

The Virtual “Water Cooler”

Humans, by nature, are social. From a young age we are taught and encouraged to socialize with others through family, school, and community. In the past couple of decades, we have expanded that socialization with technology, to keep in contact with friends, family, coworkers, and acquaintances over time and distance.

When circumstances out of our control suddenly remove us from our normal team setting and routine, even if job responsibilities remain intact, it is natural to miss the social aspect that is no longer there. Regular remote workers have long reported this challenge of feeling “disconnected” from the organization at times and rely on the ability to stay connected in other ways. Sometimes that involves talking to other remote workers about those same feelings, connecting to their onsite teammates on a personal level at a distance, periodic in-person visits, and or through well-designed efforts from the organization to make them feel a part of the group.

What do you do when most of the organization suddenly feels disconnected by a necessary, imposed distance? There should be a concerted effort to continue the social aspect of the work environment, even if it means doing it at a distance, in order to maintain morale and a sense of connection at the individual level. The good news is technology and creative thinking can enable just that. The following are some ideas on ways companies can encourage and enable employees to feel connected and continue the social aspect of their work life.

Remind Leaders

It's most important to start with your leadership. Remind leaders at all levels to communicate frequently, in all available media. I am not talking about generic emails “From the CEO”, but rather personal, candid, and sincere communications. Specifically, inform them to make communication not all about business, just as they would do if interacting face to face. Encourage them to start meetings with a few minutes of levity and personal connection. Train them to look for signs of stress and ways they can reach out to employees in an appropriate way to make them feel safe to communicate any issues, and channels for helping them through it. Sometimes just knowing a leader cares is enough to ease an employee's concern. Seeing a leader in their home office setting, possibly in casual clothing, with a pet craving attention, or kids popping into the screen reminds employees that we are all humans and connected with similar challenges.

Communication Channels

Consider using an online communication channel to allow for collaboration and communication. Tools like Microsoft Teams, Yammer, Slack, Basecamp, etc. make connecting with employees easier than ever. Consider creating a specific channel, room, or space for non-work-related material. Encourage people to post family pictures, links, articles, or memes to keep things light and fun. If one of the many free or subscription tools is not available, don't discourage employees from sending the occasional lighthearted email, or taking a moment on your video conference for sharing something personal.

Check-in Meetings

If you have a regular in-person or virtual business meeting time scheduled with your team, you might want to increase the frequency. Every other day or even daily quick meetings can help people feel connected with their peers and give a moment for socializing. If using a video conference technology, don't be afraid to turn on that camera occasionally. It humanizes you and brings a comfort seeing a familiar face. Again, you don't have to immediately jump into business. Take a moment to ask about weekends, or personal events. Look and listen for signs of stress and take note of them and be proactive in addressing them.

Townhalls

If gathering in person as large group isn't available, it's important to see or hear from top leadership in a way that attempts to bring your organization together in a virtual way. A video/audio conference can be used to communicate leadership direction and remind people that they are part of a larger organization. Encourage open communication with time for questions and answers. As always, bring some levity to the gathering with a joke or a personal story. At the very least, leaders should be sending regular emails communicating not only business but also touching on the human aspects of working through change.

Group Events

Health challenges, runner's groups, lunch groups, etc. don't have to be a thing of the past in a remote setting. Setup the same scenarios in your collaboration spaces. Come back from a run and send your group your personal time or things you saw on the run. Eat lunch over Skype with your friends and compare what you are chowing on. Develop and organized wellness challenge and volunteer to communicate it and track the results. Keep group connections a top priority to avoid feelings of isolation.

Fun Contests

Don't forget to have fun! Break up the workday with elements of fun, just like you would in the office. Setup virtual games or challenges around working remote. Pick a word of the day, and challenge everyone to use it in their daily communication at least once. Organize a virtual trashcan paper ball shootoff or a BINGO game. Setup friendly wagers around certain scenarios, e.g. every time a pet/family member makes a presence during a work meeting. Laughter relieves stress and having fun with your coworkers is a great way to bring everyone together, virtually or otherwise.

Ask Questions

How do you know how coworkers are feeling... ask! Remember that we all have unique challenges in our daily lives that can be exacerbated by changes in routine. We can't assume that our remote work challenges are the same as everyone else on our team. If available, put together a survey around remote work, checking on technology issues, communication needs, or just general feelings. Help make employees feel safe to express what they are dealing with. Open communication channels with employees and encourage dialog in all directions.

As situations around us change, the way we work also evolves. Part of that shift will always need to satisfy our human craving for interaction. That quick, "Hey, how are you?" as you fill your cup at the water cooler brings and gives more to your well-being than you realize. When faced with isolation physically, it's more important than ever to remember to still reach out in any way possible and ask the same question. Your organization and the individuals that make it up depend on it.

About Inspirus

Inspirus believes employees make up the foundation of culture, shaped and evolved through every day experiences that are essential to the development of strong, high-performing organizations. Through our technology and integrated solutions, we elevate the employee experience and optimize organizational culture by providing a holistic approach to the entire employee journey. We seek to influence the employee experience through our six Quality of Life dimensions: recognition, health and well-being, personal growth, physical environment, social interaction, and ease and efficiency.

Only Inspirus combines an integrated rewards engine, communication tools, and analytics into a single platform spanning recognition, service anniversary, well-being, and diversity and inclusion. Through Sodexo's broader mission of improving the Quality of Life of all we serve, Inspirus aims to bring joy to work, one experience at a time.

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