Communicating Well and Building Strong Relationships Virtually

How COVID-19 is changing relationships

As the COVID-19 virus continues to sweep around the globe, millions of us have had our normal routines and responsibilities upended. Many of us are currently trying to work from home while simultaneously balancing pressing family needs like caring for children or other relatives.

Working remotely—especially for an extended period—is something that many of us haven't had to do before. And being isolated from many family and friends at the same time adds another layer of complexity. In the space of just a couple of months, many of us have had to adapt to doing our work and connecting virtually with almost everyone in our lives.

This is a major challenge for a lot of us. Human beings are pack animals. We are hard-wired to want to be with other people. (Yes, even the introverts among us need that.) Suddenly being more isolated and having far fewer face-to-face connections can feel stressful and confusing.

In this tips sheet, we explore the topic of communicating well and building strong relationships virtually, because there's nothing more foundational in life to our health and happiness than the quality and flavor of our relationships. This is true both at work, and at home.

Communicating well and building strong relationships in virtual teams

Some virtual workplace dynamics that complicate relationships

The virtual workplace has some unique characteristics. For example, we miss out on all the physical interaction (handshakes, hugs) that typically communicate trust and connection and willingness to cooperate, and when our primary communication is virtual (even when we use video) we miss a lot of visual cues and non-verbal communication. Normally, at least half of what we communicate happens non-verbally. Think about what a confused expression, or someone shifting uncomfortably in their seat, or looking disengaged can signal in a meeting. It's a lot harder to pick up on those signals via video, and even more challenging on a phone call.

We also miss out on a lot of the natural information "flow" that happens around a shared workspace. When we share a common work place we typically pick up a lot on what others are working on, how busy (or not) they are, and a lot of big picture "team" stuff. A lot of that "incidental learning" doesn't happen in virtual teams. As a result, it's easier for team members to start to feel disconnected and for teams to get out of sync with each other.

There are many things we could say about this topic, but here are just a couple of tips on communicating well and building strong relationships during virtual interactions. A lot of these tips will sound basic. That's because they *are*. When you're communicating virtually, it helps to be intentional

and thoughtful, and (just like self-care and stress management) the basics are where much of the power lies.

Tips for relating and communicating well in virtual meetings

1. Make sure everyone has an opportunity to contribute to discussions: We've all been in meetings where one or two people completely dominated. If you're having a lot of virtual meetings, especially team meetings in groups, make sure that everyone has an opportunity to speak. If you're facilitating, consider putting a structure of process in place to help make that happen, and/or actively invite team members to contribute ideas, thoughts, and concerns. (Just try to do this in a way that doesn't make people feel like they're being put on the spot—for example, cue them in advance that you will ask them to share on a particular topic.)

2. Actively invite/request team members to ask questions: We generally ask a lot of questions of each other in day-to-day conversation. Managers need to be tuned in to questions their team members might have, but are sometimes more hesitant to articulate virtually than they would be in-person.

3. Listen carefully, clarify, and confirm shared understanding: Text messaging and chat applications allow for quick and easy communication, but the lack of context and other verbal/visual cues can cause messages to be more easily misinterpreted, leading to confusion, frustration, and even resentment. We need to strive to make our thoughts clear, and to listen closely in order to ensure we're understanding and reading other team members accurately!

4. Build a relationship beyond work: One of the biggest challenges with virtual teams is cultivating the social bonds that make everyone feel like they're connected and part of something valuable. A close-knit team with a sense of camaraderie will function more resiliently and effectively than one without those connections. So cultivating positive interactions between team members (whether via virtual coffee chats/lunches, check-ins before meetings, shared humor etc.) is very important.

Communicating well and building strong relationships with family and friends

Relationships aren't just important at work. The quality and health of our family relationships and friendships is foundational to our overall health and happiness and has a strong influence on our ability to engage productively with our work. As such, here are some tips on building good relationships virtually during this season of increased isolation from our friends and family:

1. Make it regular: If you want to maintain or grow a relationship, connecting regularly is important. It can help to make this a regular part of your routine (e.g., a once-every-two-weeks call with family living overseas on a Sunday morning).

2. Reach out (do "the work" to connect): If the relationship is important to you... be prepared to do the work to maintain it if you have to go virtual. Something I've learned through a lifetime of living mostly overseas from many friends and family is that (with some notable exceptions) many of our friends aren't

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going to be great about reaching out and initiating contact. So if the relationship is important to you...*you do it*. Don't wait for them to call or write. Do it yourself. Do it first. And do it first again next time, even if it doesn't feel "fair." Because most people aren't that great about staying in touch across distance.

3. Share: During this extra-isolated time it can feel like we haven't got much going on in our lives to talk about. It can take some extra effort to share some of the smaller details of your day or work with close family and friends, but doing this will help them better understand what you're doing and feel more connected with you.

4. Ask good questions: Especially during times when we feel like we don't have much to talk about, asking questions is a relationship-building superpower. So think up (or look up) some good questions to ask friends and family to get them talking about more than what they did that day (or COVID-19).

Relationship minefields during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic is presenting some unusual challenges to relationships, *especially family relationships.*

Disaster exacerbates the differences that already lie between people in terms of their natural coping style (the way they naturally manage stress and pressure.) As a result, situations like these can often draw family members closer together, or prove polarizing.

COVID-19 has transformed routine actions (like grocery shopping, attending religious services, going out to eat, going out at all, having contact with other family members) into high-stakes decisions. During this pandemic we are constantly trying to judge context and risk and weighing up many variables as we make decisions about what we will and won't do.

In this environment, people we love are inevitably going to make decisions we don't agree with or feel comfortable about. And people we love are going to have strong opinions about decisions we are making and risks that they perceive we are taking.

Guiding principles for dealing with relationship minefields during COVID-19

Here are some principles that may prove helpful as we navigate these complex moments:

Remember your main priority: Sometimes (especially when we think we're "right") we can lose sight of what's *really important* in the situation or exchange. So remember your main priority here, and that main priority will often be the health of your family relationships and the fact that we want those relationships to be in good shape this time next year, in a decade, etc.

Remember you're on the same team and assume good intentions: Remember we're all on the same team here, and caught up in the same storm. We may be looking at the data and context differently, and making decisions. But we are on the same team and likely have the same ultimate goals – to stay safe and protect our loved ones and others.

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So remember that although we may be looking at the facts differently and making different decisions and sets of judgements around risk, any concern and pushback or questioning we are receiving from family is usually being motivated by love. They are not setting out to make your life miserable just for the fun of it. If we can assume good intentions and remember we're on the same team, it will help.

If you're more of a "risk-taker": If you're more of a risk-taker in these sorts of dynamics, make efforts to engage productively and lovingly with more cautious family members. It will particularly help you if you can *listen well.* Practice listening to understand where your family members are coming from, not just so you can argue with them about how they're wrong. And respect their caution even if you don't agree with them. Don't mock them for being more cautious than you.

If you're "more cautious": If you're being more cautious and you're worried or frustrated by some of what your family is doing, here are some tips with engaging productively and lovingly with family members who are making decisions that make you uncomfortable. First, don't browbeat them with "facts" or shame them for their stance. You're probably not going to change their mind by sending them a dozen research articles. If you really want them to change their behavior (and especially if you're worried that their behavior is putting you or others at risk) try sharing your fear and sense of vulnerability and asking for their help. This is probably the most effective way to enlist their co-operation.

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