office politics or overall dysfunction. Your team can become a symphony, working in harmony and in unison, in a way that preserves and builds face for all.

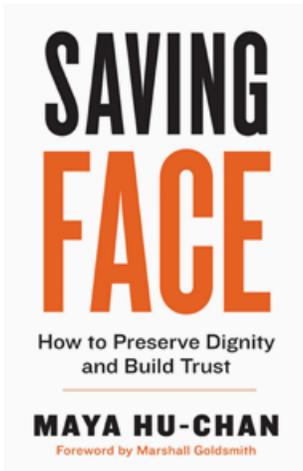
When a team works in harmony, it is connected. Each member feels accepted—their dignity and face preserved and honored.

In our modern, globally connected world, business moves fast, and the potential for losing face is high. But if we seek to value human connection and empathetic leadership, we can actively honor and preserve face and build strong, lasting business relationships. 🌐





Info



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Maya Hu-Chan is a globally recognized management consultant, executive coach, author, and speaker. She is the founder and president of Global Leadership Associates. Hu-Chan was an anchor for the China Broadcasting Company in Taiwan, CEO of a nonprofit organization in California, and columnist for *Inc.* She has trained and coached thousands of leaders from Fortune 500 corporations, nonprofits, and public sectors in North America, Asia, Europe, Australia, and Latin America and is the coauthor of *Global Leadership: The Next Generation*.

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