

***On Intimate Ground:  
A Gestalt Approach to Working with Couples  
(1994)***

**Edited by Gordon Wheeler and  
Stephanie Backman**

**Intimacy:  
Why Do We Need More of It in the  
Corporate World?**

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**Z E Y N E P T O Z U M , M A , P C C**

For most of my life in the corporate world, I considered “intimacy” an inappropriate word outside the realm of family and friends. In recent years, however, I discovered a link between building meaningful relationships in the workplace and hard-core performance: the more intimacy we have with our colleagues, the more we will enjoy what we do, produce radical ideas, implement them with speed – and enhance our overall business performance. At the same time, intimacy is hard to define, easy to fake, and risky to engage in without skills. And yet, it works when truly appreciated and nurtured.

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I remember numerous team-building exercises, full of confidence that this time my team, including me, would cooperate better and be more tolerant of others. It would take a couple of meetings, and a few challenging discussions, to pierce that over-inflated confidence and throw me into despair. What had happened to the friendly atmosphere, to those moments of candid sharing among the team members? It took me a while to understand the difference between investment in a relationship and shots of intimate moments: the latter were often seen as short-term rescuers in the lives of teams. The impact of experiencing trust for a teammate, of sharing something private about oneself, of talking about team taboos, was instant and impressive. The sustainability proved negligible though, even after numerous attempts to revive it with “check-ins” at meetings. Ground had been laid, but no process put in place to nurture intimacy by staying curious to each other. We had neither language nor full understanding of this need; hence no intention to support longer-term intimacy.

The kind of intimacy I have since discovered to work for both our personal and our professional lives is like the return on a long-term investment, as opposed to quick gains from an impulsive gamble: we invest our time, our minds, our humanity into building a relationship that grows with time. It involves emotional engagement and display of human feelings but not an outburst of emotional impulses or a self-disclosure. I found that investing in the unlikely concept of intimacy at work, knowing our colleagues and letting them know us, can in fact be transformative: this can make us see our colleagues as interesting human beings and not merely as predictable and reliable; it can change our experience in the work place.

Noticing a shift in my understanding, experience, and practice of intimacy coincides with my increasing exposure to Gestalt orientation in my professional training. Along the way, the work of many practitioners captured in Gordon Wheeler and Stephanie Backman’s edited volume, *On Intimate Ground: A Gestalt Approach to Working with Couples*, was my eye-opener. The relational perspective of Gestalt was brought in to explore intimacy, taking intimacy to a new, relational level. Different perspectives offered in the book provide the reader with new lenses to see why and how people avoid intimacy, as well as with skills to mitigate the risks involved.

The book’s impact on my thinking, actions, and awareness centered on three issues:

- Defining Intimacy;
- Understanding why and how intimacy works;
- Developing skills to create and sustain intimacy.

In addition, the book illuminates the dynamics when people are connecting on “intimate ground” as couples, families, and groups. I also found myself wondering about the application to even larger systems like corporations: lessons we could draw from our experiences to help transform some of our relations at work. How would that dynamic impact our performance? I then realized that it would have saved a lot of time, effort, and discomfort had I reflected, experimented with, and learned about aspects of intimacy in my earlier years in the corporate environment – hence, my interest in writing this article. Below, I shall share my experience of these issues and challenges by referring to certain ideas in *On Intimate Ground* which have inspired and educated me.

### **Intimacy Is Hard to Define**

For many years, I focused on making myself and my teams better at what we were hired to do. It served us well. And yet, I came to realize that business acumen and skills were necessary but not enough to raise performance: the brain needed to be anxiety-free in order to engage our cognitive capacities fully. What best served to relieve that anxiety was to work with people I felt I knew, understood, trusted, and enjoyed. In other words, we had a history together; we could feel how the other would respond to a challenge: what made us anxious or excited. I could trust that they would deliver a tough feedback with care. We would work for insane numbers of hours, have difficult discussions, major disagreements, hard disappointments – and yet, we would work through them. That level of “knowing” the other was the result of a long and close relationship. There was *intimacy* between us, and it was helping us to perform better.

Intimacy is, in fact, a fuzzy concept, more experienced than explained, hard to define.<sup>2</sup> Yet, once understood, experienced, appreciated, and nurtured, it works for both the business and the people involved. I feel intimacy when the distance between me and other people seems to shrink, though we still know we are distinct individuals. Some would say they feel expanded, some accepted, some nurtured. This nurturing is somehow mutual, an exchange as in a reciprocated involvement, or in a deep and long-lived friendship.

As Wheeler (1994) writes, “Intimacy is different from intimate knowledge that we begin to develop about our colleagues to further our agenda” (p. 37). It is a kind of knowing of another person, and being known by that person, in a way and to a degree that is for its own sake, not instrumental to any other

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<sup>2</sup> Intimacy is hard to talk about. Therefore, in this paper I may speak of intimacy as an “it,” as if it exists or does not exist. In truth, intimacy is a process, and whenever I use the word I am referring to a relationship that forms and grows over time.

goal (Wheeler, 1994, p. 37). Intimacy cannot be reduced to being about the quality of contact or a state of mind; it has a long-term investment quality to it, too. It is created moment-by-moment and kept with care. The payback is that we appreciate working with each other, we feel seen and understood, we get the best out of each other, we dare more, and we enjoy what we accomplish.

Intimacy is different from having “intimate moments,” in the words of Joseph Melnick and Sonia M. Nevis (1994, p. 294). Melnick (personal communication, 2011) said the following:

Intimate moments happen in an unexpected, effortless way, leaving those involved with a feeling of connectedness and sameness. Yet, they are much less dependable in their significance and meaning as to what may be expected, compared to intimacy that develops into its maturity over time. In that way, intimacy is a long-forged connection, a substantive relationship between two or more individuals over an extended period of time.

For others, however, intimacy may feel threatening, inappropriate, disconcerting; therefore, they would prefer to avoid it. For them, the transparency required of intimacy may feel too much to handle. This is, in fact, what intimacy means – knowing a person’s inner world and making ours known; hence, its risky nature may become prohibitive for some.

Intimacy therefore is not just a connection but also a relational contact between people and with ourselves. Intimacy emerges when any human connection turns into an open and trusting two-way flow: it may start with curiosity from one person but requires acceptance, willingness, and candid interest from another to share the self. If the interaction stops there, without response to this sharing, the connection will lead to exposure from one side only and will thus risk remaining a transactional connection (“I got what I wanted”). An opportunity is missed: by staying in the process long enough to respond, executives would stand a chance to know more about what motivates and triggers them and others. We would therefore gain new insights and have opportunities to collaborate in trust. Intimacy would also provide us with a good platform to create the right conditions to request strategic support in the future.

### **Intimacy Is Easy to Fake**

Although it is not a “Quantum physics” challenge to differentiate an intimate interaction from a strategic one, it is sometimes a challenge. When

these intimate interactions are intended as tools of our marketing strategy, then I see them as “fake” intimate attempts. Intimacy is more than a pat on the shoulder, a water-cooler chat, or a warm greeting. Such behaviors can be effective in the short-run but the chance of building trust and intimacy over time can be irreparably damaged.

The value of connecting with people beyond our strategic agenda is certainly not new to the corporate world. In the late 1990s, with the virtues of Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 1996) becoming popular corporate knowledge, we watched “connecting with people” rise to the top of the leadership qualities list. It also became a door-opener for many training programs offered to executives. I remember suggestions like “ask your people about their weekends” or “tell them about your kids” becoming “golden rules”: we were mostly fooling others and ourselves into believing that we had just created a bond beyond the everyday business context.

I also recall the surprise these fabricated actions created when, for example, an executive and a mother was asked about her kids and she talked about her kid’s learning disability in school. She was later criticized in subtle ways at a succession planning meeting for her inability to stay focused, and she was left out of a candidate’s list. There was not enough care in the system to support her; what was happening, or rather *not* happening, intrigued me. The clearest meaning I could make at the time was that I – as executive or consultant – needed to be both *smart* and *authentic* when complying with those golden rules.

What in fact makes us better leaders, better decision makers, better parents, better partners is not just whether we socialize and connect with others. It is more about whether we build trust, safety, respect for privacy and vulnerability, etc. It is important to know what our intention is, to be able to discern between building intimacy and simply using skills to connect with people to advance a short-term, strategic agenda. The latter deployment of skills, though not wrong, can lead to the destruction of trust in relationships when mistaken for true intimacy. People then feel manipulated and taken advantage of.

### **Intimacy Is Risky: It Needs Skills**

Intimacy is a choice and has consequences: it may impact our actions, goals, results, emotional and intellectual stability, and those of our teams. Understanding these potential consequences will also help us understand why we may prefer to avoid intimacy in certain situations. The experience of intimacy is compelling for people to open up in the hope of being better understood and seen. Intimacy makes people vulnerable to its manipulative

and even abusive potential: there are too many in the business world who play at intimacy to extract information, to use personal data to further their business agenda, to use people's vulnerabilities.

The experience and knowledge that come with intimacy may make it harder for us to make decisions that are going to impact negatively those whom we know intimately. Moreover, in an intimate connection, we may need to give up "being right" and the false comfort that comes with self-righteousness; and we may not want to talk about aspects of ourselves we do not know well, since the discomfort and shame of "not knowing" can be unbearable. We may think that the environment is not safe enough to share our concerns, and be fearful that we may come across as weak or incompetent.

Once engaged in an intimate connection, it is useful to pay attention to how we feel after an intimate moment. Did we feel responded to with equal candor? In other words, do we trust that this dialogue supported us to learn more about other(s) and ourselves, so that we want more? Do we feel we now have a wider perspective on issues, are validated in our thoughts, beliefs, and concerns, and feel safe to ask for more? If the answer is "yes," then we probably have started building an intimate connection that will serve us in the future as well. In this way, we make intimacy a choice and not an experience imposed on us.

Intimacy in the corporate context presents further difficulties. For example, many minds are trained to associate the experience of closeness primarily with family or personal relationships. Engaging with others in that way often feels awkward and inappropriate in the work place. Further on the down side, our attempts to develop intimacy with colleagues may be mishandled and even inflict potential suffering: the competitiveness of the workplace can beg for betrayal, exposing information about colleagues' and their vulnerabilities. Similarly, we may feel uncomfortable when our freely expressed opinions create clashes, or when our vulnerability or wish to get to know someone is misinterpreted as making romantic or sexual passes. These possibilities are real and could eventually cost us respect and credibility in the eyes of fellow executives. The dynamics of intimacy are complex; with such risks at stake, it is important to reflect on how best to reap the merits of intimacy. Nevertheless, it is reassuring to see intimacy as a *relational* human process, calling for skills which can be mastered in order for it to be created and sustained. Here are some that I consider essential.

### *Recognizing the call for intimacy*

Since intimacy bears risks, discerning when to engage with it remains a challenge. We may best be guided by our attention to inner experience: intimacy needs time and a relaxed attitude. It may feel out of place when

there are pressing business issues requiring immediate focus. Conversely, there are times when we need to share things and understand each other.

Our daily life at work is full of interactions with others. Along the way, some of our decisions come out of long reflections, some are impulsive, and others are shaped in discussions with others. We enter into these discussions usually with a goal in mind, and a (conscious or unconscious) strategy to achieve it. We explain, we ask, we debate, and we explore what others have to say and contribute; we are essentially having a transactional and purposeful exchange. What sets these connections apart from an “intimate” connection is their “strategic” nature: at least one of the parties has an intention and an outcome in mind:

Both intimate and strategic interactions seek to maintain a connection among the parties involved. They are both ways of supporting ongoing relationships, but they are different ways of defining the quality of any given interaction. Intimate interactions are supported by feelings of mutual identification and empathy concerning the needs of the parties involved. Strategic interactions are supported by an acceptance of differences in accountability and authority in getting tasks accomplished. (S. Nevis, Backman, and E. Nevis, 2003, p. 136)

The experience of intimacy is such that when it is at play, the structure of the conversation seems to loosen up, the direction becomes less predictable and prone to surprises, personal boundaries and defenses are lowered, and private information is shared with ease. We all have some experience of sitting down for a cup of coffee with a work colleague after a tough meeting and suddenly realizing that the conversation has moved from the new factory proposal, to neither one of us wanting to leave town or risk uprooting the family again. We may even sense “having new eyes” – seeing more about our assumptions, beliefs, and desires that were hitherto kept in the shadow of our decisions and actions.

The skill is about getting the balance of intimate and strategic exchanges right: too much intimacy and the business results will suffer. The office could become a friendly meeting place for social fun, inappropriate sexual relationships, and favoritism, thereby diluting the business focus and ultimately performance. Conversely, too much result-orientation and the workplace will feel dull, lonely, unsupportive, and lifeless. As a result, insight, creativity, and humor will also be missing. The trap is that, in environments like these, performance is usually quite high but only for a while.

At times, both intimate and strategic interactions flow into each other

effortlessly. High performance teams built over time can occasionally allow intimacy to take over strategic interactions. Imagine a team that stopped their meeting to listen to the concerns of a member who felt threatened by a new idea being developed and was brave enough to voice them. She will do so because she realizes that her teammates know her well enough not to judge her as incompetent or weak. We can easily see how one person's bringing up what most others are holding back can save the team days of passive resistance, and hence major delays. Even though the team process seems to slow down for a while, such voicing of concerns can lead to high-caliber discussions, effective decision-making, full commitment, and accelerated results. The ability to modulate the speed and tone of the exchange is equally crucial as a way to accommodate to the "rhythm" of others. No matter how curious we are, we must allow some space or modulate our own energy to respect the other person's speed.

Within organizations, as with individuals, the speed with which intimacy develops and the level of appropriate engagement may vary, calling for sensitivity to delicate cultural norms. In a family company, it may be the norm to go to every employee's wedding party and to talk at length about their personal lives at the office. This can be a problem in a more formally structured/institutionalized company, where it could be seen as asking for too much space and therefore inappropriate. A client once stated that in her multinational internet business employees, even at initial interviews, are encouraged to share sensitive information like planning a pregnancy. Management makes a point of not using such data against employees. My client's take was that her company was actively supporting trust among its people and encouraging them not to fear disclosing who they are, what they believe in, etc.

### *Staying curious*

Beyond the skills to do the job, we need to be able to enlist people in the task of creating a common vision, or doing what they may not do by themselves. For our leadership to be effective we must understand the aspirations of others, as well as their fears and beliefs about what is possible; and they must understand us. And yet, given that we believe we already know about others and ourselves, the question becomes: How do we stay curious and open-minded to new possibilities and choices? Wheeler (1997), drawing from attribution theory in social psychology, puts the problem in this way: "When we are dealing with other people, our actions are based not on their behavior *per se*, but on our own projective understanding of the motives and feelings behind that behavior in them" (p. xi). This means that we could react differently if our projections were different, if our understanding of people's

motives and feelings changed.

Imagine the following scenario: your solid thought has been totally dismissed by your colleagues, and you said you did not agree to their idea either. The air is heavy, voices are being raised, and the team is stuck in inertia. Go back to the moment when, just before the frustration sank in, you felt surprised, wondering what was taking hold of the mind of the other. That moment, I suggest, can be a tiny window of opportunity to discover what you are not aware of, to learn about a fear or concern that may have been driving the other person's response (or, even more, informing your own thinking about the issue). This is a moment of vulnerability – short but real – and you can choose to do something with it; for example, to ask good questions to explore what you seem not to know and so get interested in other realities. Instead of advocating your view, you can accept that others may see things differently for reasons you do not know, and ask about their assumptions. When done with purpose and consistency, staying curious to another person's reality affords a good opening for intimacy to grow.

### *Finding Our Authenticity*

Trust is the engine as well as the ignition needed for intimacy. Without trust in the system, there is no chance for intimacy to develop, or to be sustained. In other words, if we do not trust that a person will respect confidentiality or care enough to protect us from public judgment, we will not share our private dilemma with that individual. Similarly, if we take a risk and get into a serious, intimate conversation with someone and realize that the person is not responding to our sharing, or does not disclose anything from her own experience, we may decide not to trust in that relationship and back away from deepening the intimacy. Building trust in a relationship is a long and winding road. It calls primarily for our skills around authenticity: the integrity of what we think, say, do, and experience helps create trust for intimacy to grow. Authenticity will guide our sensitivity to what we come to discover about others, as well as maintain our commitment to confidentiality.

### *Accepting Influence: Emotional and intellectual*

It takes courage to allow ourselves to be influenced as well as to carry our influence. When we are influenced, we often start thinking and feeling differently: sometimes relieved and better-grounded; other times, not seeing ourselves as always right. If we let intimacy influence us, we may need to revisit earlier choices when faced with ethical dilemmas. When we are intimately connected to colleagues, we can no longer predict how we will take what we learn about them or ourselves. Likewise, there is no way we can control how others will respond to what we disclose. As much as we will be exposed to

pleasant surprises and bonding truths, we will also be vulnerable – open to disappointment. Depending on the manner in which we share our personal data with others, we may also disappoint them. All of this is hard to bear; yet, the ability to bear it is necessary in order to develop and sustain intimacy.

### *Bearing An Equal Level Of Power*

A long-term balance of power is the necessary condition for intimacy to flourish (Melnick and Nevis, 1994). This suggests a mutuality that may seem hardly possible in the corporate environment where, in my experience, most interactions are driven by a hierarchy. This refers not simply to positional power but also, in more subtle ways, to power dynamics fueled by the organization's cultural norms (e.g., age, gender, experience). The ability to bear an equal level of power is not about giving up power, but rather about being aware of not wielding it over the other, nor of submitting to it in fear of upsetting team (i.e., organizational) dynamics. This is risky and tough to master. It requires time and a clear understanding of the conditions and requirements that brought people together in the first place. Similarly, establishing intimacy between bosses and subordinates is equally hard without letting the business down or creating moral conflicts, ethical dilemmas, or disappointments. It takes time and dedication for people to work through these issues. Creating a culture that includes both strategy and intimacy involves becoming aware of one's intention and the new boundaries needed, and then managing them with care.

## **Why Intimacy Works for Business**

Here is why intimacy matters: performance is at the core of our corporate existence. That existence is also driven by social interactions: not only status, acknowledgement, fun, and joy, but also social pain and anxiety fueled by uncertainty – highly competitive and therefore abrasive – with many power dynamics. This is a perfect recipe to stress the brain and reduce our cognitive capacity. Neuroscience informs us that our brains respond to social pain in the same way that they respond to physical pain (Lieberman and Eisenberger, 2008); consequently, with social support and rewards, we actually **experience less pain**. Similarly, perception of closeness greatly **increases pleasure and positively impacts performance**. Intimacy is a high return investment in the sense of providing the dependable and close system that can **alleviate the pains of the corporate life** and support our performance.

On a different note, people who know each other intimately **waste less time** writing self-protective memos, copying emails to an infinite number of people, undoing mistakes that could be avoided by direct questions and

honest answers, and revisiting decisions which proved ineffective. Similarly, even when we have the skills necessary to get the job done, differences we encounter often inhibit performance. Intimacy can help us see our colleagues as human beings with legitimate thoughts and feelings. As we foster intimacy, we can find connection points with them at a deeper level; understand what moves them as well as ourselves; find it easier to trust their intentions; feel safe, protected, and free to experiment. Once “on intimate ground,” we may gain new insights for future opportunities to collaborate with our colleagues in trust, despite differences. The resulting level of creativity is an invaluable competitive edge for any business, in order to effect bottom line results. Furthermore (employee) **turnover rates often drop**, as people who feel seen and valued by colleagues are more likely to stay with the organization even through difficult times. After all, as Hallowell (2010) writes, “Soldiers in the trenches aren’t in that moment fighting for freedom or country; they are fighting for one another.”

Trusted and intimate relationships can also serve as clear mirrors in **becoming more effective leaders**: when we are intimately connected to people, we stand a good chance of knowing more about our strengths, developmental edges, intentions, sources of power, and the different ways our presence affects others. We often have no idea about what our actions, appearance, and speech evoke and provoke in people. As the late coach Bradford Brown once said: “I have eyes that I may see you: you have eyes that I may see myself” (personal communication). Our development as leaders will certainly benefit from that clarity.

With genuine connection going two-ways, asking for help can no longer feel like admitting to weakness but rather like co-creating something that no one person can create alone. In this way, intimacy can also provide us with a good platform to request strategic support in the future. Imagine a team stopping their meeting to listen to the concerns of a member who felt threatened by a new idea they were developing and was brave enough to voice concern. He would do so because he was sure that his teammates knew him well enough not to judge him incompetent or weak. We can easily see how one individual’s bringing up what most others are holding back could save the team days of passive resistance, hence major delays. One would do so only if people knew each other well and trusted that they would be listened to, respected in their judgment, and not criticized for slowing the team down. When that happens, even though the team process seems to slow down for a while, it leads to high caliber discussions, effective decision-making, full commitment, and accelerated results. This is not to say that we need to be “best friends” with everyone at work, but it certainly helps if we have some friends and are open to making more. Data released by Gallup in 2007 show

that people who have a best friend at work are seven times as likely as others to be positively engaged with their jobs (Hallowell, 2010).

Following is an example of how intimacy has worked in the corporate world.

One of my most intimate friendships during my corporate years was with the factory director of the business, with whom I was leading the marketing team. Director and team had a history of “politely” fighting for power, self-aggrandizing, and alienating the other in the process. The factory director and I contributed to those explosive meetings. In the meantime, we were preparing for one of the most controversial and challenging product launches in the history of our business.

What set us on a different trajectory was that on a field trip we could spend a couple of hours talking: I remember telling him that I was not enjoying our meetings, leaving angry most of the time when my team’s suggestions were killed on the spot. I then told him that I was also feeling at an impasse, as I could not do the indicated product launch well without his technical experience. He, too, talked about his irritation with previous inexperienced marketers and admitted to doubting my skills at times. Then he suddenly acknowledged me as a radical thinker and a curious marketer. He added that he was under a lot of time pressure and needed to find a counterpart in marketing with a quick mind and well-intentioned challenges. Without that, he could not see the development department designing the product by the launch deadline and within the cost constraints.

That was a turning point in our relationship: all of a sudden, we saw not a source of irritation in the other but a potential ally. What enabled the shift was that we saw each other in all of our humanity, with our own ambitions and vulnerabilities. We laid a few bricks that afternoon, but the bridge took us months to build: that was just the beginning of many years of our remaining buddies, using each other for “sanity checks”; listening to and understanding each other’s needs and fears; and surviving many tough discussions, disagreements, and peer pressures to yield to short-term department wins. There was trust, clarity, integrity, and transparency in that relationship. We could move fast in meetings, call one another immediately when we saw something not working, and enjoy bringing in other people we each trusted to join that unlikely team. I am sure that we would still be no more than a phone call away, helping and building each other’s lives and careers, if it were not for his untimely death due to a stroke at age 42.

Looking back on that experience, I see the importance of acknowledging intimacy as a process – not as overnight magic. Investing time and trust pays back generously to a business.

### **Conclusion**

The business environment needs solid thinkers, creative ideas, and a willingness to hear what others have to say in order to ensure commitment and results. However, only with people whom we trust not to exploit or take advantage of our openness would we share our imperfections, limitations, confusions, or hesitations. Subsequently, this place of respect, responsibility, and acceptance creates the safety zone for learning to happen: we would dare to review the consequences of our past actions (i.e., failures as well as successes) and experiment with new, unfamiliar ways to deal with similar situations. Creating that environment of trust and intimacy by building long-term relationships with work colleagues is important to support learning and performance.

For intimacy to survive, grow, and benefit the business, it is not enough for individuals to be willing to engage and manage intimacy in the work place. Leadership of these businesses needs to deploy strategies to foster integrity, respect, and caring for others as elements of their culture. In this way, intimacy can find a context and be cultivated to support business results. What often stands between high performance and poor performance is not the lack of technical capacity but, in the absence of trust and support, the pressure of surviving without failing or being ridiculed. Some may say that they are not interested in bearing their soul in the corporate context. I came to see that, as long as we are discriminating about when and with whom, we can afford to do so with benefits. Investing into knowing those with whom we work, and letting them know us, can be transformative in terms of our creativity and performance, that is, in connecting thoughts and power for focused delivery. For intimacy to survive, grow, and deliver its benefits to businesses, it is not enough for individuals to be willing to engage and manage intimacy in the workplace: leadership needs to deploy strategies to support integrity, respect, and caring as elements of their corporate culture.

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