

# RELATIONSHIP ACUITY®

LEADERSHIP THROUGH  
*A DIFFERENT LENS*

JUDY HEMMINGSEN

# **RELATIONSHIP ACUITY®**

**Leadership Through a *Different* Lens**

**Judy Hemmingsen**

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Relationship Acuity® / Judy Hemmingsen – 1st ed.

ISBN: 978-1-7776801-0-7



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*“Each of us has our own perspective and uniqueness. We create our own boxes, and expectations of ourselves. What is important for us to realize is that within each of us is a unique individual with our own special combination of talents, abilities and perspectives that do not fit neatly into boxes. We are all capable of making special and unique contributions to any given situation by leveraging our strengths, building on our past success, and putting our mind and soul into it.”*

**Robert J. Kriegel**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Many people contributed to the completion of this book. Without their support and belief in me, this book would not have been possible.

A special debt of gratitude goes to my husband and business partner Matt, whose invaluable support and counsel contributed significantly to my finished manuscript. I also owe a great deal of thanks to my associate and good friend Madalena Coutinho, for imparting her illuminating thoughts and perspectives throughout my creative process. Thank you Matt and Maddie!

Many thanks also to my editor, Jess Shulman, who provided her much needed wisdom and professional advice. Jess, you very skillfully took my initial writing to the next level. I couldn't have done it without you.

The vision of my book came to life thanks to the creative team at Prominence Publishing. Thank you Suzanne Doyle-Ingram and Beth Nightingale, for your contributions to the final book design, the cover image, and the publishing process. Your advice has been essential for transforming my manuscript into a polished book.

On a personal level, I would like to acknowledge those who read my manuscript prior to its publication. To Jill Ash, Ron Jockheck and Sarah Matheson – thank you for giving me your valuable time and much appreciated feedback.

Finally, many clients over the course of my career provided me with endless insights and continuous learning that formed the basis of this book. A big thank you to Dr. AB Warriner and the many others who convinced me that I had something worthwhile to say.

*“The more aware we are of what makes us tick, the more aware we are of what makes others tick, the more aware we are of the impact we have on each other, the more empowered we become to control the outcomes of our relationships with others.”*

**Elias Porter**

## PREFACE

After many years consulting with diverse organizations and leaders, I have come to realize that much of my work, initially focused on fixing “people problems,” was actually related to the same root cause – people seeing things differently. And seeing is a form of believing. I have coached derailed executives, worked with troubled teams, provided career counselling to disengaged employees, and mediated conflicts. All these interrelated consulting and coaching activities link to differing perceptions, faulty assumptions, and unproductive work relationships.

I clearly remember my very first professional job. I was asked to produce a position paper on the “assessment of management potential.” After completing my research and writing, I waited patiently for feedback. Weeks passed, and I heard nothing about it, so I was curious to find out why. I asked my manager, “Who read it? What are the next steps? How will it be applied?” He said something like, “Don’t worry, your report is with the powers that be.” That was the end of it.

That response took the wind right out of my sails. It seemed to me that my work had had no meaningful outcome. In my view, the task had been purposeless.

But I now realize that other people in my position might not have perceived that situation in the same way. They might have been satisfied just knowing that they had done excellent work that met their own standard. How the work was to be applied might not have mattered so much to them. Someone else might have been frustrated rather than disheartened. They might have expected to see a tangible outcome and, when that was missing, viewed the whole exercise as a waste of their time and effort. Different people can have the same experience and see it from totally different perspectives. On reflection, that experience was a notable leadership lesson for me. The lesson, simply put, is that people differ. They differ in the value they place on the work they do. They also differ in their perception of each situation they encounter.

These differences also include expectations. We differ in the expectations we have of our colleagues and our leaders, and they differ in the expectations they have of us. These differences are rarely expressed or discussed. I expected to be told how my work made a difference, how it met a higher purpose. Why did I assume that my boss knew what I expected? How would anyone know my needs, my expectations, and my



## Relationship Acuity: Leadership Through a *Different* Lens

perceptions, particularly since I'd never expressed them? Should the people I worked with intuitively have known how to keep me engaged and committed? Why didn't I speak up? Why wasn't I asked?

Since that time, I have encountered numerous situations that drew attention to differences in perceptions and expectations. On one occasion, I was asked to help a medical research organization transform its managers into, in their words, "nicer people." This organization had a history of promoting its best scientists into people leadership positions. Part of the leadership role was to coach employees, and employees expected coaching support. Unfortunately, the scientists had no desire to coach their employees. What they valued was their research work, and they were rewarded for it. They were not rewarded for the number of hours they spent coaching. So, it was not surprising that they saw no benefit in doing it. While their employees expected guidance and mentoring, the managers expected their employees to leave them alone.

These experiences inspired me to write this book.

Think how often you see people doing things that they see as right, and you see as wrong. You probably react by judging them. You might call them insensitive, unprincipled, careless – just insert any negative trait that you believe applies. What you aren't doing in these cases is stepping back to look for their *why*. Why do people choose to do things you see as wrong or not do things you see as right? Getting to the *why* changes the perceptions you have of them. When you uncover the positive intent behind the behaviour you see, even if you still don't agree with it, you'll understand it. You'll get where people are coming from – you'll see their perspective.

Like most of us, I have difficulty working with people who don't seem to see the world the way I do. It requires hard work to be constantly mindful – to remind myself to seek the reasons people do what they do and try to understand their perspective. That understanding is a gift. With understanding comes respect. And, in today's world, what seems to be missing at all levels of leadership, across government and business and politics, around the globe, is the ability to value different perspectives and to create environments that inspire mutual respect.

I hope this book opens your eyes to new ways of looking at the people and situations you encounter every day. Get to the *why*. Sharpen your perception. Keep your work relationships productive. And see the difference it makes!

## INTRODUCTION: LOOKING AT LEADERSHIP THROUGH A DIFFERENT LENS

*“The more we lack leadership, the more we hunger for it.”*  
—Warren Bennis

Leadership is as much a pressing challenge today as it was thirty years ago when noted leadership expert Warren Bennis wrote the book *Why Leaders Can't Lead*. Widely regarded as the pioneer of leadership studies, Bennis authored over twenty-five books, and his insights into leadership are still relevant today.

Over the past several decades, leadership has been the subject of much discussion, writing, teaching, and learning. Every organization remains focused on the hiring and development of effective leaders. The challenges Bennis wrote about related to a world that was becoming increasingly complex and diverse. These same challenges exist today, to an even greater extent. Leaders must ride these waves of change while inspiring people, remaining open to new insights and perspectives, and earning trust through influence, not power.

There are as many books on leadership as there are definitions of effective leadership. It's one thing to write about what makes theoretical sense, but quite another to get people to change. Leaders still need coaches. Teams still struggle to operate at peak performance. Organizations still have issues of employee engagement and retention of their best people. Conflict is still present and concealed under boardroom tables. And career-transition coaches continue to guide derailed leaders toward new jobs where they continue to do the same things.

### **What Is Relationship Acuity® and Why Is It Important?**

The guidance and wisdom in this book are inspired by many authors and psychologists. Relationship Acuity is rooted in the psychological theories of relationship management, motivation, perception, and the research of numerous leadership authors that focus on the importance of social and emotional intelligence at work.

Relationship Acuity is best defined as the clarity of perception in one's work relationships. We all know the word *relationship*. It refers to

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an association between individuals where each person has the potential to influence the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the other. *Acuity*, on the other hand, is not a word we often see in leadership writings. Yet, acuity is particularly important in the field of leadership development. In the context of this book, it refers to the sharpness in one's perception of the situations and people around them. Together, the words relationship and acuity form a critical leadership skill. You can regard it as the lens of leadership in work relationships.

### *Relationship Acuity and the Three Levels of Leadership*

You might equate leadership with management. But leadership is more than that. It has nothing to do with a job title or a position of power. I define a leader as someone who inspires others to follow – someone able to “spark what's inside”. To get people to follow you, you need to build healthy relationships and mutual understanding. When you understand the people you work with, and they understand you, you build trust and mutual respect. In this leadership context, having Relationship Acuity means that you have honed the personal and interpersonal competencies you need in order to work productively with others.

The Relationship Acuity model is illustrated on the following page. There are three levels of leadership, each requiring a specific set of personal and interpersonal competencies. These competencies build on each other and also complement one another, working together to form the broad spectrum of leadership capabilities that exemplify Relationship Acuity.

## Introduction: Looking at Leadership Through a *Different Lens*

### THE RELATIONSHIP ACUITY LEADERSHIP MODEL



Leadership begins at the personal level, right at the start of your career. It starts with your ability to build productive relationships with the people you rely on to get your work done. You have to lead yourself before you can lead others. Personal leadership means entering every interaction with mindfulness of the situation and the people involved. You will often be challenged to work with many people with different and distinct ways of looking at things. Every day, your colleagues are watching your behaviour, listening to the words you choose, and judging you based on their personal perceptions. In this regard, you must constantly think about how you act and interact with others. Although it's easy to ignore the importance of your work relationships when you're focused on results, ironically, the more productive your relationships, the stronger your results will be.

Once you start leading teams, your role requires additional competencies that enable you to engage your employees to do their best and achieve their potential. As a team leader, you can help your team members build Relationship Acuity by sharing your insights from this book.

If and when you reach the executive level of an organization, your role then is to create an enterprise-wide culture that inspires people to follow your vision and purpose, and live the values of your organization.

## Relationship Acuity: Leadership Through a *Different* Lens

### About This Book

This book is the result of many years of leadership consulting, coaching, and facilitation. Over the years, I have been lucky to gather many fascinating insights about the working world. Here are my top ten:

1. No one works in isolation. Whether you're an individual contributor, a team leader, or an executive, the only way to get your job done is to work productively with others.
2. Most people don't realize the critical role that perception plays in attempting to influence others.
3. Many organizations talk about leadership development before they even begin to define what being a leader means.
4. Employee engagement and discretionary effort are driven by each person's intrinsic motivation, not by company bonuses and salary increases.
5. Leaders need to follow the Platinum Rule, not the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule says that people should treat others as they, themselves, want to be treated. The Platinum Rule understands that people differ in what they value and expect from others, and that one size doesn't fit all.
6. A person's job performance is most often assessed on the achievement of set goals and objectives – *what* they are required to do. Rarely does it focus on their behaviours – *how* they're expected to do it.
7. When people lose jobs, it's sometimes because of a lack of competence or ability. Very often it's because they have failed to work well with others.
8. The widely accepted Peter Principle, put forward by educator Lawrence J. Peter in the 1970s, states that each person tends to rise to their level of incompetence. In reality, this principle has more to do with passion than capability: People don't become incompetent; they just become indifferent.

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9. During change, leaders struggle with finding ways to inspire commitment and engagement, so they rarely do so.
10. Executives usually agree on mutually defined organizational values yet differ in how they demonstrate those values each day.

These insights inspired this book. Each one points to the important role that relationships, motivation, and perception play in today's complex, ever-changing work environments. We've all learned valuable concepts from a myriad of wise leadership authors. Yet nothing has really changed.

Despite this, I remain hopeful that positive change starts with inspiring just one person. It's like the old saying about how to eat an elephant... one bite at a time. Each person who is inspired becomes an agent of change. That's the purpose of this book. Perhaps after reading this book, you will, in turn, influence those who work with you. The change agent could be you.

### **Will You Benefit from Reading This Book?**

If you agree that leadership is about working with people, not just about accomplishing goals and getting things done, then this book is for you. You will learn how to influence and inspire the people you need to help you achieve your success.

This book addresses many leadership challenges, and it's intended to change your perspective about them. It will take you from insight through to actionable ideas. Whether you need to influence or engage others, gain their commitment, or communicate in more impactful ways, this book will help.

You will be introduced to twelve leadership competencies. These competencies represent the personal and interpersonal skills embedded in the three levels of leadership. Great leaders demonstrate these competencies that enable them to lead self, lead others, and lead the organization. These skills can be learned, practiced, and honed. It doesn't matter whether you're a member of a team, the leader of a team, or the leader of an organization – think of these competencies as your building blocks for success.

## Relationship Acuity: Leadership Through a *Different* Lens

### The Relationship Acuity Leadership Guidebook – From Reflection to Practice

This book is chock full of valuable insights, new perspectives, and actionable ideas. However, insight alone doesn't lead to new practices. You may remember those times when things didn't turn out as expected – maybe you couldn't get others to agree with you, or you lost a sale to a critical customer; maybe someone just didn't get your point of view, or you just couldn't get someone to do what you needed them to do, no matter how hard you tried. Each of these situations could have ended differently with a different approach. Change your approach and you're bound to get better results the next time around. The *Relationship Acuity Leadership Guidebook* was developed for this purpose. It takes the insights from this book to the next level by providing specific, practical applications and follow-up activities for each of the twelve Relationship Acuity competencies. So, think of *this* book as your introductory training program – Relationship Acuity 101. Then, the follow-up *Guidebook* is your how-to guide for specific on-the-job applications.

#### How to Read This Book

To learn **WHY** the concepts of Relationship Acuity are important to leadership development, read Part One.

To learn **WHAT** leadership competencies are required at each of the Personal, Team, and Organizational levels of leadership, read Part Two.

To learn **HOW** to apply the concepts in this book, work through the competency practices in the *Relationship Acuity Leadership Guidebook*.

**PART ONE:  
RELATIONSHIP  
ACUITY INSIGHTS**



*“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands but seeing with new eyes”.*

**Marcel Proust**

## The Foundation: Motivation, Perception, And Behaviour

Relationship Acuity focuses on the important role that motivation, perception, and behaviour each play in our work relationships.

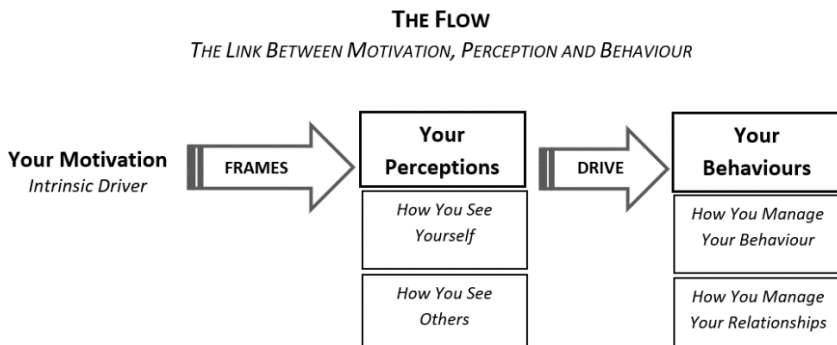
The figure below shows how these flow together, starting on the left with your motivation. I call this motivation your *Intrinsic Driver*. *Intrinsic* means innate and essential to each of us, not something that we can change or learn. Your intrinsic driver is your motivation to achieve a sense of self-worth and purpose in your life.

Your intrinsic driver frames the perceptions you have of yourself and others. This is what makes you see something one way, while others might see it differently.

Your perceptions, in turn, drive your behaviour.

The behaviours that align with our intrinsic driver are called our *intrinsic strengths*. We know we're using these strengths when we feel good about what we're doing or saying – it feels right to us. That's why people differ in the ways they behave, because their behaviour is driven by their personal intrinsic driver and perceptions.

Here's the premise of Relationship Acuity: While we can't change our motivation, we do have the ability to change our perceptions and, ultimately, how we act and interact with others. That's the secret sauce of great leadership!



Perceptions play a powerful role in leadership, influencing every work relationship we have. Differences between how two people view the world are not always visible. That's why people very often misinterpret other people's intentions. You can probably think of many times

## **Part One: Relationship Acuity Insights**

you have made an assumption about someone, only to find out later that you'd misread their intent. Many conflicts are rooted in these misperceptions. When you see the behaviour, you assume the intent.

Many theories of motivation focus solely on universal human motives, but I believe we need to go deeper – to the reason people behave as they do. Relationship Acuity is founded on the belief that every interaction you have is influenced by your intrinsic driver and how it frames your perception at that time. Like most people, you're probably not even aware that this driver exists, let alone the role it plays in determining how you look at situations. But it's there, influencing how you see things and guiding how you interact with others. And it's the quality of those interactions that ultimately determine your success. Developing acuity means learning to shift your perceptions – in other words, to change your perspective and your behaviour. We'll delve further into these concepts in the chapters ahead.

## RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

*“Nothing lives alone... reality is created through our participation in relationships. We choose what to notice; we relate to certain things and ignore others. Through these chosen relationships, we create our world.”*

*—Margaret Wheatley*

I think it's safe to say that, when it comes to leadership, relationships matter. Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, authors of the best-selling book *The Leadership Challenge*, stress that success in leadership is a function of human relationships – how well people work together. Every day, you interact with co-workers, colleagues, customers, clients, and bosses. Each relationship is important when it comes to getting your work done. You can't just walk away from a person that irritates you. You can't say, "it doesn't matter that I don't have a good relationship with them," because it matters a lot!

Like most of us, you are probably in work relationships with a few people who you'd rather not work with at all, given the choice. You probably see these relationships as, at the very least, challenging. What if you were to look at those relationships in a different way? What if you could see them as opportunities for new insights? You might learn something that could make a difference when it comes to your work performance. One of my executive clients, Ken, found himself in a career crisis when he failed to pay attention to his important work relationships. Throughout his career, Ken focused on the goals and objectives he needed to achieve. His technical skills got him up the ladder. He was even tagged to be the next CEO of his company. Then, his career derailed. He hadn't paid much attention to the people he needed support from on the way up. As a result, his colleagues didn't respect him. They didn't see him as a team player. He was too competitive. He didn't listen to other perspectives. They hadn't forgotten the times he'd "lost his cool" in management meetings. When it came time for his peer performance ratings, Ken's results were dismal. Getting this feedback from his colleagues was a life-changing event. He had put everything he'd

## Part One: Relationship Acuity Insights

worked for at risk. In his own words, he was “humbled.” Managing his relationships became his most important leadership challenge.

We know that leadership is as much based on the people as on the work that needs to get done. That’s because no one works by themselves or achieves results without the help or input of others. So, to be an effective leader, you need to own your relationships. That means looking at leadership through a different lens. When you do that, you begin to gain some insight into the people you work with and for. How often do you reflect on the quality of your work relationships? Are they healthy and productive? Do you value the people you work with? Do they value you? Do you have any insights regarding their strengths, their ways of working, and what they care about? It seems logical to pay attention to these insights, but most of us are too busy to take the time to do so.

The people you work with are both like you and different from you. Just like you, each has their own internal motivation. Each person may want to do things differently and for different reasons. And each has a preferred way of getting things done that is not necessarily your way. Each person’s behaviour is linked to what *they* value most. You may tend to look at these different behaviours and judge people according to what you see. That’s focusing on *what* they do. First, you need to learn *why* they do it. That’s an important insight.

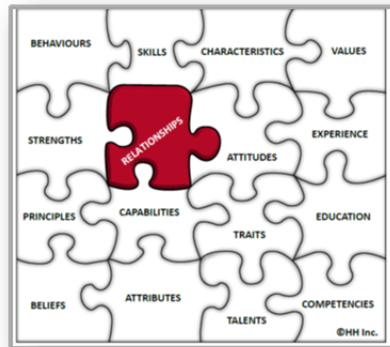
### What Does It Mean to Be a Leader?

New leadership books are published all the time. They all promise a fresh perspective. But if you look closely, most books offer different ways of looking at similar concepts. As yet, no one has found *the one* definitive explanation of what leadership means in practical terms. That’s because it’s a complex concept. You probably have your own thoughts about leadership, based on what you believe an ideal leader looks like to you.

I look at leadership as a jigsaw puzzle with lots of pieces. The question is, which pieces are most important? That’s hard to answer because each person has a different opinion. It depends on who you’re asking. No small wonder people become confused when management tells them to “hone their leadership skills.” They wonder, “what does that mean? Is it my personal attributes, my attitude, my expected behaviours, my skills, my qualities? What skills? What behaviours? What

qualities?” The answers will differ, depending on the person you are asking. Each person has their own unique perspective.

The many pieces in this puzzle, when fitted together, provide a more complete picture. Each piece is important. In many leadership theories, the concept of *relationships* is often overlooked. Sometimes it’s implied. A study by the Carnegie Foundation and Stanford University conducted many years ago concluded that 85% of job success comes from having well-developed “people”



skills. So, what does it mean to have people skills? Generally, it means having the ability to influence and communicate effectively with other people and to relate in ways that are mutually productive.

When I say that leadership requires engaging in productive relationships, that probably sounds a little too simple. It’s true that *relationships* are not the only piece in the leadership puzzle. But it’s undoubtedly one of the most important ones.

### **This Is Where Perception Fits In**

We rarely see much written about the importance of perception in leadership and, more importantly, how it influences the way people relate to each other. Yet, perception is critical in leadership. It has an impact on everything you do. It influences how you look at situations and the people you encounter every day. It unconsciously controls everything you do and say. As a result, your perceptions can positively or negatively affect those work relationships that matter most to you.

I once had a coaching client named Elaine, whose boss believed she needed to develop better leadership skills. In a meeting, I asked her boss what he meant by better leadership skills. He replied, “Well, she’s got to act faster on things. There’s a major problem in her department, and she’s done nothing about it.” As he talked about this issue, he was describing in detail what he believed a leader needed to do when faced with an issue to resolve. He wanted to see her deal swiftly with the

## **Part One: Relationship Acuity Insights**

matter in an authoritative way. To him, she appeared to be avoiding the problem.

But when I spoke with Elaine, she made her perception clear: she believed in the importance of taking time to think about her response. She wasn't avoiding; she was problem-solving. She didn't think she lacked the required skills or knowledge; she simply believed that acting too swiftly could cause even further issues. That sounded reasonable.

Elaine's behaviour did not reflect what her boss expected her to do, so some coaching may have been necessary. But before taking that step, I clearly saw that I needed to address the relationship between Elaine and her boss. This relationship was unproductive because he never communicated his expectations, and neither of them mentioned what they saw as the required or desired response. Elaine and her boss demonstrated that each had their own perspective on the meaning of leadership. To one, it meant a swift response. To another, it meant risk mitigation and careful due diligence. No one person's perspective is ever the right one (although we're all sure the right one is our own!). Sometimes the best solutions come from sharpening our own focus, understanding a different perspective, and reaching a mutual agreement.

### **Perceiving Root Causes, Not Symptoms**

Elaine's story reminds us that what seems like a specific problem is actually only a symptom of a relationship management issue. You probably have seen many without recognizing them as such. However, they are quite obvious when you see open confrontation, hostility, human rights complaints, declining productivity or performance, poor morale, turnover, health/ stress leave, union/management and boss/subordinate disputes, active resistance to change... the list can go on and on! If these are the symptoms of relationship issues, there should be a solution that goes beyond the symptoms to the root causes. A solution often gets rid of the symptoms, but it's never a cure. Dig deeper for the root causes. You can bet that if they're ignored, the symptoms will return time and time again.

A municipal government client of mine was concerned about how their managers were handling the performance of their employees. There were too many employee disputes. They wanted to hold a performance management workshop to teach their managers how to have constructive conversations with their direct reports. The course,

however, wasn't the right solution at all. Although we did run the course and the managers did learn some valuable skills and techniques, they all said that they expected to have had a hard time applying them. An open, honest, and constructive dialogue was virtually impossible to have with their employees, they said, because a union steward always had to be in the room at the same time. The root cause of the problem wasn't a lack of supervisory knowledge or skill. It was the organization's adversarial union/management relationship that needed to be addressed.

In a similar situation, I worked with a financial services firm that was going through a major change initiative. Everyone was stressed. Morale was low. They decided to develop a training program to help people manage their stress. Stress, however, was the symptom, not the root cause. The managers needed to understand how to support their employees during a period of rapid change. This was a change-management issue. The employees were stressed because they didn't trust their leaders and they feared losing their jobs.

Let's look at the faulty treatment of symptoms through the lens of the medical profession. We have all experienced a headache at one time or another – that's a symptom. The solution is usually to take a painkiller. That gets rid of the headache, but the symptom returns. So, you take another pill... and the cycle of treating the symptom continues, at least until you realize the headache won't stop coming back. Then, finally, you wonder if maybe there's something causing that headache that needs to be addressed. What might be the potential root cause of a headache? It could be stress, lack of sleep, overindulgence in alcohol, lack of food, eye strain, or even a more serious medical issue. There's no way of knowing until you look deeper at each situation and circumstance.

Many issues in organizations are the symptoms of unhealthy relationships. Yet, we rarely see *relationship management* training as the first response. Training programs continue to address symptoms, not root causes. When faulty relationships are the root cause, address that issue first.

Faulty relationships often stem from people seeing the world in different ways. A conflict is almost always rooted in people having strong opinions based on different perspectives. To consider why that happens, think back on the flow from the previous chapter. Everything we do flows from our inner driver to our outward behaviour. You can't see



## **Part One: Relationship Acuity Insights**

a person's inner motivation – it's their invisible *why*. You can only see what they're doing or hear what they say. When someone makes the comment "this is how I see it," they're looking at things from their own particular perspective. That perspective might be different from yours. It's best not to make assumptions or judge someone before you find out why they see things the way they do. Seeking insight into why people do what they do helps build trust and mutual respect. Understanding someone is not the same as liking them. With understanding, comes the wisdom of knowing someone well enough to keep the work relationship healthy and productive.