

Leaders Take The Initiative

by Adrian Pei

Look beyond the urgent and obvious, and you'll discover joy in unexpected places.

One morning as I was getting ready for the day, one of my friends from college came to mind. For some reason I remembered how he had faced some significant health challenges in his family, which I couldn't fully appreciate at the time. But now that I had similar experiences, I thought of him and how he handled it bravely.

We weren't the closest of friends. But I had his e-mail address, and I had a thought and feeling of appreciation in my mind. So I decided to e-mail him. It was short—maybe about 3 or 4 sentences, but I basically wrote: "It's been a long time, but I still remember you and all the challenges your family was going through in college. How are things now? I'm facing some similar experiences in my life, and I admire the way you handled things. I'm sure I could learn a lot from you. Anyway, you came to mind today and I wanted to let you know."

This e-mail was probably the last thing he expected to receive. But as you can imagine, he really appreciated it, and it led to a great dialogue where I learned a ton, found a new comrade in my struggles, and re-established a friendship from the past. All with one e-mail that took about two minutes to write.

Over the years, I've gotten more and more into the habit of doing things like this. I don't mean looking through my college yearbook and e-mailing every random person I've met. I mean initiating communication outside the everyday flow and incoming e-mails requiring a response, or social media newsfeeds that often prioritize a select number of the "loudest", most active people.

I try to maintain about a 75% to 25% ratio—I spend 75% of my time responding to e-mails and calls, and 25% of my time initiating communication that's not anywhere in my inbox. The great thing is that a little bit goes a long way; when we initiate an e-mail that's unexpected, it doesn't have to be long to be appreciated.

Here are some examples of quick notes we can write:

- **Thinking of you.** “You came to mind today, (add any appropriate specifics of why). Just wanted you to know I'm thinking of you.”
- **Reminded me of you.** “I read this blog today (or watched this movie, heard this talk, etc.) and it reminded me of you.” I have a good friend who consistently sends me old pictures or songs, and we have a laugh about them. It's an easy way to keep our connection going.
- **Appreciation.** “I was thinking today about how much I appreciate your sense of humor. Thanks for always brightening my mood.” or “I wanted to tell you how much I appreciate your leadership. You've really helped me to grow over the years.”
- **Quick opinion.** “I saw this event, and wanted to know your quick opinion—is it worth going to?”

There are many other ways we can initiate, but hopefully this sparks an idea or two. Of course, it's not that we don't have the ideas or thoughts in our heads—it's a matter of moving from our heads to the point of actually writing that e-mail and sending it off.

Here's what helps me do this practically:

- If a person comes to mind and I'm not tied up doing something else, *I just write the quick e-mail right then.* I try not to take more than 2-3 minutes to do it—to me, short is better than nothing at all.

- If a person comes to mind and I'm doing something else, *I try to jot down a quick note on my computer or phone* in a place where I'll see it easily. Sometimes I put a reminder with that note.

Try it now! If you're reading this, you're probably not tied up in tasks or burdens. Think of a person in your life who might need some encouragement, or who's come to mind recently. Write a quick e-mail and keep it to 2 minutes. Or jot a note on your computer or phone.

It brings me joy to initiate e-mails. For one, **I relish not being ruled by my inbox.** It makes me feel more like a human, rather than a machine on auto-pilot trying to keep up with e-mail responses and tasks. Also, communications that we initiate often end up being some of the most meaningful. When we do what's unexpected, we may also discover a world of new connections and possibilities that we couldn't see before. That's why I think it's totally worth a couple of minutes of my day!

Discussion or Reflection Questions:

1. When have you been on the giving or receiving end of an unexpected phone call or e-mail, that brightened your day? Describe what happened and how it affected you.
2. What are some ideas that have helped you to initiate communication, rather than just respond or react to what's in front of you? What's worked well for you?
3. Who are 1-2 people in your professional or personal life, to whom you could initiate a quick e-mail, who might really appreciate the gesture?