

The Connection Key



Unlock Wellbeing and Performance
with Human Interaction

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Bestselling author of *Engaging the Hearts and Minds of All Your Employees*

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What leaders are saying . . .

“Connection is the foundation of great leadership — and it is quietly disappearing. Lee Colan and Julie Davis-Colan show exactly what to do about it, with thirty years of research distilled into simple, immediate actions anyone can take.

“*The Connection Key* delivers what most leadership books don’t: a clear, practical path to becoming the kind of leader people actually want to follow.”

—**Dr. Marshall Goldsmith**, *Thinkers50* #1 Executive Coach
and *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Earned Life*,
Triggers, and *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There*

“I have applied Lee Colan’s practical tools for over 20 years. *The Connection Key* is another one of his game-changing books! Human connection is the most overlooked performance advantage in today’s organization — teams break down without it. The authors provide relatable examples and clear steps to build human connections in real life.

“*The Connection Key* is the perfect guidebook for today’s leader who is navigating the challenges with disconnected teams. It is equally valuable for anyone trying to build a richer personal life through more meaningful human connections. I highly recommend it!”

—**Frank Dulcich**, President & CEO, Pacific Seafood

“In a brilliantly simple way, Lee Colan and Julie Davis-Colan offer a process to develop positive, deeper connections with people in your life. They have given you a special gift — the gift of awareness and action. It will open your eyes, change your perspective, and empower you to build and enjoy more fulfilling relationships.”

—**David Cottrell**, Author of perennial best-selling
Monday Morning Leadership

“In three years working together, Lee and Julie pushed me beyond my comfort zone, helped me make a major change I never imagined, and challenged me to build a life that feels meaningful, not just successful. Their belief in human connection isn’t something they just teach — it’s something they live.

“*The Connection Key* equips and empowers the reader to realize the success and fulfillment that are not meant to be achieved alone. More importantly, it is a practical guide for building meaningful connections in real life.”

—**Veronica Schnitzius**, President, Chief Manufacturing
and Sourcing Officer, RH

“As a breast cancer surgeon, I have seen firsthand that human connection can be as transformative as any treatment — providing hope, resilience, and strength during life’s most challenging moments.

“*The Connection Key* delivers a thoughtful, science-backed guide to building meaningful relationships that help us live better, work better, and thrive together. This book is a timely

and inspiring reminder that connection is not simply a benefit of life — it is one of its greatest necessities.”

—**Dr. Allison DiPasquale**, Breast Surgical Oncologist,
Chief of Breast Oncology, Medical City Dallas

“*The Connection Key* is a powerful, practical guide for anyone who wants to lead and live with greater impact! The authors deliver a simple, research-backed framework — Reach Out, Seek Understanding, Make Memories, and Check In — that makes building meaningful connections both accessible and actionable.

“This book is energizing, insightful, and immediately useful! It creates a compelling case that small, intentional acts of connection drive wellbeing, strengthen relationships, and elevate performance. If you want to make a real difference in your work and in your life, start here!”

—**Rachel Davis Mersey**, Executive Vice President
and Provost, SMU

“Lee and Julie continue to publish their actionable tools and provide coaching and guidance to leaders at all levels of an organization. *The Connection Key* is yet another reference tool for managers to understand the human side of our teams and seek to develop leadership practices to advance your organization. Add this book to your leadership arsenal!”

—**Brian Sinkiewicz**, CEO, Crestview Aerospace

“In my experience working with clients, I’ve seen that the toughest challenges are rarely solved by analysis alone — they’re solved through strong, intentional human connection. *The Connection Key* brings this to life with a clear, practical, and science-based

approach. It offers simple actions that deliver real impact in real life. It's a timely, actionable guide for anyone looking to strengthen relationships, improve outcomes, and build a more connected, fulfilling life."

—**Christopher R. Chastain**, Senior Partner, Big 4 public accounting firm

"Most of us understand the value of human connection; the challenge is making it a daily practice. *The Connection Key* turns that truth into practical action by offering simple, research-based ways to build stronger relationships, improve wellbeing, and perform at our peak. Lee Colan and Julie Davis-Colan have crafted a timely and practical guide for anyone seeking to live and lead with greater impact."

—**Jesse Jantzen**, President & CEO, Lifespace Communities

"*The Connection Key* highlights one of the most overlooked drivers of individual and organizational success: meaningful human connection. In today's highly digital and fast-paced world, the ability to build trust, strengthen relationships, and foster genuine collaboration is more important than ever.

"The authors have provided practical, science-based insights that can help leaders, teams, and individuals improve wellbeing, engagement, and performance both at work and at home."

—**Walter Pinto**, COO, Pattern Energy

"*The Connection Key* provides practical, impactful strategies to help teams build deeper relationships at every level.

"When your team feels genuinely connected, engagement rises, and that sparks productivity, collaboration, innovation and

performance. Every organization has a team, but connected teams create a level of culture and competitive advantage that sets great businesses apart."

—**Jason D. Lippert**, CEO, LCI Industries

"*The Connection Key* is a must-read for leaders today who are committed to human connection as a strategic advantage. The authors show how small, intentional behaviors drive better wellbeing, stronger relationships, and higher performance. What sticks most with me is being more intentional about small moments that are easy to overlook.

"This book makes that both simple and actionable. I strongly recommend this book to any leader who wants a practical, no-nonsense way to strengthen culture and drive performance through more meaningful human connection."

—**Amy Messersmith**, Human Capital Executive & Chief People Officer, Caravel Autism Health

"The Colans take their work very seriously, and this is a serious topic. In *The Connection Key* they cut through the clutter in their usual relatable and practical style. This book delivers simple actions we can take to connect with colleagues, family, and friends (old and new ones alike) to make a positive difference in our lives and in the lives of others. Their approach is not only useful, but it is also necessary in today's world!"

—**Denis Simon**, Senior Executive Vice President, Challenger, Gray & Christmas

“Whatever business you’re in, you are in the people business. Lee and Julie understand connection because they practice it!

“*The Connection Key* is an insightful, practical reminder that meaningful human connection still drives trust, wellbeing, and performance—especially in a world increasingly shaped by technology and artificial intelligence.”

—**Dr. James Beckett**, Founder, Beckett Media

“We were created for relationships. First with our Maker and then with our family, friends, fellow workers, and those whose lives we touch. Whether you are an introvert or extrovert, *The Connection Key* delivers a simple but effective plan to help us develop and maintain relationships. In this age of technology-dependence nothing is more important than interpersonal relationships based on gratitude, respect, forgiveness, and simple acts of kindness.”

—**Robert Murchison**, Partner, Murchison Capital Partners, L.P.

“*The Connection Key* delivers timely and practical tools to build meaningful human connections that create a competitive advantage in business and in life. Lee and Julie combine research, real-world experience, and actionable insights into an impactful framework. In a world driven by technology and convenience, this book challenges us to be more intentional about how we engage with others. Organizations, leaders, teams, and families will all benefit from the lessons shared in these pages.”

—**Robert Covington**, Founder & Managing Partner,
Braemont Capital

“I have had the privilege of working with Lee and Julie and witness firsthand the impact of their leadership principles. Their consultation and coaching through the concepts presented in *Healthy Leadership* were instrumental in my growth as a leader and in the development of our senior leadership team.

“*The Connection Key* captures what Lee and Julie do best — taking powerful research and turning it into practical actions that people can apply immediately. This is more than a book about relationships; it is a guide for creating stronger teams, healthier organizations, and more fulfilling lives. I highly recommend it to leaders at every level.”

—**T.J. Burk**, CEO at a psychiatric hospital

“Human connection is such a simple concept yet embracing it consistently is becoming a lost art. Lee and Julie continue to share thoughtful, well-framed research-based tools to incorporate human connection into our personal and professional lives and into our leadership practices.

“Leading in increasingly fast-paced and technology-driven times requires a grounded approach that contributes daily to positive culture AND yields strong results. The authors’ practical and powerful actions outlined in *The Connection Key* is a gift to time-starved leaders looking to lead the right way in today’s transactional world.”

—**Scott Thresher**, CEO, Plumbing Products Group, LLC

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The Human Connection Payoff

*Alone we can do so little;
together we can do so much.*

—HELEN KELLER

The geese really get it! Let us explain . . .

In the fall, when you see geese heading south for the winter, you might notice something remarkable. They fly in a “V” formation. There’s a reason for that. As each bird flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the bird immediately behind it. By flying together in formation, the flock can travel up to 71% farther than if each bird flew alone. But the lessons don’t stop there.

When a goose slips out of formation, it immediately feels the drag and resistance of flying solo. The extra effort reminds it why the formation matters, so it quickly moves back into position to benefit from the lift of the birds ahead. When the lead goose gets tired, it doesn't stubbornly stay in front. It rotates back, and another goose takes the lead. And the geese in the back? They honk to encourage those up front to keep up the pace.

One final detail makes these geese even more inspiring. When a goose becomes sick or wounded and falls out of formation, two other geese leave the flock and follow it to the ground. They stay with the injured goose until it recovers or dies. Only then do they launch again either to rejoin their flock or to find another formation.

**We're built for connection,
and we long to belong.**

In many ways, humans are remarkably like geese. When we travel together, we go farther and faster than we ever could alone. We need encouragement along life's journey, whether it's a pat on the back, a word of appreciation, or an encouraging email (though probably not a honk on the road). We're built for connection, and we long to belong. Geese are defined by how they stay connected to one another, and humans are defined the same way.

Let's look more closely at how human connection elevates both our wellbeing and performance.

Connect More, Live Better (and Longer)

Human connection heals. Human connection isn't just emotionally satisfying. It's biologically essential. People with meaningful relationships experience fewer symptoms of depression, stronger immune response, better cognitive functioning, and lower risk of heart disease.¹

Few studies demonstrate this more clearly than the Harvard Study of Adult Development, one of the longest studies of human happiness ever conducted. The research began in 1938 and continues today. Robert Waldinger, the current director of the study and a psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital, summarized the findings this way: "Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period." After decades of research, several key insights emerged:

- Relationships matter. Close social connections are central to wellbeing.
- Quality beats quantity. A few deep relationships are far more powerful than many superficial ones.
- Relationships protect health. Strong relationships buffer stress and reduce risks of conditions, such as diabetes and cognitive decline.
- It's never too late. At any stage of life, people can build and strengthen meaningful relationships.²

In short, nearly 90 years of this research can be summed up in three words: Connection is medicine.

Another striking finding comes from a large meta-analysis led by researcher Julianne Holt-Lunstad, professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young University. Using very sophisticated metrics, her team analyzed 148 studies involving 308,849 participants, examining the relationship between social connection and longevity.

Human connection heals.

The results were staggering. People with strong social relationships had a 50% greater likelihood of survival during the time of each respective study compared to those with weaker relationships.³ In other words, relationships are not just emotional luxuries. They are essential building blocks for our wellbeing.

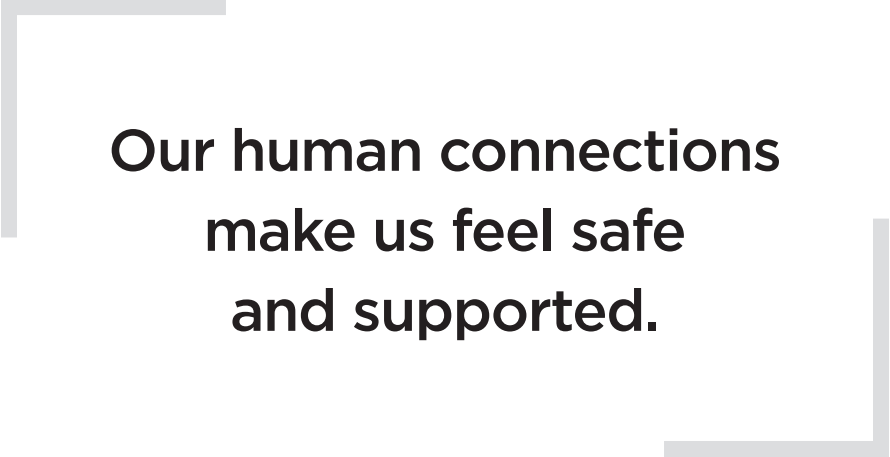
Our human connections make us feel safe and supported. There's safety in numbers. Have you ever had to walk through a dark alley at night by yourself? It feels a lot better when we have other people with us. When going through dark times, it's safer to walk with others who can encourage us and be there with us. Our human connections also help us persevere. If you've ever trained to run a race, you may have been tempted to quit because you reached a plateau in your training. But when we run with other people, they keep us moving toward our goals and provide support.

Harvard Business School Professor Arthur C. Brooks, an expert on the science of happiness, offers another powerful insight. He states that much of our happiness inside comes from looking outside of ourselves. Ideally, we spend our lives finding connections to other people, to our work, to nature, to the arts, and to the divine. The more we do to improve these connections, the better off we are.⁴

Human connections don't just improve our own lives. They improve the lives of the people around us. Psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky, author of *The How of Happiness*, has spent decades researching

what truly makes people happier. Her conclusion surprised even her. She discovered that nearly all effective happiness practices, from writing gratitude letters to performing acts of kindness, work for the same reason: they build connections. As she put it, “After all these years, it hit me . . . the reason these interventions work is because they make people feel more connected.”⁵ When we express gratitude, help someone in need, or simply spend meaningful time with others, we strengthen our sense of connection. All these connections fuel happiness.

In essence, our wellbeing (social, emotional, psychological, and even professional) is deeply shaped by the quality of our human connections. These connections do more than boost our moods; they are literally a matter of life and death.



**Our human connections
make us feel safe
and supported.**

Elevated Work Performance

Human connection doesn't just affect wellbeing. It also dramatically affects performance. In fact, research supports what many leaders intuitively feel. Organizations with high levels of employee wellbeing show 27% higher profitability than those with lower wellbeing.⁶

Research from fifty-two countries found that when people were asked who has the greatest influence on their lives, the answers were revealing. First came family members (44%) and second came someone from work (34%).⁷ Think about that. Workplace leaders and colleagues have enormous power to influence the wellbeing and performance of others, often more than they realize. Consider a scenario we've seen play out many times with clients . . .

The numbers didn't make sense. This team had everything, including great talent, smart strategy, shiny new technology, and more dashboards than the cockpit of a 747. If performance improved based on PowerPoint slides per employee, they would've been unstoppable. But deadlines slipped, meetings dragged, and energy felt like a Monday morning . . . a Monday morning that lasted all week.

So, the team leader did the logical thing. He added more structure, more metrics, and more meetings about the meetings to prepare for the next meeting (since nothing fixes low morale like a two-hour meeting about urgency). Still, there was no improvement.

Then one day, the leader walked into the weekly meeting, looked at the forty-two-slide deck and did something radical. He closed the laptop.

Team members thought, *“Oh, wow . . . this is it. We’re getting laid off.”* Instead, he asked, “Before we talk about work, how’s everyone actually doing?” Awkward silence. It was the kind of silence where people suddenly become fascinated by the grain on the conference room table.

Then someone spoke. Then another. As it turns out, people were stressed and they felt overloaded. They tried to look fine while quietly drowning in deadlines and life. In that moment, something shocking happened. Humans appeared. Not job titles, not roles. Just humans.

Over the next few weeks, nothing officially changed. Same goals, same workload, same boss, same coffee that tastes like regret. But performance started rising.

Why?

Because when people feel connected, they help sooner, share faster, and trust more. Suddenly the team that couldn’t hit a deadline was beating targets. This leads to a simple truth: Human connection isn’t soft. It’s not fluffy. It’s not optional. Human connection is a strategy. It’s the most overlooked performance advantage in today’s organizations.

**Human connection
is a strategy.
It’s the most overlooked
performance advantage
in today’s organizations.**

Research by Harvard Business School Professor Amy Edmondson supports the fact that teams with strong interpersonal connection and psychological safety show higher innovation, better learning, stronger engagement, and higher productivity.⁸ When people feel connected and safe, they raise concerns sooner and solve problems faster. Connection helps remove the fear that keeps teams silent.

For more quantitative benefits, a study from BetterUp, a global coaching firm, further revealed that companies with employees who feel socially connected at work experience:

- 34% greater goal attainment;
- 32% higher peer ratings;
- 14× greater likelihood of appearing on “Best Places to Work” lists;
- 92% greater professional growth; and,
- Employees who are 25% more likely to recommend the company to others.⁹

Feeling connected to team members changes how we perceive challenges. Researchers found that if a person is looking at a hill and judging how steep it is, the simple presence of social support (like a colleague or friend) made the hill look 10% to 20% less steep than if the individual were alone.¹⁰ Both individual and team perception of a task, goal, or project is transformed

for the better when the presence of others is felt. Connections with others communicate that we are looking at the hill together, not alone.

We are wired for connection. We are better together.

Not only do connected team members deliver higher performance, but they are also more resilient when faced with challenges, and they make better decisions.¹¹ Being connected to others can be a reality check since it helps us see situations more clearly. Human connections enable us to access relevant wisdom and experience of others to make good decisions and draw on their encouragement to be more resilient. They help us see stumbling blocks as stepping stones.

*The strength of the team is each member.
The strength of each member is the team.*

—PHIL JACKSON

A Real-Life Story Made for Movies

In the early 1990s, a young boy named Chris Gardner was struggling alongside his father. There were times when they had no home and were sleeping in shelters, and even in public restrooms. But Chris Gardner Sr. was doing everything he could to build a better life for his son. Despite his challenges, he was

educated in finance and was pursuing a competitive internship at a brokerage firm. In doing so, he noticed that many of the other candidates and successful professionals he encountered seemed distant and guarded. But instead of taking this approach, he did something different. He connected.

He asked questions, listened, remembered names, and showed genuine interest in people. One senior executive in particular began to take notice that Chris made people feel seen and valued. That connection led to a mentorship, which eventually led to a job offer. That job offer changed everything.

The young Chris Gardner, clearly having observed and learned from his father, would later go on to become a successful entrepreneur, motivational speaker, and author of *The Pursuit of Happiness*, which later was turned into a hit movie.

What's fascinating is that the breakthrough for Chris Sr. didn't come from a resume or from luck. It came from connection. In a room full of competition, the differentiator was simple: Chris treated people like people, not positions.

Human connection opens doors that talent and education often can't. People don't just hire skills. They invest in people who make them feel connected. And often the most powerful way forward isn't by pushing harder. It's by connecting deeper.

We've highlighted the powerful payoff of human connection for both wellbeing and performance. Just as geese fly farther

together in formation than they could alone, people also thrive when they travel through life connected to others. Decades of research show that strong human connections improve physical health, increase happiness, and even extend life expectancy. Human connection also provides encouragement, safety, and support during life's challenges.

In the workplace, connection fuels trust, collaboration, innovation, and productivity, enabling teams to perform at higher levels. When people feel seen, supported, and connected, problems are solved faster, resilience grows stronger, and goals are achieved more effectively. Simply put, connection isn't a "soft" extra. We said it once, and we'll say it again: Human connection is the strategic advantage that helps people live better, work better, and go further together.

Now, let's look at the simple but powerful process for unlocking elevated wellbeing and performance with human interaction.

Two are better off than one. . . . If one of them falls down, the other can help him up.

—ECCLESIASTES 4:9

**We live in
a high-tech world,
but building
human connections
is still a high-touch job.**