

# **Organizational Thinking, Leadership and Subsequent Action: Psychoanalysis as a Guide?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This case study of a senior executive at a foreign bank, explores the complex dynamics between leadership, teamwork and organizational culture, and how to help leaders navigate the challenges of a rapidly changing business landscape. We address the importance of understanding the psychological factors that drive individual and organizational behavior and decision-making; the role of leadership in fostering creativity and innovation; and the challenges and opportunities presented by organizational culture and its political dynamics.

## **OVERVIEW**

The following case explores the application of (Relational) psychoanalysis to organizational thinking. The case describes consulting work with a senior executive of a foreign bank in New York City during the development of an internal social networking application that was intended to better connect employees. Over the course of our work together, the executive, the team developing this system, and I experienced a number of interesting dynamics. The case purposefully leaves open to interpretation and association what works, what does not, and just how psychoanalysis informs organizational work.

In a phone call, Henri, the CEO of this Bank's Americas investment bank, spoke to me about how much he misses our work and me. He was traveling for about three weeks on Bank business, most recently participating as a guest speaker at a world economic forum. There, he spoke about how bankers today needed to revert to a more traditional role as "relationship managers," sharply moving away from the quantitative role that dominated the 1990s through 2008.

## **MY ROLE**

I assumed multiple roles for the Bank. I was the executive coach for Henri. I consulted to the Americas' Human Resources (HR) department, providing research and organizational development expertise. I also coached other Bank senior executives. In this case, I was deployed by Henri 20 to consult to the team noted in the introduction on their interaction with one another, learning, and process, and to facilitate their thinking about the assignment. I also provided the team access to my network, which had a significant impact on their output.

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## NETWORKING BEGETS NETWORKING, UNLEASHING CREATIVITY...

Unleashing creativity is not the most obvious priority for financial institutions, especially in a post-crisis world where the focus was on greater safety and less risk. But in rebuilding, tapping creativity could help differentiate a firm from the competition and reestablish client relationships that were harmed or severed in the prior three years.

However, amid the dizzying complexity of the modern-day financial institution, creativity can often be hindered by legacy systems and processes, blocked by political silos and stifled by bureaucracy. Increased regulation and capital constraints in Europe and the United States made matters even more cumbersome. Institutional safeguards, whether imposed by a government or employed internally by the institution, were often reactive and not productive—a way of defending against the ambiguity and anxiety inherent in a changing economic landscape and dramatic shift in business.

Earlier in 2010, the Bank's HR department, in partnership with a prominent American graduate business school, introduced a "talent development program" designed to nurture the next generation of Bank leaders. About 35 teams of high-potential middle managers from around the world across all departments were handed a deliberately vague brief to fulfill two objectives: expand their network and enhance the feeling of belonging ("pride") among employees. Each team was given a "mentor" with whom they were to work. Henri was assigned as mentor to one of these teams and, as is his approach to all work, threw himself and any resource he controlled into the process (I was one of those resources). HR's program design provided the teams and mentors no further guidelines aside from the objectives just noted.

Considering the inordinate amount of anxiety already being experienced by a system reeling from the fallout of the 2008 economic crisis, including dramatic reductions in force and compensation, and a shift in business priorities, one might wonder if HR was helping or hindering the organization by introducing further stress. Was this an intentional developmental leap or a conscious/unconscious lapse in an important aspect of HR's role to understand and contain the organization's anxiety and help people manage it? HR's program *was* experienced as sadistic, allowing others to suffer while HR could feel exceptional, productive, and in control. The program task of developing middle managers seemed to ignore, lose, or never consider the boundary between the stress required for adults to learn, creating a "threshold of learning" and an anxiety-ridden task that overstresses the system (Heifetz, 1994, p. 348). As a consultant, I felt ethically obliged and attempted to discuss the program's impact with HR to no avail. I was too late in the process and the New York HR group had lost control of the process to headquarters (HQ).

While there is a positive value in developing mid level leaders to experience and work through the ambiguity of assignments that are the daily life of more senior executives, it is best to do so with both technical *and* psychological support, both of which were missing. HR could have considered just how much ambiguity serves learning, how the task could be structured, and what would best engage participants, mentors, and other organizational stakeholders in learning.

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However one views HR, the experiences of the participants were strongly held—the vagueness of the brief caused team members and Henri confusion, stress, and anger throughout the project. In the aftermath of the financial crisis they were expected to perform their normal duties *and*, over just three months, produce an exceptional “product” and then deliver it at a competitive forum in Europe where team “products” would be voted on and a winner declared. Five already-stressed managers were brought together from different countries and disciplines and expected to produce under purposefully ambiguous terms. And Henri was not going to stand for anything less than complete success from “his” team!

Henri’s reaction was complicated. His pride, in himself and in the Bank, his quest for recognition, and his quest for perfection contributed to his taking the role in the way that he did. He found differentiating himself as a mentor difficult, well outside of his comfort zone. Instead of providing a bounded distance to act as a thought leader and teacher, he joined the team *as* their leader. He reacted to the assignment’s ambiguity and competition by overcompensating, even going to HR to intervene (New York and HQ) and providing guidance and resources to both reduce stress and to “win.”

Through contacts of Henri’s, others’, and mine, the team was introduced to similar systems at world-leading American universities, Apple, and other organizations. Following two months of meetings and discussion, the team focused on the idea for an internal social networking site similar to Facebook for Bank employees.

The experience of the team was also made easier by being part of a program that had the approval of senior management. Those they approached in the process of networking were, to a certain extent, expected to help. Even so, there was an undercurrent of naysayers who often conspired, perhaps unwittingly, to stifle the program. Within the Bank there were several executives who were strongly tied to HQ, where doing things differently was disdained and any success in doing so generated envy. Henri admitted that the team benefited from having “me as a mentor with my level of seniority, which opened more doors for them than perhaps other mentors could.”<sup>1</sup>

Given this culture, quite a bit of anguish was felt during the program’s three months. As noted by one of the program’s creators in HR:

“We debated how much structure to give [the teams] and in the end decided that we should let them freak out a little bit. It is always difficult to know how much guidance to give. We were very deliberate in our decision to give them no net and no guidance. The decisions were made in the middle of the financial crisis and we took the view that they should be able to lead in the midst of

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<sup>1</sup> Two important points that I was working with during this process: first, the “authority” given and taken by senior management set the tone for behavior throughout the firm—allowing an outsider to “mentor” was not common in this firm, and second, Henri’s ability to “allow” someone else to share the stage with him in “leading” this group either showed the extent of Henri’s trust for me and the impact of our work together or provides another example of his narcissism—treating others as an extension of himself. Most likely both were true. There was some recognition of my experience in the field of consultancy that enabled access to senior people outside of the firm who proved helpful to the work.

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a crisis. They actually were quite angry about this. When you look at the benefit of the ambiguity—it is that when people are lost, they try to connect with each other.”

This illuminates a dynamic within this Bank that while consulting in this system I had to grapple with: HR acted on its behalf not always with the employee in mind and mostly at the direction of HQ, this program was invested in and going to be conducted regardless of the impact on the participants, the program’s rules could be bent or broken, and this Bank had a highly charged political HQ-centric culture that could easily operate “against” the employee. As a consultant/coach to Henri, I had to “take-in” and work with the long-term impact this environment had on his way of working, his psychological makeup, and his behavior.

## HENRI'S LIFE

Henri was born in France of academic parents, attending the best schools and training as a competitive sailor from an early age. As a teen he was a finalist in trials for the French Olympic sailing team. He remains a competitive sailor, racing most weekends as a member of a number of prominent yacht clubs. Henri moved to the United States early in his banking career, eventually becoming a dual citizen, raising a family, getting divorced, and rising within the Bank to his present role. He has over 25 years with the Bank.

Henri and I met at the beginning of 2009 during significant reductions in the workforce and compensation that caused tremendous turmoil at the Bank. This Bank fared well during the 2008 financial turmoil, having no investment in subprime. In fact, the Americas business of the Bank had one of their best years. Being a foreign Bank in an “at-will”<sup>2</sup> employment market (the United States), the Bank’s HQ decided to make most of its worldwide “adjustments”<sup>3</sup> in the United States, where it was the easiest.<sup>4</sup> In my work with Henri, we exhaustively explored numerous hypotheses for the United States taking the “hit,” including as punishment, reinforced by the cultural and other splits present at the Bank, as the way business operates, as a way that business operates that is experienced in a punishing way, as France punishing the rest of the 120 world, or as a result of projections from the general population that is suffering at the hands of the financial services industry.

I was hired in 2009 by the Americas HR department to help managers deal with the layoffs and dramatic reductions in compensation. A conservative foreign bank had taken an ever more conservative turn. In my work with Henri in this initial assignment, I helped him adjust his style in the moment—Henri was used to “speaking at” rather than “listening to” his audience. Early in our engagement I had the experience of him talking “past me” and not really taking me, or what I was saying, in—behavior that I would confront

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<sup>2</sup> United States and New York law do not protect employees as does French law. The firm could terminate most (not including those that may be in some protected class) employees “at will.”

<sup>3</sup> The firm laid off hundreds of U.S. employees even though the U.S. Bank outperformed *all* other parts of the world; a substantial amount of the worldwide loss was due to a single investment managed in Switzerland with additional losses coming from London and Asia.

<sup>4</sup> Some in the Americas experienced this as retribution to punish the epicenter of the cause of the financial meltdown—New York.

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often. He began to actively listen to me and increasingly demonstrated connecting and communicating with his employees, no matter how painful. He protected those that he could and dealt with the traumatic impact of these changes. It was during this work that Henri and I began developing a relationship. Once this work concluded, he asked if I would be his executive coach with an initial challenge of improving his leadership by better connecting him to his people.

When working in the Bank, I often wondered about its conservative culture focused on minimizing risk that inadvertently stifled innovation and was “split” by design. Expatriates such as Henri lived in a system of split allegiances: HQ vs. New York, French vs. American, global vs. regional vs. local, HQ management vs. local management, needs of the Bank vs. needs of the client, needs of France vs. needs of the United States, to name a few. This seemed to leave Henri, having lost the opportunity to reach for Olympic gold, with a deep feeling of inadequacy. As a consultant to this system, I often raised questions about feelings of adequacy and being good enough and/or innovative with mixed responses.

Henri had a tendency to be superficial or political in his connection to people in what we discussed as a defense against having a deeper relationship. This part of Henri seemed well ingrained. Our intent was to further pursue how these “splits” impacted him and how, as developmental opportunities, he could be more aware in the moment of the pulls and be more purposeful (perhaps less political) in his response. Though this behavior seemed to originate deeply, perhaps in his Olympic training or before.

### **COACHING HENRI**

At the onset of our work together, it would have been easy to consider Henri as a well-defended executive with narcissistic tendencies, but our brief encounter during the layoffs showed depth and a desire to adapt, connect, and change. His motivations remained a mix of ambition (reaching for the gold), a desire to do the best job (his perfectionism), an undefined caring for people (briefly explored as a way of offsetting the disconnect with his family), and a drive to advance.

One of the first “crises” we faced together in our new coaching relationship was prompted by a sudden major talk he was asked to give, in less than two hours, in place of his manager who missed his flight to New York. Henri was a man who was used to being fully scripted and in this instance lacked the time and resources to have his speech written. He and I were already scheduled to meet over breakfast. He entered the room excited, pacing the floor while asking if we could forgo our previously planned agenda in order to address an urgent matter. He was dramatic in his presentation of the dilemma he faced—to address the newly promoted vice president class of 2009. This group, while being promoted, also bore the guilt of surviving the recent layoffs and receiving more financially than their colleagues, most of whom experienced pay cuts. His portrayal of the task was as an honor (an exaggeration) as opposed to the “fill-in” role he was taking. This need to describe the task in an elevated way emerged as an often discussed pattern in our work.

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I helped him abandon the idea of a written speech and over the course of 90 minutes helped him organize his thoughts into select bullet points, focused on engaging the audience directly without a podium. While this approach made him profoundly anxious (he called me 5 minutes before speaking to review the three main points he was covering), it resulted in one of the best talks he had given and a turning point for him as a leader. Our work continued to include challenges to his assumptions of what success looked like. Briefer, more genuine, and transparent engagements with others continued as a key goal for his development.

Henri, though, was not just the product of French culture, and so on. He had other significant experiences in his makeup. He did not make the French Olympic team, qualifying as a reserve, a tremendous blow as a teen. He attended the “right” school in his education.<sup>5</sup> Henri’s early success at the Bank was as the private banker responsible for investing in film and entertainment (including a number of famous “hits”). He spent a number of formative years living and working in Hollywood. Henri’s social network had been formed out of these experiences. These professional influencers and experiences add to the complexities within Henri’s evolving identity.

### HENRI AS MENTOR

Henri was not a very adept mentor. His notion of mentorship, like many executives I encounter, was to lead (by example) and rarely teach or ask a question. He began his work with this team in the same way. He and I would engage in a weekly tug, his wanting to say and do more and my pulling him out of his leadership role into a role of productive silence, where he spoke less, asked questions, and provided access to people and information in an attempt to allow the team the space to form its own processes and conclusions. His developmental transition continued to focus on shaping others in his image (while protecting and promoting them) as opposed to developing others for their sake, considering who they are, how they work, and where their career ambitions lie. Helping him develop deep relationships in which he is able to take-in the other in productive and task-focused ways continued to be challenging.

To this point, as a follow-up to the phone call mentioned in the beginning of this case, he and I decided that there was a lot going on in his travels and that we should connect the next day by phone to process his experiences and to prepare for what was to come. He never called. I was left considering what this meant for our relationship: was this an “as-if” consultation where *having* a coach was the objective and not the learning, or was this part of his (and the Bank’s) struggle, to learn, develop, and change? Henri was caught in a struggle I find common among executives—do I (the executive) be genuine and transparent and risk being seen as countercultural, or do I compartmentalize and adapt to the culture and live a conflicted life? He and I began to openly think about this dilemma.

### THE TEAM’S PROCESS

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<sup>5</sup> French banking, especially within this conservative Bank, is reliant on graduates from four French universities. At the Bank, graduating from one of these universities is often referred to as being “part of the club”—most of the top 100 executives come from one of these schools. This has created an intellectually elite group within the Bank that prides itself on its capacity to think and solve problems. It has also produced a relatively risk-averse, bureaucratic, highly controlled environment in which all businesses exist within a matrix of loyal managers controlled by HQ.

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The team was made up of five members—a lawyer, two traders, a financial analyst, and an administrator. Two were based in New York, one in London (who moved to Hong Kong), one in Sao Paulo, and one in Houston. Two were French, one was Dutch, one Brazilian, and one born in China and raised in the United States. There were four men and one woman—quite a diverse group. Their ages ranged from late 20s to mid-30s; one was single and three had children. All had been with the Bank for a substantial part of their career. The team’s members differentiated roles in a somewhat stereotypical fashion—the woman (the administrator) became a caretaker of sorts, attending to the team’s administrative details, and the lawyer and one of the traders assumed aggressive leadership roles. The other two were behaviorally more typical for this Bank, vocal but less in the lead, attending to the tasks assigned. To break out of the “frozen” state the team seemed to be in after about a month and a half, and as part of the their development regarding networking, I asked them to each choose three people within the Bank whom they did not know well in their geographic area and schedule a meeting to discuss both what that person was proud of within the Bank and how “social networks” might improve the person’s business. In addition, I asked that they solicit from each interviewee suggestions for three other people to speak with.

During this process, the lawyer, Ken, with the help of Henri, connected with Bernard, the head of the Bank’s Americas’ equities division.<sup>6</sup> Bernard wanted to find a way to better connect his traders to information about clients and to each other so they could track trades and products and better learn from each other. Bernard was intrigued by the idea of a social network tool that might connect his traders, usually vastly independent and individually reclusive. With a strong push from Henri (who was Bernard’s senior), Bernard decided to allow the team to use Equities as a test bed and committed one of his trading system programmers to create a prototype. Ken acted as liaison to both the programmer and the Division.

In a business environment where, too often, initiative is overlooked in favor of blind adherence to a particular job description, the team displayed reassuring, refreshing, and quite flexible thinking and voluntary teamwork. It also demonstrated how the common goal of producing an effective solution to their brief enabled them to moderate internal differences, petty squabbles, or hierarchy in order to concentrate on how best to get the job done.

Key to the team’s productivity and spirit was Henri’s protection and influence. Henri, as leader (not mentor), would facilitate weekly conversations (the team met in his office). The team followed his lead regarding actions, relied on him when issues surfaced, and ultimately depended on his influence to both get the system sponsored *and* have it reclassified as a winner.<sup>7</sup>

### THE SOCIAL NETWORK

A platform was developed for accessing information about a particular person by name, role, geography, skill, education, work history, client relationships, and so on. Once populated, an employee could learn who was connected to what client, product, or other business facet, as well as who might have expertise in

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<sup>6</sup> This division traded in stocks, bonds, and derivatives.

<sup>7</sup> After the team initially came in second (two other teams tied for first), Henri used his influence with HQ HR to have the top three teams all declared winners.

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a particular area. As of this writing, just three months after inception, the system was populated with more than 60% of the Bank's 4,000 Americas' employees. The system was fully operational six months from the beginning of the program, an example of how a disparate group of people can be brought together, provided a facilitated experience and support, be authorized, and develop a vital tool with potential to influence life in the firm and enhance future performance.

The team also built the system in a way that circumvented the firm's technology division, demonstrating a potentially new way to design, prototype, develop, and put into production new systems. Their experience highlighted the fact that silos, fiefdoms, and internal political concerns were an obstacle to clear, efficient, and creative thinking. Their path was relatively unencumbered by such obstacles and their success was no mere coincidence. Yet, as already alluded to, success had a lot to do with the motivation and ambition of their "mentor." The team's experience was an extension of Henri—an enactment of his need to be successful, be seen, and be a star. Failure was not an option, and he committed the resources, including me, and used his influence to better the odds of success.

So when is a virtual connection, like that of this team, in support of developing a relationship and when is it a defense against connecting? From my vantage point it was a fantasy on the part of the Bank and this team that this system promoted relatedness. Indeed, in this Bank's culture, systems like these are easy places to hide behind and use as a defense against connecting. The system simply cataloged more information about employees and offered a way for those selling to see if someone at the Bank had a "connection" to the potential sale. As of this writing the system was not being used to enhance the interaction among employees.

### **A GROWING CONCERN: MAKING CHOICES OR IS THIS ABOUT ME OR YOU?**

The success of the system provided an opportunity for the team to meet with and present to the Bank's Executive Committee in France, including the Bank CEO and Chairman. Henri helped create this forum by working behind the scenes with HR, Corporate Communications, Information Technology, his boss (the head of investment banking), and others. He lobbied for "his" team to be amongst three winners (the team had lost the vote in the original competition, seen by Henri as part of the Bank's inherent bias against the United States). The meeting had been scheduled on the same day as an important talent review in New York at which Henri was expected to support the ranking of his people.<sup>8</sup> He chose to go to the presentation in France, allowing others to fend for his organization.

The Bank, including his manager, viewed this choice as Henri promoting himself. Here again Henri's role confusion was pronounced. Had Henri lost focus on his role as mentor and recast his role as part of the team? Were his ambitions superseding his role responsibilities, leading him to choose to be a part of a high-profile presentation rather than fulfill an important, albeit emotional, part of his job? Were the security, dependency, and other needs of the team being projected or assumed in his countertransference? Is he in flight from the emotional burden of ranking and protecting his people? Had he moved on in his

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<sup>8</sup> This review would determine promotions and compensation.



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mind to some new undefined role? These were all critical developmental questions that remain to be unpacked.

## THOUGHTS ABOUT HENRI

Taking Henri out of the context of his work environment was impossible. He was clearly a product of growing up in both the Bank and in French business culture. His ascent had been a product of the very traits that he had asked me to help him change. In consultation, and here with Henri, the following questions need to be openly considered: Will being more transparent, purposeful, and less political be destructive or productive? Henri's ultimate goal was to be considered as a future head of the Bank. Did he have the intellectual rigor to compete in the way it was currently done? Was there an alternative? Could he function without the resources he had assembled who became key to running his organization? Did he have the emotional fortitude to sort and then focus his role on his responsibilities? Was he showing his lack of readiness for a more senior role by behaving in the way described in this case? Could he separate and integrate his primary responsibility with his emotional response? Could he distinguish between what was primary to his role and his desire for another shiny object? How did his identification with the Bank, his role, his people, and so on, shape his role as perceived? How well did he understand the parts of his role that were given to him by the system, and so forth, and those parts that were taken by him?

In one of our last conversations we talked about succession—who would and could replace him in his Americas' role? There was no clear answer. He had shaped the role in a unique way complete with its own bureaucracy, albeit distinctly different from the Bank's. While building a formidable and successful business, he had not spent the time to relate to and develop those below him in preparation to succeed him. He had yet to have the difficult conversations with subordinates to address what was in their way, avoiding nurturing his replacement. Yet he aggressively pushed 300 himself for his advancement.

## MY EXPERIENCE

I did feel oddly loved by him. I felt that he engaged me and, on occasion, dug deep. Yet these deep dives were rare, and his engagement was intense when in New York yet nearly nonexistent when traveling. Or, perhaps, he had taken in enough of me to have internalized aspects of our work and me that adequately supported him.

In our work together, we met once or twice a week and discussed the status of the many items on our agenda, most of which focused on some aspect of Henri's work—a new initiative, an issue he was having, and so on. Sometimes I gave him an article to read that we used to generate a deeper discussion about work, him, his leadership, and so on. These articles ranged in subject from management/leadership to psychoanalysis. Each session ran approximately 90 minutes and was conducted either in his office or in a private dining area. Every couple of months we would have a meal together outside of the Bank where I found us discussing more intimate aspects of his life. Coaching a client on the client's turf was dynamically limiting.

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I felt comfortable confronting him, which I had done a number of times. Yet I often found myself adjusting my directness in support of him. The consultant providing executive development/coaching requires an understanding of the business context, including an appreciation for the organization's dynamic and culture, and must be prepared for supporting the ego while challenging the status quo. Importantly, coaching requires careful and continued consideration of the transference-countertransference individually and organizationally. Recently, Henri confided that he was having a significant relationship with a senior woman in another division within the Bank. They were both single and of equal seniority. He asked me if I thought it appropriate for him to have her accompany him at company events. After clarifying that these events have nothing to do with her area of the Bank, I asked why he was concerned. He responded that their relationship was public and he felt it was his right to include her. I also asked if significant others are usually invited to these events, which they were not. When I asked him to consider how bringing her might be experienced by his peers, seniors, and subordinates, he responded that it might be perceived as grandstanding. Given that she was one of the most senior women at the Bank, he understood how bringing her could appear as his flaunting their relationship to enhance his power. We discussed the many reasons for this display and drew no new conclusions. He began thinking about how he needed to protect his private life and not flaunt it, though I did not perceive that he had reached any deeper meaning as to what his relationship with this woman might represent. Was she another medal, a shiny object that he had captured while striving for the elusive part of himself that remained at the helm and not integrated into a fully functioning and responsible senior leader?

Additionally, he realized that the Bank's conservatism meant that his display of a lack of a coherent family life was both provocative and detrimental to his career, that he needed to offer a more stable whole person to those more senior to him. I could see in his eyes the profound sadness he was feeling about not being fully connected to his three daughters, of not having an ongoing significant other, and how work (and sailing) had become his primary preoccupations.

I felt that I was an additional supportive relationship in his life, like his girlfriend, his administrative assistant, his daughters, his sailing mates, and his work team. These are *almost* relationships. The network grows but not the internalized relationships that fulfill deeper needs.

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