

## **The Power of High-Quality Connections**

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Human connections in organizations are vital. Whether they form as part of long-term relationships or brief encounters, all connections leave indelible traces. Organizations depend on individuals to interact and form connections to accomplish the work of the organization. Connections formed in work contexts, therefore, have a significant effect on people just by virtue of the time spent there (Hochschild, 1997). The quality of the connections, in turn, impacts how organizations function. Theories of human behavior in organizations need to take seriously the quality of connections between people to understand why people flourish or flounder and to unpack how they affect organizational functioning. In this chapter we respond to positive organizational scholarship's call to better understand how to build contexts that enable human flourishing by understanding the power of high-quality connections.

We define the quality of the connection in terms of whether the connective tissue between individuals is life-giving or life-depleting. Like a healthy blood vessel that connects parts of our body, a high-quality connection between two people allows the transfer of vital nutrients; it is flexible, strong, and resilient. In a low-quality connection, a tie exists (people communicate, they interact, and they may even be involved in interdependent work), but the connective tissue is damaged. With a low-quality connection, there is a little death in every interaction (Dutton, 2003).

In this chapter, we develop this definition and unpack the theoretical bases for the power of high-quality connections (HQCs) in work organizations in three steps. In the first step, we define HQCs. In the second step, we describe four theoretical lenses for seeing how HQCs affect people at work. Finally, we develop a research agenda for organizational studies that puts understanding the power of HQCs as a keystone for positive organizational scholarship.

## HIGH-QUALITY CONNECTIONS

When people are at work, connections with others compose the fabric of daily life. A connection is the dynamic, living tissue (Berscheid & Lopes, 1997) that exists between two people when there is some contact between them involving mutual awareness and social interaction. The existence of some interaction means that individuals have affected one another in some way, giving connections a temporal as well as an emotional dimension. Connections can occur as a result of a momentary encounter, and can also develop and change over a longer time period (Gabarro, 1987). Other scholars have called this relationship feature the bond (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995) or “space between” (Josselson, 1996) two individuals. In our definition, connection does not imply an enduring (Reis, 2001) or recurring (Gutek, 1995) bond, nor does it assume intimacy or closeness.<sup>1</sup>

Understanding the quality of the connection is critical to understanding why and how people thrive at work. Hallowell (1999), for example, describes the power of a connection created in a matter of minutes:

A five-minute conversation can make all the difference in the world if the parties participate actively. To make it work, you have to set aside what you're doing, put down the memo you were reading, disengage from your laptop, abandon your daydream and bring your attention to bear upon the person you are with. Usually, when you do this, the other person (or people) will feel the energy and respond in kind, naturally. (p. 126)

Gersick, Bartunek, and Dutton (2000) describe one person's expression of the power of a more long-lasting work-based connection:

I haven't chosen this relationship to be important to me. It just—is. She is always there in the back (of my mind). . . . She has had such an impact on how I should run my life—how I should be a female faculty member. (p. 1025)

In both examples, the power of high-quality connections is felt and sensed, with lasting implications for the individual, and often for the organization.

In contrast, low-quality connections leave damage in their wake. As one manager explained, “Corrosive connections are like black holes: they absorb all of the light in the system and give back nothing in return” (Dutton, 2003: 15). Studies of work incivility (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000) and minority employees (Blake, 1999) document the long-lasting damage done by corrosive connections at work. A low-quality, toxic connection depletes and degrades (Frost, 2003). It imposes a damaging emotional and physiological toll on individuals in work organizations (Williams & Dutton, 1999). Incidents like the one below, in which an executive sales consultant explains why he left a high-status job after eighteen months, happen frequently in all kinds of work contexts.

The day he hired on, his assigned mentor showed him his new office and walked away without a word—no tour of the office, no introductions to co-workers, “in short, no information,” the consultant says. Later, in a meeting, a partner treated him like a piece of furniture. Pointing him out as a new hire, the partner said, “I don’t know if he’s any good. Somebody try him out and let me know,” he recalls. (Shellenbarger, 2000: B1)

Despite its importance organizational, researchers have not consistently defined connection quality. Some imply quality is relationship strength (Mills & Clark, 1982). Others define connection strength (and by implication, quality) in terms of the emotional weight of the attachment (Kahn, 1998) or by emotional weight coupled with reciprocity and frequency of communication (Granovetter, 1973). Researchers focusing on leader-member exchange relationships treat the quality of connection using a broad array of definitions (e.g., Schriesheim, Castro, & Cogliser, 1999). Mentoring researchers often gauge connection quality by relationship satisfaction (e.g., Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000). Other times, they use a broader definition, including emotional affect, reciprocity, mutuality, interdependence, and mutual motivation to be responsive (e.g., Higgins & Kram, 2001). Many imply connection quality is important, but leave the construct undefined (e.g., Uzzi, 1997). All in all, the concept of connection quality needs work (Berscheid & Lopes, 1997).

We define and gauge the quality of connection between people by three clusters of indicators. One cluster directly focuses on features of the actual connection between two people. Two clusters tap the experience of each individual in the connection. While we represent the quality of a connection using a static picture of the life-giving features of the tie, in reality

quality is dynamic and processual, and is affected by changes in the individual and the social context.

### Features of the Tie in a High-Quality Connection

To distill high-quality connections we focus on the features of the connection between two people, though connections occur in larger groups. We have identified three defining characteristics of the connection itself when it is defined as high quality.

First, HQCs have greater strength as indicated by *higher emotional carrying capacity*. Greater emotional carrying capacity of a connection is evidenced by both the expression of more emotion when in the connection and the expression of both positive and negative emotions. Connections with higher quality have capacity to withstand the expression of more absolute emotion and more emotion of varying kinds. We know we are in an HQC by the safety we feel in displaying different emotions:

I can say anything to Art and he will be understanding. I am able to get frustration and anger out in a more constructive fashion with him. We do that for each other. (Kram & Isabella, 1985: 121)

The *tensility* of the tie is related to the capacity of the connection to bend and withstand strain and to function in a variety of circumstances. It is the feature of the connection that indicates its resilience or the capacity to bounce back after setbacks. Work in psychology (Reis, 2001; Gottman, 2001) has shown that meaningful connections are indicated by how the connection responds to conflict. In a connection with greater tensility, the connection alters form (while maintaining strength) to accommodate changes in the conditions of either individual, or conflict and tensions in the joint circumstances of the dyad.

The third characteristic of the tie, the *degree of connectivity*, developed by team researchers working from complex adaptive systems theory (Losada, 1999), is a measure of a relationship's generativity and openness to new ideas and influences, and its ability to deflect behaviors that will shut down generative processes. These researchers found that teams with a high degree of connectivity display an atmosphere of buoyancy, creating expansive emotional spaces that open possibilities for action and creativity. Stated in terms of complex adaptive systems, an HQC has the ability to dissolve attractors that close possibilities and evolve attractors that open possibilities (Losada, 1999: 190).

## Subjective Experience of a High-Quality Connection

We propose that people in HQCs share three subjective experiences.<sup>2</sup> First, HQCs are sensed by *feelings of vitality and aliveness*. People in HQCs are more likely to feel positive arousal and a heightened sense of positive energy (Quinn & Dutton, 2002). The subjective experience of vitality is of interest to psychologists who study well-being and health (Nix, Ryan, Maly, & Deci, 1999; Ryan & Frederick, 1997). It has been documented by researchers who study networks and energy at work (Baker, Cross, & Wooten, 2003).

Second, being in an HQC is also felt through a heightened sense of *positive regard* (Rogers, 1951). People in HQCs experience a feeling of being known or being loved. This sense can be instantaneous. It does not imply romantic attachment, nor does it imply a relationship of long duration. Sandelands (2002: 250) calls this the first moment of social life and describes it as the feeling of “living presence, a state of pure being, in which isolating worries, vanities and desires vanish within a single vital organism.” Quinn calls the subjective experience of deep connection “profound contact” (Quinn & Quinn, 2002). Kahn (1998) uses emotional weight to indicate this kind of attachment. At the physiological level it is a form of unconscious resonance of neural engrams between two people (Lewis, Amini, & Lannan, 2000).

Finally, the subjective experience of being in an HQC is marked by felt *mutuality*. Mutuality captures the sense that both people in a connection are engaged and actively participating. Miller and Stiver describe mutuality as “a way of relating, a shared activity in which each (or all) of the people involved are participating as fully as possible” (1997: 43). While positive regard captures a “momentary feeling” of love at rest, mutuality captures the feeling of potential movement in the connection (Miller & Stiver, 1997) born from mutual vulnerability and mutual responsiveness. Miller and Stiver distinguish felt reciprocity from mutuality by the presence of mutual empathy. All three subjective experiences are important barometers of the quality of connection between people.

## Physiological Experience of a High-Quality Connection

Physiological indicators mark a high-quality connection and positive interactions (Reis & Gable, 2003). However, most studies connecting high-quality connections and physiology are not designed to capture instantaneous correlates of the quality of connections. Instead, research has been

focused on longer-term effects. There is diverse evidence that having high-quality relationships with others is central to optimal living (Ryff & Singer, 1998) and associated with well-being in higher social animals (Mendoza, 1991) and humans (Uvnäs-Moberg, 1997).

First, people with more positive connections in their life have a lower allostatic load (Seeman et al., 1997) or a lower physiologic to responses to environmental stressors (Adler, 2002). Allostatic load refers to the cumulative effects of activation of physical systems in responding to environmental demands (McEwen, 1998). Second, HQCs are associated with a longer life-span (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988) and lower risk of death (Seeman, 1996). Third, HQCs are associated with a stronger immune system (Cohen, 2001; Ornish, 1998) and lower blood pressure (Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996), helping people cope more effectively with stress. Thus the cumulative effects of being in HQCs are clearly positive and life-enhancing.

Going beyond these longer-term effects, research suggests that people are instantaneously more alive and healthy in HQCs and that this state is indicated by three sets of physiological changes. First, in HQCs there is a *release of oxytocin*, which reduces anxiety and increases activity of the sympathetic nervous system (Altemus et al., 1997), at the same time that it fuels further affiliative behavior (Taylor, Dickerson, & Klein, 2002: 561). Second, HQCs are associated with a *release of endogenous opiate peptides*, which down-regulate the sympathetic and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical (HPA) response to stress. Previous studies have shown that their release is associated with positive social contact (Taylor, Dickerson, & Klein, 2002). Third, an instantaneous effect of being in a high-quality connection is *reduced systolic blood pressure*. In one experimental study that demonstrated this effect, people's cardiovascular reaction was assessed under three conditions that varied in terms of the strength of social support present when participants had to give a six-minute speech. When HQCs were present, there was an attenuated blood pressure and heart response, suggesting immediate cardiovascular effects of being in an HQC (Lepore, Mata-Allen, & Evans, 1993).

## FOUR THEORETICAL LENSES ON THE POWER OF HIGH-QUALITY CONNECTIONS

Four rich veins of theory inform how HQCs leave their imprint on people at work. The theories are interrelated and the boundaries blurred, but for now we will present them as four separate lenses: exchange, identity, growth, and knowledge. The exchange lens argues that HQCs matter by endowing individuals with resources that are useful and valuable. The

identity perspective highlights the role that HQCs play in co-creating the meaning that employees can and do make of themselves and of the organization. A growth perspective showcases how relationships with others literally develop employees in the direction of their potentiality and health as human beings. Finally, a learning perspective focuses on relationships as micro-contexts for knowing. By putting these theoretical explanations and research communities side by side, we can better see the generative capacity of HQCs at work.

### **An Exchange Lens**

An important way that organizational scholars explain the effects of HQCs is through a social exchange lens. In this perspective, work connections are vehicles for resource and reward exchanges. Rooted in sociology (e.g., Blau, 1964; Homans, 1974) and social psychology (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), social exchange theory suggests that social relations involve the exchange of valued commodities between people. These commodities include money, advice, political opportunities, trust, social support, and even positive feelings (e.g., Lawler & Yoon, 1998). If people in a social relation acquire valuable resources, then that relationship is likely to endure and be strengthened (Emerson, 1976).

There are numerous examples within this paradigm for how HQCs enliven. We sample two. First, network theory asserts that relationships exist, survive, and thrive when ties in the network gain utility from their connection (Baker, 2000). For example, studies of power in organizations typically use an exchange logic to explain what gives and what sustains power. For example, Brass (1984) found that employees acquired influence in the eyes of supervisors and nonsupervisors through their relative position in a social network. Different positions gave people access to resources that other people value, increasing interdependence and influence. These studies emphasize that organizational structures shape the connecting potential between people at work, and if people are in HQCs they may benefit from access and flows of valued resources, which in turn create and strengthen power.

Leader-member exchange theory illustrates how HQCs between leaders and their subordinates create value through how they deliver valued goods to both parties. The theory assumes that the dyadic linkage between leaders and subordinates is negotiated through a series of interactions over time in which both people exchange resources (Graen & Scandura, 1987). In a high-quality connection, a member may receive discretion and development from a leader, and in return, a leader may receive strong commitment and high effort from the subordinate. The leader-member exchange

paradigm uses the exchange of valued resources and the building of trust to show how these relationships develop over time (Bauer & Green, 1996). The building of HQCs improves the flow and rate of valued resource exchange, which further cements and deepens the dyadic connection.

Through an exchange lens, we see how HQCs enliven through the mutual passing of valued resources. We see how repeated interactions create new and valued resources (such as trust and power or influence), which shape patterns of future exchange. This perspective stands in stark contrast to an identity lens on HQCs.

### **An Identity Lens**

Other people are active players in the co-creation of who we are at work. Our work identities, and selves more generally, are created, deployed, and altered in social interactions with others (Potter & Wetherell, 1998; Prus, 1996; Reicher, 1995; Sampson, 1993; Schlenker, 1985; Swann, 1987). Cooley's idea of the looking-glass self (1902) and symbolic interactionists' claims that self-reflections from others compose the self (Blumer, 1966; Mead, 1934) undergird the idea that the quality of connections matters to the content and evaluation of the identity that employees form, claim, and express at work.

High-quality connections with others allow for the co-constructions of identities that are valued by organizational members themselves. High-quality connections afford the opportunity and the psychological safety (Kahn, 1990) to explore alternative identities, to make claims, and to craft an identity that a person feels is worthwhile and that fits who employees are or who they wish to become. In addition, HQCs help to make employees intelligible to themselves and to others through talk and through storytelling (Gergen, 1994).

Ibarra (1999, 2003) has written about the process that individuals deploy to reinvent their career and to craft a viable and desired work identity. Her stories of how individuals invent themselves as a work in progress highlight the role that HQCs play. Other people encourage actions that are the seed corn for revising one's identity in the direction of a desired and valued possible self. Thus June, the literature professor who becomes a broker in Ibarra's book, relies on HQCs to give her feedback, to help her experiment and transition, and to affirm her new work identity (Ibarra, 2003). Through relationships with others she enters a type of holding environment for playing with elements of the new identity, and she acquires real information that helps her to understand and legitimately claim this new self. She imagines new possibilities for herself, which then motivates action consistent with this new self (Markus, 1977).

HQCs help employees create valued identities by helping people derive positive meaning about what they are doing. For example, we found that coworkers and supervisors play pivotal roles in helping temporary workers see their value:

The boss I had was extraordinary at taking me under his wing. He did things for me as a temp that I wasn't used to. It was as if the minute I walked through the door I was you know, I . . . was a permanent employee, even if I really wasn't. He took me to lunch the first day. I mean he went over everything [the company] did in detail, he brought out all the materials, and he even talked about the political relationships of everyone in the department—his allies, management, this person and that person. This was the most delightful experience I've ever had. (Bartel & Dutton, 2001: 126)

Thus, HQCs with others can make positive aspects of one's current identity salient (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001). They can play a significant role in converting ambivalence into positive meaning that helps people make positive sense of who they are and what they are doing at work (Pratt, 2000).

In certain cases, HQCs facilitate the expression of identities that are more authentic and genuine, at the same time that identity expression mobilizes change. Creed and Scully (2000) describe how gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) employees deploy their identities in ways that allow them to contribute more fully to their work organization. At the same time, this form of identity claiming facilitates a self-narration that is in greater alignment with how someone sees themselves. High-quality connections enable this process by providing subtle and not so subtle support for marginal identity displays. One lesbian speaker talked about the effect this way:

That right there is your validation. Among these friends are people that make the workplace a safe environment. They've been the driving force behind this network. I think a lot of it is [that for] a lot of gay and lesbian employees, there is still some fear to be out there in the front and to be a friend and supporter, though that takes a lot of risk too. So many of them have just been right out there. (Creed & Scully, 2000: 403)

Through an identity lens, we see that HQCs enliven people at work by facilitating employees' experimentation with new possible selves, by helping employees construct positive meaning about the current work that they do, and by creating support and possibility for identity displays at work.

## A Growth and Development Lens

Scholars in this perspective view connections with others as fundamental to human development and growth. In contrast to theories that view separation and the drawing of boundaries around the self as humans' primary developmental task, in this perspective humans' growth is enabled or stunted by the quality of connections with others. Through HQCs, people at work can realize and activate new developmental trajectories.

Three veins of theory contribute to this perspective. First, scholars at the Stone Center argue that human growth occurs and action is enabled through mutually empathic and mutually empowering connections (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Second, building on attachment theory (e.g., Bowlby, 1969) and Winnicott's work on holding (1960, 1965), researchers show relationship systems are central to individuals' physical health, growth and development, and meaningfulness in life (Josselson, 1996; Kahn, 1998). The third stream views humans as driven toward satisfying the need to belong through connections characterized by frequent interaction and persistent caring (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Miller and Stiver (1997) illustrate how this theory of high-quality connection works. Psychological growth occurs in mutually empathic interactions, where both people engage with authentic thoughts, feelings, and responses. Through this process they experience mutual empowerment, which is characterized as a feeling of zest, effectiveness of the other person, greater knowledge, sense of worth, and a desire for more connection. The connection becomes a micro-context that fosters growth and development. For example, Phyllis was able to engage in a growth-fostering connection with her boss during a time of tough layoffs:

She was able to let her boss know how hard it must be for him to have everyone angry at him but she told him that she thought he could make a difference if he more actively engaged with his employees and listened to their concerns. Phyllis created a forum for meeting with all the people involved and facilitated an energetic exchange among them. In the process, she encouraged her boss to be responsive to his staff through "not being defensive" and letting them know he did not have all the answers but truly wanted them to participate in the company's problem-solving endeavors. . . . People responded with energy and high motivation, and morale was greatly improved. (Miller & Stiver, 1997: 192)

HQCs become contexts for growth and development through organizational caregiving. Building on the work of Bowlby (1973), Kahn (1993)

uses caregiving to understand how role-related interactions produce a sense of security for employees. When one or more caregiving behaviors are part of a connection, they can become the basis for personal growth and development.

Finally, the quality of connection is a cornerstone of the literature on developmental relationships. We see this in an early mentoring definition: “Mentoring is defined not in terms of formal roles but in terms of the *character of the relationship* and the functions it serves” (Levinson et al., 1978: 98, italics added). Mentoring relationships foster growth by helping protégés gain promotions, demonstrate competence, and decipher organizational norms. A mentor can help protégés with integrating their professional and personal identities through role modeling, counseling, acceptance, confirmation, and friendship (Kram, 1985).

In sum, with a growth lens we see that HQCs enliven by providing growth-fostering connections, secure bases of attachment for organizational caregiving, and developmental relationships. In the next section, we look at how HQCs enable learning.

## A Learning Lens

There are two theoretical explanations for how HQCs affect learning. First, connections can function as vessels in which knowledge is passed from one person to another; in an HQC, knowledge is absorbed faster, more completely, and with the quality of the connection intact or enhanced (Wenger, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lampert, 2001). Second, knowledge is constituted in interaction between people, with HQCs being more generative, heedful, and flexible (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Losada, 1999; Weick & Roberts, 1993).

Studies of communities of practice demonstrate how HQCs enable employees to join, participate in, and learn from groups of people organized around a socially defined competence. Learning occurs as individuals engage with a novel experience and alter or elaborate social practices (e.g., Brown & Duguid, 1991). We see this form of relational learning in Orr’s study of Xerox technical representatives (1996), which showed how HQCs facilitated developing tacit knowledge for fixing copiers. The vitality of the connective tissue facilitated storytelling, made question-asking safe, and created a context in which practitioners could elaborate and develop their practice.

HQCs also enable people to expand their knowledge about the self, the relationship, and the world. When mutual empathy and mutual empowerment characterize relationships, both people elaborate their own thoughts and feelings, and build a new shared understanding (Miller & Stiver,

1997). When people demonstrate care in HQCs, they create an enabling context, which facilitates the creation of new knowledge (von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000).

People who study relational practice in organizations also provide a learning lens for HQCs (Fletcher, 1997; Jacques, 1993). These studies uncover the micromoves in interactions that simultaneously increase the quality of connection and enable learning. For example, Fletcher (1999) describes a set of practices she calls empathic teaching in which the “teacher” takes the emotional context, intellectual context, or both, into account when interrelating. This practice increases learning by preserving the dignity and respect for the other while communicating information about needed changes in behavior. For example, one female engineer who was teaching a young male technician, who was a junior to the engineer by several job grades, said:

Statistics is an expertise that people are interested in and they want to know it, but they are getting negative feedback from their managers when it takes them a long time to do an analysis or to design an experiment. So they have a lot of discouragement to learning. So if you turn them off at all, you’ve lost them. So in that case I always teach things so I try not to bruise an ego. (Fletcher, 1999: 56)

In this instance, the engineer teaches in a way that preserves and possibly improves the quality of the connection, while presenting the statistical information in a way that enables the technician to act, enhancing her teaching competence.

A learning lens on the power of HQCs reminds us that these forms of ties are micro-contexts in which people acquire, develop, and experiment with new knowledge or ways of being. HQCs enable people to learn how to be practitioners and enable competence. Mutual empathy and mutual empowerment provide a relational context to safely navigate and learn about unfamiliar thoughts and feelings. Finally, relationally competent people can use HQCs to design effective learning situations for others.

## **HQCS AND POSITIVE ORGANIZATIONAL SCHOLARSHIP**

Focusing on the quality of connection between people at work is pivotal to understanding individual and organizational behavior. It weaves to-

gether theories of growth, identity, learning, and exchange to improve our understanding of how and why connections at work matter. Focusing on connection quality adds a critical new dimension to our understanding of people's behavior at work: it puts individuals in context, but in a context that is alive, dynamic, and embodied, making it a rich reservoir of possibilities for human behavior and accomplishment. The focus on HQCs invites us to engage three important venues for positive organizational scholarship.

### **HQCs and Positive Individual Outcomes**

High-quality connections literally and figuratively enliven people. We think this claim is critical for expanding the set of outcomes to which organizational scholars attend. A focus on HQCs reopens very important and basic questions about how work affects human health and well-being. While there have been noteworthy and critical developments in understanding how social relationships affect basic human health in psychology (Ryff & Singer, 1998) and behavioral medicine (e.g., Ornish, 1998), organizational scholars barely touch the subject. When they do, the typical focus is on stress and physiological damage done by the conditions of work. We have given far less attention to how work contexts affect human flourishing, from a psychological or a physiological perspective.

Our brief review of how HQCs at work affect people unlocks all kinds of new research possibilities.<sup>3</sup> For example, do employees with HQCs at work have more energy, zest, and vitality as measured by actual physiological indicators, in addition to subjective perceptions? Do they demonstrate more resilience (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003; Worline et al., 2002)? Do they learn more and at a faster rate? Do they experience more authenticity and craft identities that better fit who they are? Do they find better, more workable paths for their own development through organizations? Are they more effective change agents? There is evidence from our brief review that the answer to each of these questions is a resounding *yes!* Posing these questions opens up exploration of how work organizations enable the development of human strengths and virtues, which is at the heart of positive organizational scholarship. Research awaits, however.

### **HQCs and Positive Dynamics**

If we back up from outcomes and focus on process, we see that a focus on HQCs reveals productive paths for developing scholarship about positive

dynamics. Understanding how HQCs unleash human resourcefulness (e.g., energy, Baker et al., 2003; Quinn & Dutton, 2002) uncovers the human potentiality in organizational systems. By identifying the quality of connections as a pivotal construct, we begin to explore basic questions about how HQCs enable employees to create positive spirals of meaning about projects and the organization. For example, if organizations create fertile ground for building HQCs, employees may be able to display authentic identities more often, engage each other more fully, be more vulnerable in the process of learning, and experience more interpersonal valuing through positive regard, all of which cultivate positive meaning about being an organizational member. These positive meanings and constructive interactions in turn may create positive emotions and cultivate trust, which contribute to higher coping, greater resilience in the face of setbacks, more creativity, greater attention and a broadening of the thought-action repertoire (Fredrickson, 1998), and a greater probability of the experience of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

These are just some of the imagined effects that are part of the nonlinear dynamics that compose what Fredrickson (2002) calls the upward spirals of human functioning. Our hope is that by understanding better how these dynamics and spirals work, and how they are stimulated, sustained, and nourished through HQCs, we can unlock new forms of theory and intervention that help people thrive at work.

### **HQCs and Positive Organizational Outcomes**

A focus on HQCs affords new insights for understanding positive organizational-level behavior and actions. On the one hand, a focus on HQCs sheds new light on “old” mechanisms that undergird processes of heedful interrelating (Weick & Roberts, 1993), absorptive capacity (Zahra & George, 2002), relational coordination (Gittell, 2001), intra- and interorganizational collaboration (Uzzi, 1997; Powell, Koput, & Smith-Doerr, 1996), and organizational learning and resilience (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 1999). A focus on HQCs as a mechanism helps us to see the synergies possible from linking studies of these critical organizational-level processes. At the same time, using HQCs to understand these processes provides a window into understanding organizations’ dynamic capabilities (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). We see real yield from linking HQCs to strategic processes and outcomes for the firm.

A focus on HQCs also invites consideration of collective-level outcomes that focus on organizational-level strengths and virtues. For example, orga-

nizational intelligence or wisdom (Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1998), organizational compassion (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2002), organizational integrity, and forgiveness as ongoing collective accomplishments and competencies are just some of the possible outcomes that can draw on HQCs as a foundation. Cameron, Caza, and Bright (2002) call these collective behaviors “virtuousness” and show their positive effects on performance in the wake of organizational downsizing. These topics are fertile territory for future organizational scholarship. If explored, they will surely reveal how and why organizations create value at a much more profound and sustainable level, over and above the production of financial returns.

## **LOOKING FORWARD TO COMING ALIVE!**

In this chapter we hope to have equipped you to embark with us on mapping a new direction in organizational studies. There are calls in a number of fields to develop a greater understanding of relationships (e.g., Baron & Pfeffer, 1994; Berscheid, 1999; Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000; Emirbayer, 1997; Duck, 1990). We join them and add three important elements. First, we provide a definition and operationalization of connection and connection quality. Second, we provide researchers with four rich theoretical approaches to begin to map the territory. Third, our focus on positive potentialities of HQCs challenges us to deepen our knowledge about building human and organizational strength, health, and flourishing in work organizations. Currently, we simply don’t know very much about these processes. We hope that this chapter enables many of us to begin the process of accumulating knowledge about this vital construct.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

Thanks to Rob Cross, Joyce Fletcher, Rachel Hsuing, Jason Kanov, Lou Lukas, Sally Maitlis, Giovanna Marchio, Jean Baker Miller, Leslie Perlow, Ryan Quinn, Cara Sandelands, and Leslie Sekerka for comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

## **NOTES**

1. We also use the word “connection” differently than Jean Baker Miller and colleagues, who define connections as positive and growth-fostering (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Kaplan et al., 1991; Miller, 1988). We wish to allow for the possibility that connections can be growth-fostering (life-giving) or growth-depleting (life-depleting).

2. We define subjective experience as “thoughts together with their accompanying emotions” (Miller & Stiver, 1997: 27).

3. This section only addresses positive effects of HQCs, but there may be negative direct and indirect effects as well that also deserve consideration. We also wonder if what limits, if any, might apply to people’s capacity to handle HQCs. Thanks to Rob Cross for these suggestions.