

The Power of Human Connection in Today's Workplace

In recent years, many organizations have faced the challenge of an increasingly digital workplace, with workers contributing from different geographical locations. However, restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a rapid move to remote and hybrid work models and escalated these challenges. Leaders today must find new ways to foster connections with their teams and create cohesive cultures in their organizations. In [the 2021 Human Connection in the Virtual Workplace report](#), the HOW Institute for Society found that 44% of workers reported feeling less connected to coworkers since the start of the pandemic. That same survey found that feeling connected to coworkers, managers and the organization as a whole was an important predictor of employee engagement and team performance.

As leaders navigate either returning to the office or managing newly hybrid and remote workplaces, prioritizing human connection will be vital to building effective teams and strong networks. [Recent research](#) shows that professional and personal networks have shrunk by nearly 16% (roughly 200 people) during the pandemic. A shrinking network can hinder career progress, lead to less creativity on teams, and cause a decreased sense of belonging for employees. In normal times, networks rarely shrink because new acquaintances replace old friends that lose touch for any reason. Due to the pandemic, people have not had the



opportunity to form new relationships or have much contact with strangers and distant acquaintances in the course of a normal day. [One study](#) looking at digital interactions in a tech company found that exchanges between collaborators increased by 40% post-lockdown, but there was 10% less communication with distant colleagues. Researchers have found that people often draw inward and focus on their closest friends and colleagues in times of stress. That tendency, combined with quarantines and remote work, has only worsened the shrinking of work and personal networks.

Another important consideration for leaders is that this lack of human connection has had a more profound effect on individual contributors (employees with no direct reports that are not considered managers or directors). According to the HOW Institute's research, only 31% of senior leaders felt a decline in connection to their coworkers, compared to 57%

of individual contributors. Individual contributors were also 200% more likely to feel disconnected from direct supervisors since the start of the pandemic. The researchers believe one cause of this disparity is that senior personnel often enjoy more benefits and privileges, including during times of crisis. They are also more likely to receive information and communication from their direct supervisors, the C-Suite and other top executives. Leaders need to understand that individual contributors and entry-level employees are less insulated from the effects of the pandemic financially and have less influence over organizational policy, which can contribute to increased stress and anxiety.

The Importance of Feeling Connected

Social psychologists have studied the human need for belonging for decades. A well-known motivational theory called Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs rates people's need for belonging just as important as the need for food, shelter and safety. [Kassandra Alcaraz, Ph.D., MPH](#), a public health researcher with the American Cancer Society, reports that "[Our research](#) really shows that the magnitude of risk presented by social isolation is very similar in magnitude to that of obesity, smoking, lack of access to care and physical inactivity."

Strong social connections make people happier and physically healthier, which can also affect work performance. Employees with friends or social relationships at work tend to be more engaged and loyal to their organization. The reverse is also true. [Research by Cigna](#) found that lonely employees have 45% lower productivity, twice the amount of missed days at work, a higher risk of turnover, and a 12% lower quality of work. They estimate

that loneliness may cost U.S. businesses as much as \$406 billion a year. It is tempting to assume that returning to the office could improve a sense of belonging for employees. Unfortunately, even before the pandemic, [40% of workers](#) said they felt isolated at work. Simply being in the same physical location is not enough to create the strong relationships employees need to remain engaged.



The Role of Leadership in Fostering Relationships

Building relationships and creating connections has always been a key role of leaders. Making connections and building social networks is vital to any organization and is a large part of doing business in general. Leaders today cannot assume that getting everyone in the same room— or the same Zoom meeting— will necessarily create connections. Relationship-building requires deliberate focus and consistent effort.

Now more than ever, it is helpful to create some structure for employees while still allowing for autonomy and flexibility. Managers can help their teams by organizing time effectively. For example, a hybrid workplace leader might schedule one or two specific days for in-office meetings, leaving work from home days available for individual work and client calls. Leaders should also prioritize connecting with staff members on in-person days. Fully remote leaders can take similar action, creating specific days or times for



Zoom meetings and other designated blocks of time for individual work. These fully remote leaders must also find time to call or otherwise have quick check-ins with their teams regularly. For leaders working in-person or having more in-person events at work, it is important to find ways to reconnect with the team and ease the transition from home to office. It is important to learn about what has changed in the lives of their team members. Take an interest in how employees feel about the present and future in general, not just about work.

What Leaders Can Learn From High-Performing Teams

[Recent research](#) suggests that high-performing teams have found ways to leverage social connections to produce successful outcomes even during the pandemic. The same study found some common ways high-performing teams behave and communicate. Leaders at any level can use these same techniques to reconnect with their teams.

- 1. High-performing teams are not afraid to reach out by telephone.** While most people have moved away from phone calls, they are a great way to communicate quickly, strengthen relationships, and prevent misunderstandings that occur over text or email. While Zoom fatigue has put a damper on virtual happy hours everywhere, people have discovered that an old-fashioned phone call is a great alternative for connecting with others.
- 2. They are strategic with meetings.** Poorly run meetings are a drain on productivity, creativity, and mental energy. High-performing teams will often require prework from participants, provide a clear agenda, and begin with a status update for each team member's progress.

3. **High-performing teams also make time for conversations about non-work topics.** Making time for small talk and casual conversations that have nothing to do with work is essential for team bonding and stress management. It creates a strong rapport that also makes it easier for team members to communicate about work topics.
4. **They remember to show appreciation.** High-performing teams show gratitude for their colleagues and managers alike. They recognize the group's efforts as a whole and as individuals and regularly express appreciation to their peers.
5. **High-performing teams are more authentic.** The study showed that the most productive teams were significantly more likely to express both positive and negative emotions at work. They were likely to joke around and compliment one another during work. However, they were also likely to express negative feelings with sarcasm, complaints, and cursing. While negative emotions aren't always helpful, suppressing them uses valuable cognitive resources. The fact that the team members felt comfortable expressing negative emotions shows they felt psychologically safe.

The Need for Emotional Intelligence

In addition to the normal demands of the workplace, people face the ongoing stress of a global pandemic, the resulting ups and downs of the economy and often are dealing with personal grief and loss. Emotional intelligence is a critical skill for leaders in the post-pandemic workplace. Understanding and managing emotions will be key to maintaining strong connections at work. Leaders who sharpen awareness of their own emotions and the emotions of others will be better positioned to reconnect with teams



to drive performance. In **Missing Each Other: How to Cultivate Meaningful Connections**, the authors call this skill "attunement." They explain that attunement is not just an emotional connection but the ability to perceive communications from others, to have our own messages understood and to manage conflict successfully. They emphasize the importance of tuning in to your own emotions, listening to others, practicing empathy, and regularly expressing sincere interest in others.

The HOW Institute's research found that people experienced three emotions more often throughout the pandemic: sadness, fear, and loneliness. While leaders cannot solve all the causes of these emotions, research has also shown that simply asking coworkers how they are doing is an effective strategy to create a sense of belonging and safety at work. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents in their survey felt that sharing personal updates and feelings during check-ins increased feelings of connection with direct managers. Only one-third of

respondents had a manager that regularly shared in that way.

The good news is that emotional intelligence is a skill that can be learned, and leaders can provide teams with the opportunity for training and development to sharpen those skills. In addition, interactive learning in group settings, like [Crestcom's signature BPM program](#), can strengthen team bonds, improve networking skills, and help managers connect with others regularly. The most important thing to remember as teams begin to reconnect is that no one will be perfect. As people adjust to the rapidly changing workplace, there will be miscommunications and misunderstandings. Leaders who prioritize human connection will find it easier to recover from missteps and prevent them in the future.



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