

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, ELEVATING POSITIVE EMOTIONS, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING IN A REMOTE WORK ENVIRONMENT

While remote work employees often enjoy flexibility and a balanced home-work life, there are many challenges in this type of work. The absence of meaningful connections — which generate engagement, growth, and psychological wellbeing — can lead to difficulty and a sense of loneliness, and accordingly to harm to psychological wellbeing. In this article, we will present challenges in remote work and suggestions for coping with them.

Difficulty in Creating Positive Communication and Building Meaningful Connections

In remote work, we do not have the 'corridor conversations' and the physical proximity that generates small talk and familiarity. We need to find other ways to create positive communication and familiarity during work. We can:

- Use a variety of tools to improve communication among team members: Slack, Zoom calls, Teams — which allow fast and efficient communication between team members wherever they are. It is worthwhile to emphasize the importance of occasionally holding video calls to 'see' each other. A video call creates greater closeness than written correspondence alone. This recommendation carries additional weight when discussing sensitive topics or resolving conflicts within the team.
- Hold regular weekly team meetings for teams dispersed in different locations, in order to create an organizational culture of sharing and transparency. Maintaining a regular, stable pace of meetings allows for a routine that characterizes the team, and in these meetings there is a platform for asking questions, raising ideas, celebrating achievements, and more.



These regular meetings help cultivate trust and mutual dependence among team members.

- It is recommended to create, once in a while, an in-person meeting that includes an experiential and bonding activity — for example, a nature trip, a carpentry workshop, a cooking workshop, etc. When strangers come together for a shared purpose and experience a challenging moment together, connections form faster and more meaningfully. Investment in this type of meeting can yield many fruits down the road.

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Lack of Clarity or Communication Gaps Experienced by Employees

When working remotely, there are often gaps in expectations or interpretations of various situations due to physical distance or cultural differences between employees from different countries. Defining clear expectations will reduce the degree of uncertainty and allow employees to know what is accepted within the team. Communicate how 'things are done here' — both when onboarding new employees and on an ongoing basis.

Employee availability is a topic worth emphasizing: Must the team member be available throughout the entire day, or can they join a call only when it suits them in terms of timing? Are there certain hours during the day or meetings/sessions where all employees are required to participate or be online?

Defining the degree of flexibility given to employees — the degree of flexibility varies among managers: some want more monitoring and control over their employees, while other managers tend to think the employee is responsible for managing their own time and will understand if the employee does additional things during the workday (such as running errands, grocery shopping, or picking up a child from school), as long as they meet their tasks. Defining what is permitted during the workday and whether we track hours and/or outputs will help build trust between the manager and employees.

Lack of Mental Presence

We often see 'present-absent' employees in virtual meetings — that is, employees will join Zoom meetings but not participate, or will be distracted and busy with countless other things unrelated to the meeting. As a result, distance is created and there is a sense of disconnection on both the manager's and employee's side, leading to a decline in psychological wellbeing and in the relationship between both parties.

This challenge can be addressed by emphasizing the importance of turning on cameras. Although insisting on turning on the camera can sometimes feel intrusive, it should be remembered that not turning on the camera creates a sense of alienation and distance — which in turn can lead to a decline in the sense of connection to the team. Therefore, managers should encourage their employees to turn on their cameras and explain at the beginning of the meeting the rationale behind this request, and the importance of full participation and presence in meetings in order to create engagement and connectedness among participants.



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Focusing on the Employee's Strengths

A manager who gets to know their employees well and focuses on their strengths while cultivating them may increase the employee's sense of stability and sense of recognition of their capabilities.

Investing in Social and Getting-to-Know-Each-Other Activities Among Team Members

For example, meeting once a week on the last day of the week and doing a fun activity, such as a sharing circle, shared coffee, a Kahoot game, and more.

Focusing on the Mental Health of the Employee

For example, creating a channel dedicated entirely to mental health on Slack, which allows for a free subscription to apps that reduce stress and anxiety, and encourages employees to take breaks during the workday and throughout the year.

Attention to Non-Verbal Cues of Team Members and Providing Psychological Safety

When not meeting face to face, there is a challenge in identifying that the employee is experiencing a certain difficulty. Non-verbal cues worth paying attention to: not turning on the camera in meetings, arriving late to a meeting, a usually quiet employee not sharing and being unresponsive. All of these can indicate a team member who is struggling. The manager should create a 1:1 connection with that employee (recommended via video call), reflect what you are identifying, and hear how they feel — coming in time to give a comfortable and safe feeling with a statement of 'open door,' so that even if the team member is on the other side of the world, they feel comfortable reaching out for help in times of challenge, difficulty, or personal distress.

Sharing Emotions and Encouraging Participation

In addition, managers can use the following tools to encourage participation during a virtual meeting: direct address to different employees, expressing genuine interest in employees and asking 'how are things' at the start of the meeting, giving space to share feelings openly.

Sharing our feelings has a major impact on developing interpersonal relationships with the people we work with. As managers, we can initially serve as a personal example in our own personal sharing — and this in turn will allow other employees to share their feelings as well.

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A Sense of Uncertainty or Instability Regarding My Position

The individual's sense of stability diminishes in remote work compared to the situation where they would come to the office every day. We often hear about employees who don't know whether they are valued or whether their position is secure. Since in remote work the sense of uncertainty grows, people tend to look for 'clues' in the wrong places (in others' body language, in the frequency of communication with me, or in the tasks I received).

We know that negative emotions raise these thoughts and the sense of uncertainty — but the opposite is also true: positive emotions broaden our perspective and allow us a higher sense of security. In order to raise a sense of security and positive emotions among employees, we can take several steps:

- Focusing on the employee's strengths — a manager who frequently reminds the employee of their strengths and keeps track of their strengths along the way, while guiding them to highlight the employee's stability and recognize their capabilities.
- Investing in social activities of familiarity and laughter among team members — for example, meeting once a week on the last day of the week and doing a fun activity, such as a sharing circle, shared coffee, a Kahoot game, and more.
- Focusing on the mental health of the employee — for example, creating a channel dedicated entirely to mental health on Slack.
- Attention to non-verbal cues of team members and providing psychological safety. When not meeting face to face, there is a challenge in identifying that the employee is experiencing a certain difficulty.

Implementing some of the solutions we have proposed here in the work of virtual teams can improve levels of communication, trust, and cooperation among team members — and as a result strengthen the psychological wellbeing of employees. In our workshop 'On Relationships and People,' we expand on these tools and bring the positive psychology approach to building meaningful connections and positive communication in teams.

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