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Ron Ashkenas' blog post on Harvard Business Review
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Compromise Requires Relationships (Not Friendships)

To work out differences and get things done, people in organizations need to work together. To foster this kind of collaboration, managers need to develop personal relationships – and some amount of trust – with potential partners. Without this foundation, negotiations often become adversarial; parties question each other's motives and neither side truly listens to the other.

Sound familiar? The [struggle to reach consensus in Washington](#) over spending, taxes, debt limits, and other issues is a case in point on how the absence of relationships constrains compromise. Clearly the issues involved are divisive and emotional, but watching these leaders try to find a middle ground is painful and discouraging – largely because they have so little relationship capital to draw upon. According to recent news reports, Republican leaders [routinely turn down invitations](#) from President Obama to come to the White House for social events, whether they are state dinners or movie screenings. And President Obama, for his part, has indicated that he prefers to spend time with his family instead of [schmoozing](#) with members of Congress.

Nobody is suggesting that President Obama, Speaker Boehner, and Senate Minority Leader McConnell become close personal friends. They do, however, need to understand and appreciate each other's points of view and be willing to look for middle ground. Getting to that point takes hard work. As one manager at the World Bank once said to me, "Building relationships requires a thousand cups of tea."

A number of years ago, many of the big commercial banks and private corporations encouraged their officers to build relationships by providing special [executive dining rooms](#) (with gourmet meals). While there was a certain amount of elitism involved, the practice gave managers a chance to get to know each other and create an underlying support structure for doing business. Similarly companies also organized regular offsite team-building retreats, and social events for managers and their families.

Today companies tend to be more egalitarian, and more concerned about costs and perceived boondoggles, so that many of these relationship-building vehicles (some of which were excessive) no longer exist. However the need may be greater than ever, since managers often [do not work in the same locations](#) as their peers, spend more time traveling, and usually do not have the luxury of extra hours to just "get together" with colleagues. The result is that many managers simply do not have relationships



News Blog Article Archive

with a wide network of people across the company (and outside) and therefore struggle to resolve conflicts. In fact I've been in a number of senior management conferences in the past few years in which top-50 managers are meeting each other for the first time.

The bottom-line is that whether you are the president of the United States or a mid-level manager, it's worthwhile to be strategic and proactive about building relationships. To do so, here are two steps you can take:

First, identify the people in your company, or in adjacent organizations (e.g., customers, thought-leaders, partners) with whom you might need to collaborate at some point. In particular, focus on managers who are likely to hold divergent views or may see the world through a different lens.

Second, develop a tailored way to reach out to each person on the list – a few at a time – with the simple goal of getting to know each other. I know one manager, for example, who commits to setting up 10-minute calls with three people each week, just to "say hello." Another manager makes sure that he contacts people on his list whenever he's going to be traveling to their city or country. And still another uses social media to connect to some people and builds an email dialogue with others.

Most people understand that building relationships with potential business partners is a critical strategy for success. But it's a strategy that often won't happen by itself.

[Ron Ashkenas'](http://blogs.hbr.org/ashkenas/2013/01/compromise-requires-relationships.html) blog post on Harvard Business Review
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