Making Virtual Work More Human

Going virtual has been challenging for many organizations because work and home life have converged, and all habits and routines are out the window. As leaders, we have an excellent opportunity to connect and build trust in an even more impactful way, whether from home or places of work. When we emerge post-pandemic, leaders will either be stronger or weaker based on how they managed at this time. There is no middle ground. Now is our time to shine, get vulnerable, and be human. Here are some tips to connect with people in a more personal way during this pandemic and beyond.

1. Create Deliberate Video Use that Mirrors Office Norms

There are **three kinds** of engagements we have virtually. Using all three will keep the team feeling structured and close.

Effective Business Meetings – Make sure every meeting still has a clear purpose, outcome, and agenda. To start a new topic, close down the video and transition deliberately as if taking a break. Using a clear meeting structure is a best practice regardless of whether it is on video or in person. Patrick Lencioni has four types of meetings as a framework for getting decisions made in the right context. Use this time to tighten your meeting structures while everyone is already unhinged from their current habits.

Social Time – Many organizations are scheduling virtual lunches, happy hours, book clubs, and other time that is more social so that team members can connect. These hangouts are a great time to engage with each other. Perhaps add some "learning" time as well to share ideas on how to manage kids being home, how to get exercise, new recipes, ways to social distance, or even how to Maria Kondo the house! Perhaps one team member can teach others about a hobby. The only limit is our imagination. And leaders, put SOMEONE ELSE in charge of organizing and facilitating the fun times. Create the position for "Fun Leader" or "Social Ambassador" for someone with strengths in these activities and planning.

Informal "Water Cooler, Hallway, Drop By" Time – This is what people seem to be missing the most. It includes times of informal gatherings and drop-bys without an appointment. As a leader, we can get a personal "zoom" or Teams room and hold "open office hours" where we just hang out on video doing our own work and be available for anyone to "pop by." Many CEOs are opening this to all employees.

Another option is to simulate working together independently in a conference room by **turning on video and working on our own**. Multiple people are "on" but with no real agenda. It feels like talking over the cube wall or working together in a shared space where we can ask random, informal questions while working. This method is great for project teams or those who are used to having close proximity. Along the same vein, designate a virtual "water cooler" video room where anyone can go when they just need to air out their brain and see who is around that might want to take a break and chat, like a coffee machine or water cooler in the office.

2. Adapt Team Member Check-Ins to Individual Needs

Many organizations are requiring managers to "check-in" with team members daily.

Recognize that every team member is in a different place every day regarding the Grief Change Cycle. One method used is a small team "check-in" and "check-out" process to reconnect each day. The group holds a 10-15 minute video "stand up" both in the first part of the day and at the end of the day to see where everyone is at both from a work perspective and personally. This is a chance to connect in a quick and meaningful way and see where someone can help others with workload when home life or health gets tough.

The key is to find the best ways to adapt to each team member, not forcing the same process for everyone. Some need more "hands-on" from leaders than others. However, do not assume that what they needed under pre-COVID BAU (business as usual) is what they need now. When going to "stress" behaviors, people's needs may be very different.

In every touchpoint, listen for cues about work and also mental health and life outside of work. Look for changes in personality and behavior to see if stress may be building up.

As an example, we like to consider Enneagram. It tells us there are nine different types of personality in the human psyche, and under stressful conditions, we tend to sink back into some of the less healthy parts of our personality type. When we see even subtle personality shifts, it may mean there is stress underneath, even if the person does not realize it. For example, Enneagram type 3 is the "doer" or "achiever" type. In healthy conditions, Enneagram 3 tries to level out between "doing" and "being." Under stress, Enneagram 3 may start to "do" even more at an increasing pace of activity, finally bottoming out into a space of overwhelm.

Bottom line, watch for personality shifts in self and others even if your team members say they are "fine". Use EQ (emotional quotient) to feel their mental state and approach with empathy, curiosity, and compassion when possible. Also, get vulnerable and share that you TOO are struggling. Life is personal. Getting them to share requires leaders to share as well.

3. Find Areas of Control

In times of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity), research shows that our brain is triggered to a reactive, fear-based mindset. One way we can shift out of fear is to move into our brain's pre-frontal cortex by asking questions and taking action. This gets us out of a fear based "fight or flight" reaction.

Help ourselves and team members by finding areas where we CAN take back some control, while also being flexible to the idea that the world is changing and we need to adapt. It is a balance. Have open discussions about these changes in the world and discussing how everyone is feeling. For team and ourselves, this helps to diffuse some of the anxiety. And look for ways to give back some control to the team where possible. Do not assume that as the leader we need to do everything. Let's all review our delegation best practices (or call us if you need some) to truly ensure that everyone who is being impacted can feel some control over their situation.

Stay Safe and Stay Sane!! And let's begin to prepare for the New Norm.