The Likeability Factor

How to Boost Your L-Factor and Achieve Your Life’s Dreams

By Tim Sanders
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Introduction
Likeability may well be the deciding factor in every competition you’ll ever enter — even competitions you don’t realize you’ve entered. From winning clients to gaining a new job to forging the relationships that will advance your career and make your life more fulfilling, likeability can be critical.

The reasons are simple. People believe what they like. They also surround themselves with people they like — and trust those likeable people more.

Likeability is an ability to create positive attitudes in other people through the delivery of emotional and physical benefits. Someone who is likeable can give a sense of joy, happiness, relaxation or rejuvenation. He or she can bring relief from depression, anxiety or boredom. By being likeable — by generating positive feelings in others — you gain as well.

Likeability can be rated on an L-factor scale from one to 10. In general, if your L-factor is three or less, you need vast improvement. Four to six is average, while seven and above is good. Few people attain a 10.

Most people’s L-factors aren’t constant. They vary dramatically at different points in their lives, although generally not as much as Ebenezer Scrooge’s, which soared from one to 10 after a night of ghostly visitations. But you can change your L-factor, as that popular story shows.

The Benefits of Likeability
Likeability makes things happen. Here are some of its most important consequences:

• **Likeable people bring out the best in others.** In a study by the National Service Foundation, more than 4,000 people were asked about their perceived levels of service in customer interactions throughout their lives. They then answered questions whose answers indicated their personality types. The survey showed that the “likeable and competent” customer was three times more likely to have a positive service experience than the unlikeable customer. Studies have also shown that likeable patients gain more attention and time with physicians, and likeable teachers often become positive influences on students.

• **Likeable people get recognized.** Research shows that your likeability will have a tremendous influence on your capacity to win respect and recognition. Parents favor likeable children, and the additional attention and affection tends to encourage a more relaxed personality in those children, who become even more likeable, not only to their parents. Consultant Cindy Ventrice, author of *Make Their Day! Employee Recognition That Works*, observes that “bosses are emotional people like everyone else. A likeable employee that produces positive feelings in others, including their manager, will get better annual reviews and job performance...
marks than an unlikeable employee. And more importantly, the likeable employee gets more feedback through the year, allowing for continuing improvement.”

- **Likeable people outperform.** Children who are likeable, optimistic and personable fare well and are able to gain the support of others. That leads to resilience and focus, helping them later in life. Likeability also helps to create a positive feedback loop: the positive feelings you invoke in other people are returned to you, creating constant encouragement and an antidote to the daily strains of life. Learning becomes easier with a likeable personality. If you stop to think about the greatest work you’ve ever done, you’ll probably realize that you did it for a likeable boss or some other favorite leader. Inspiration is at the core of productivity.

- **Likeable people overcome life’s challenges.** A 2001 study by the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth found that likeable parents can have a tremendous impact on their children’s success. The survey determined that disadvantaged children of likeable parents can flourish as well as those with wealthy but unlikeable parents.

- **Likeable people enjoy better health.** Like eating an apple every day, being likeable every day keeps the doctor away. One of the primary reasons is that when we’re likeable, we feel our likeability reciprocated, which increases our self-esteem. And high self-esteem helps overcome physical ailments caused by or associated with stress. Dr. Nathaniel Brandon, a Los Angeles-based psychotherapist and expert on self-esteem, says it’s “the immune system of your mind. A healthy immune system doesn’t mean you won’t become ill, but it reduces susceptibility. The same is true psychologically.”

### The Four Elements of Likeability

To raise your L-Factor, it’s important to understand the four elements of likeability. To do that, imagine you’re driving along an isolated road and hit a stoplight. That first light represents friendliness. If you’re not friendly, the light remains red and you can’t go any further. If you are friendly, the light turns green and you can drive on.

Friendliness is the most fundamental aspect of likeability. Being friendly means expressing a liking for people, communicating welcome, or expressing a generally positive feeling. On the other hand, unfriendliness is the communication of negative feelings through verbal and/or nonverbal methods.

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Back inside the car, imagine you’re driving down that road again and arrive at a second light. This one stands for relevance. If you can find a way to be relevant to someone else, you can get a green light and drive on. Otherwise the light stays red.

At a most basic level, someone becomes relevant to you by walking into your life’s path — by establishing contact. At a deeper level, relevance involves finding and sharing mutual interests or, even better, possessing a skill that will help somebody else with a need.

Now, in the car again, you hit a third light, representing empathy. If you’re able to prove that you’re an empathetic person who understands, and in a way actually senses, another person’s feelings, you get a green light and can keep on driving.

Empathy is the ability to perceive another person’s internal frame of reference with accuracy. It’s different from sympathy. If you’re sympathetic to someone, your heart goes out to him or her and you feel compassion, but those are your feelings. You don’t know what the other person is feeling. Sympathy is a sweet emotion, but it’s not a connecting one.

There’s one more stoplight, and this one stands for realness. Some people, in trying to boost their L-factor, seem genuinely friendly, relevant and empathetic. But eventually you discover there’s no one there — it’s all an act. Over time you wonder, “Is this person real?” If he or she isn’t, then you’ve reached the end of the line.

**How to Raise Your L-Factor**

Each of us possesses some degree of likeability. Your L-factor may be three, five or eight. But it could be higher.
You want to raise it in a sustainable way. The idea isn’t to make a good first impression, but to have people like you over time. You want a high L-factor that won’t quit. To raise it, you must improve the four elements of likeability.

1. Friendliness
To be likeable, first and foremost you must be friendly. As simple as that sounds, friendliness isn’t the norm. The world is filled with unfriendliness. But you can improve your friendliness quotient, if you want to try.

• Observe no unfriendliness. Perhaps the best way to boost your friendliness is to eliminate unfriendliness from your behavior. So many people are accustomed to being treated in an unfriendly fashion that the mere absence of unfriendliness can be perceived as friendliness.

Follow the three steps required to avoid any breakdown: prevention, intervention and repair. Practice preventing unfriendliness by adopting a new perspective in which unfriendliness is a weakness and friendliness a strength. Intervene to catch yourself before you commit unfriendliness. When you have a setback and act unfriendly, repair the damage by apologizing.

• Develop a friendly mindset. Develop a way of thinking in which friendliness is the default position. That starts with liking yourself — finding what it is within you that others like and that you like about yourself.

• Communicate friendliness. Armed with friendly thoughts, you’re now prepared to boost your friendliness factor. The trick to being friendlier is to remember that there’s no such thing as a friendly person per se, only someone who is perceived as friendly by others.

Remember that silence can be unfriendly. Avoid an unfriendly tone of voice and try to add variety and dynamism to your speaking voice.

2. Relevance
Raising your relevance factor is a wonderful complement to your newfound friendliness.

• Identify your frequent contact circle. List the people you have contact with on at least a monthly basis, with no order or priority. Then rate each on a scale of one to 10 by the frequency of contact and the proximity — whether you see them face to face or not. Those who get eight, nine or 10 are your most frequent, close-proximity contacts. They’re the people who are most likely to respond to your friendliness, empathy and realness.

Try to increase the quality of contacts with your frequent contact circle, by meeting face to face more often or using the phone, which can also bring warmth into your communications. Look for ways to increase the number of contacts you have with this circle.

• Connect with others’ interests. When you share an interest with others, you develop a bond. That bond will boost your relevance factor, giving you a higher L-factor. To start, create an inventory of your passions, assessing your current interests, pastimes and hobbies. People in your life will find you relevant once you start talking about your shared interests.

If you feel you lack sufficient interests and passions — you’re in a rut or working so hard — rediscover an old passion or nose around a bookstore or magazine rack to see what captures your imagination.

Be proactive. Stay on the lookout for passions. As you talk with others, listen for their passions. Find opportunities to share in mutual interests.

• Connect with others’ wants and needs. The third and perhaps most powerful way to boost your relevance is to connect with other people’s wants and needs. A good step is to conduct a need-and-wants analysis of your top contacts. How can you help them?

3. Empathy
Of the four components of likeability, empathetic skills may be the most difficult to improve.

• Show an interest in how others feel. If you’re not aware of others’ feelings, you can be perceived as insensitive, either because of something you do (such as saying something inappropriate) or something you
don’t do (such as not responding to a call for help). Understanding how other people feel is a result of a process that includes recognizing their emotions, listening thoughtfully and then demonstrating your understanding by responding to their feelings.

- **Experience others' feelings.** When you listen to, and reflect back on, others’ feelings, you raise your empathy factor. A deeper level of empathy is achieved when you actually experience those feelings yourself.

  The secret to boosting your empathy lies in your imagination. Accept other people’s feelings as legitimate and try on a new perspective—imagine what leads people to believe what they do, and try imagining yourself in their shoes. As well, review and reflect on your own feelings.

- **Respond to others’ feelings.** Most of the time empathy only requires the ability to understand how others feel. But if someone expects you to do something with this understanding, and you’re unresponsive, he or she may doubt that you really do know what’s going on inside.

  To boost your empathy, work harder to remember conversations, make yourself available for follow-up conversations, and share your own feelings when others offer you insights into their feelings.

4. **Realness**

People will want to reassure themselves that you’re real, and if you don’t measure up, your L-factor will plummet.

- **Be true to yourself.** The very first step is to know the real you. Think about the last bit of advice you gave somebody that you felt very strongly about; what you stand for that separates you from the pack; what gives you support; and whether there’s a proverb or saying that you often repeat.

- **Be true to others.** When you establish a high level of realness with other people, you’re as solid as a brick house. But each time people perceive that you aren’t being true, they mentally take a brick out of your foundation, and you become less sturdy in their eyes. Eventually, if they remove enough bricks, their perception of your realness crumbles.

  To maintain that foundation, don’t forget the past. Practice humility, and watch out for exaggeration in your statements and claims. Learn to say, “I don’t know.” And be honest when you make a promise, doing what you say you’ll do.

- **Share your realness.** To elevate your realness factor, you need to provide memorable experiences of realness. You need to exceed expectations. Some steps to do that: be present when you’re with others; admit your mistakes; be generous with yourself and your feelings, sharing them with others.

**Conclusion**

It’s up to you to stop unlikeability in its tracks. It’s up to you to raise your L-factor—if not for yourself, then for all the people with whom you come into contact. Your shining example could inspire a movement of high L-factor behavior throughout your sphere of influence.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Tim Sanders is a leadership coach at Yahoo! and author of Love Is The Killer App.

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