

# CONNECTING BY DESIGN

A practical guide to designing the  
conditions for connection

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# Connection doesn't happen by accident

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Most people don't struggle to connect because they're antisocial.

They struggle because the environments around them make connection harder to begin.

People hesitate because they don't want to:

- interrupt
- be awkward
- be rejected
- misread the situation

So, they wait. And when everyone is waiting, nothing happens.

You end up with rooms full of people who are technically together, but not actually connecting.

Connection is often treated as a personality issue, but in many cases, it's a design issue.

When the conditions change, people change.

# The hidden barrier is social friction

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In many environments, people are physically present but socially unsure how to begin.

They may want to connect, but hesitate because:

- there's no clear entry point
- expectations are unclear
- the social risk feels high

So, they default to safety:

- phones
- small talk
- staying in their lane

Not because they don't care - but because the conditions aren't right.

Before improving connection, you have to see where friction exists.

# The 4 conditions of connection

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## 1. Invitation

Do people feel socially welcome and allowed to participate?

If it's unclear whether someone can arrive alone and belong, many won't try.

## 2. Environment

Does the space reduce social friction - or increase it?

People connect more easily in spaces that naturally create small, approachable groupings.

## 3. Structure

Is there a clear, low-risk way to engage?

Without a simple entry point, people default to "just mingling" - and many opt out.

## 4. Repetition

Does connection happen often enough to feel familiar?

One-off moments create pressure. Repetition creates ease.

When these conditions are clear, connection becomes easier. When they're missing, people hold back.

# Where this shows up

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Connection rarely breaks down because people don't care. It breaks down because no one designed the moment.

## In workplaces

People work side by side but stay socially separate. Connection is left to personality rather than design.

## In schools

Students are often expected to "find their people" without clear entry points or support.

## In community spaces

Spaces are open, but not always easy to enter. People often arrive unsure what to do or how to engage.

Across all environments, the same pattern appears:

Connection depends too much on confidence, luck, or existing relationships.

That's where design matters.

# A quick connection check

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Ask yourself:

- Where are people present but not participating?
- Where is connection assumed rather than supported?
- Where does interaction depend on confidence or luck?
- Where might people feel unsure how to begin?
- Which condition is weakest: Invitation, Environment, Structure, or Repetition?

You don't need to fix everything at once - you just need to identify where connection breaks down first.

If these questions are difficult to answer clearly, that's usually a sign that connection is being left to chance rather than design.

## 5 small changes that reduce friction

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1. Greet people at the door  
Removes uncertainty immediately
2. Replace “mingle” with a prompt  
Clarity beats confidence
3. Give people a clear first step  
The first minute matters most
4. Normalize coming alone  
Removes a major hidden barrier
5. Create one repeatable format  
Familiarity builds ease over time

# About Connecting by Design

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Connecting by Design is a practical framework that helps organizations create the conditions that make connection easier to begin.

It draws on what I've learned through running Meet a Stranger and West Coast Speaks, and continues to evolve through real-world use across community, school, and workplace settings.

For more information

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