Vital Friends
The People You Can’t Afford to Live Without
By Tom Rath

The Big Idea

What’s the quickest way to ruin a friendship? Do great friendships have anything in common? Are close friendships in the workplace such a bad thing?

These are just a few of the questions that #1 New York Times bestselling author Tom Rath asked when he embarked on a massive study about the impact of friendships. Along with several leading researchers, Rath pored through the literature, conducted several experiments, and analyzed more than 8 million interviews from The Gallup Organization’s worldwide database.

His teams’ discoveries produced Vital Friends, a book that challenges long-held assumptions people have about their relationships. The teams’ landmark discovery – that people who have a “best friend at work” are seven times as likely to be engaged in their job – is sure to rattle the structure of organizations around the world.

Drawing on research and case studies from topics as diverse as management, marriage, and architecture, Vital Friends reveals what’s common to all truly essential friendships: a regular focus on what each person is contributing to the friendship – rather than that all too common approach of expecting one person to be everything.

Why You Need This Book

This groundbreaking book reveals which friends play each of the eight vital friendship roles in your work and life. This will let you see your coworkers, family, friends, and significant other in a whole new light.
PART ONE: FRIENDS IN LIFE

THE FRIENDSHIP PRESCRIPTION

In addition to improving our health and life satisfaction, studies are now revealing how friends play a similar role during stressful times. Our friends essentially serve as a buffer during life’s challenges, which improves our cardiovascular functioning, resiliency and decreases our stress levels. When a tragic event occurs, a close friend becomes our comfort and refuge.

In a 2001 study, researchers at Duke University Medical Center explored the protective effect of friendships in more depth by studying patients with heart disease. They had already discovered that people with fewer than four friends were at a significant disadvantage.

The more friends the better? Not necessarily. People in this study with five, six, seven, or eight friends gained about the same survival benefit, when compared to those with four friends. Having at least four friends appears to provide the maximum protective effect.

In summarizing the latest research from the Duke study and our own, it looks like we might not need an extraordinarily wide breadth of friends; it is likely to be the quality of our friendships that matter the most. Each person needs a few very deep friendships to thrive. As you might suspect, lonely people suffer psychologically and physically. The absence of high-quality friendships is bad for our health, spirits, productivity, and longevity.

“Friendship has a profound effect on your physical well-being.” writes Eugene Kennedy, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Loyola University of Chicago. “Having good relationships improves health and lifts depressions. You don’t necessarily need drugs or medical treatment to accomplish this – just friends.”

DOES WORK BALANCE LIFE?

Everyone talks about the need for work/life balance – but it might not be that easy to separate the two. Your personal life doesn’t stop when you get to work – and you don’t stop thinking about work when you get at home at night. Indeed, if work doesn’t even enter your mind at night or on the weekends, this doesn’t necessarily mean that you’ve attained the elusive work/life balance. It’s more likely an indicator of how little you care about your job.

Balancing your time is one thing, but trying to create balance with relationships and emotions is very different. The emotional balances between work and personal life are blurred, and that might be a good thing. If you dread going home after work, things are clearly out of balance, and you might need to examine what’s wrong with your relationships at home – and vice versa.

Perhaps balance is about having great friendships that extend between work and home. This is easier said than done, of course. While we spend more than half of our waking hours at work, most organizations have done very little to encourage friendships on the job. Some go as far as to prohibit close relationships, which could be a catastrophic mistake.
PART TWO: FRIENDS AT WORK

CAN YOU BE FRIENDS WITH YOUR BOSS?

When compared to time spent with relatives, children, customers, colleagues, or bosses, time spent with friends is rated as being the most enjoyable, according to a recent study. On average, time spent with a friend ranks even higher than time spent with your spouse. How could that be?

The Princeton researchers who conducted this study used a noble technique: Participants were asked to reconstruct their day, allowing researchers to pinpoint specific moments. Participants also reported their overall enjoyment at each moment.

Perhaps most concerning was the bottom of this “people we enjoy being with” list. Clients and customers were third from the bottom; coworkers were second to last, followed by bosses, who were dead last. Interacting with the boss was also rated, on average, as being less enjoyable than cleaning the house.

Undoubtedly, there are thousands of managers in the workplace who have no business bearing the responsibility for developing other people. Most of us have had a boss like this at one point or another. They make you miserable, less productive, and even diminish your physical health. But we have also found thousands of exceptional managers who have the opposite effect, and they have something in common: These great managers care about each of their employees as a real human being, not just a means to an end.

If you’re fortunate enough to have had a manager who treated you like a friend and cared about your personal life, you probably understand the difference this type of genuine friendship can make. The best managers in the world are not only experts in systems, processes, and technical competencies—they are experts in your life. And, because of this, they increase your engagement and productivity at work.

All employees deserve a manager whom they can truly call a friend, or at least a manager who cares about their general well-being. The bottom line is that we spend roughly 50% more time with our customers, coworkers, and bosses than we do with our friends, significant others, children, and other relatives combined. If you want to be happier and more engaged at work, consider developing a few strong friendships at the office, maybe even one with your boss.

PART THREE: DEVELOPING VITAL FRIENDSHIPS

SHARPENING EACH RELATIONSHIP

A distant acquaintance might refer to you as her “good friend,” or perhaps a business associate you have met just once refers to you as his friend. Needless to say, the word “friend” is not that exclusive anymore and borders on a generic label. This is why we started using the word “vital”. It is a word that is not commonly used to describe friendships, and it means something that is essential to your life.
A Vital friend is someone who measurably improves your life. He/she is a person at work or in your personal life whom you can't afford to live without.

THE EIGHT VITAL ROLES

Builder. Builders are great motivators, always pushing you toward the finish line. They continually invest in your development and genuinely want you to succeed – even if it means they have to go out on a limb for you. Great builders will not compete with you. They figure out how their talents can complement yours. If you need a catalyst for your personal or professional growth, stay close to a Builder.

Champion. Champions stand up for you and what you believe in. They are the friends who sing your praises. Every day, this makes a difference in your life. When you succeed, they are proud of you, and they share it with others. Champions thrive on your accomplishments and happiness. When you need someone to promote your cause, look to a Champion.

Collaborator. A collaborator is a friend with similar interests – the basis for many great friendships. When you talk with a collaborator, you’re on familiar ground, and this can serve as the foundation for a lasting relationship. Looking for someone who can relate to your passions? Find a collaborator.

Companion. A companion is always there for you, whatever the circumstances. You share a bond that is virtually unbreakable. When something big happens in your life – good or bad – this is one of the first people you call. They are the friends for whom you might literally put your life on the line. If you are looking for a friendship that can last a lifetime, look no further than a Companion.

Connector. A connector is a bridge builder who helps you get what you want. When you need something – a job, a doctor, a friend, or a date – a Connector points you in the right direction. They seem to “know everyone.” If you need to get out more or simply want to widen your circle of friends or business associates, a Connector can help.

Energizer. Energizers are your “fun friends” who always give you a boost. You have more positive moments when you are with these friends. Energizers are quick to pick you up when you’re down and can make a good day great. When you are around these friends, you smile a lot more. You are more likely to laugh in the presence of an Energizer. If you want to relax and have a good time or need to get out of a rut, call an Energizer.

Mind Openers. Mind openers are the friends who expand your horizons and encourage you to embrace new ideas, opportunities, cultures, and people. These friends broaden your perspective in life and make you a better person. If you need to challenge the conventional wisdom or shake up the status quo, spend a few hours talking with a Mind Opener.

Navigator. Navigators are the friends who give you advice and keep you headed in the right direction. You go to them when you need guidance, and they talk through the pros and cons with you until you find an answer. They are the ideal friends to share your goals and dreams with; when you do, you will continue to learn and grow. When you ask Navigators for direction, they help you reach your destination.
PART FOUR: BUILDING VITAL FRIENDSHIPS AT WORK

THE WATER COOLER EFFECT

According to the research, workplaces with areas where employment can congregate, like dining and break areas have twice as many people with best friends at work. If you are involved in shaping the layout of a new workspace or rearranging an existing area, consider this an opportunity to capitalize on the “water cooler effect” by creating more conversations in your workplace.

In addition to the findings about dining and break areas, the research revealed that workplaces with a physical layout that makes it easy for people to socialize have significantly more friendships. In fact, the effects of these environmental factors were much stronger than we had originally guessed. You are three times more likely to have a close-knit workgroup in this kind of physical workplace environments. Unfortunately, only one-third of the people we asked feel that the physical layout of their workplace makes it easy for them to socialize.

If you work in a building with imperfect architecture, it will take a bit more effort and creativity to foster vital friendships. Many organizations depend on “virtual” water coolers. That is, they encourage people to bring the conversation with them wherever they go, helping others connect.

Regular events where people can catch up and meet others can also serve as venues for ad-hoc conversations. Organizations filled with “best friends” are always trying new things: weekly or monthly social hours, dinners hosted by managers in their homes with their workgroups, outings to events in the area, involvement in community service groups, or larger parties for special holidays and events. These workplaces have one thing in common: they try anything to start a conversation.

PARTING THOUGHTS

Building on your vital friendships can improve countless facets of your life if, and only if, you dedicate your attention to the positive roles people do play in your life instead of focusing on what they don’t bring to your life. This one key will help you unlock the potential within each friendship.

Start there. Then focus your attention on what you contribute. Even though the Vital Friends Assessment focuses on what different friends bring to your life, it is critical that you figure out what you add to each friend’s life.

Whether you want to build more friendships, create stronger friendships, or both, this is an essential step. Every friendship requires give and take, and what you give is likely to be even more powerful than what you get.