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What does neuroscience say about building and maintaining relationships when we are required to work from home?

As we endure the lockdown, most of us are beginning to realize that it can put a strain on our work relationships. One of the principal day-to-day activities that allows us to get along and maintain trust and relationships is our social interactions. Our social effectiveness, our abilities to form and maintain relationships, work together in groups, and empathy are deeply, essentially human skills that we often take for granted. But they are the key ingredients to effective teams in the workplace. Without a common workplace, these important skills can be difficult to establish and maintain in organizations.

So what can we do to make sure those important work relationships are not lost or damaged during these difficult times?

Neuroscience would suggest the importance of a regular, non-work-related group meeting as a brain-friendly means for building and maintaining our social connectiveness. The best time might be Monday morning, as the workday begins, but more frequent meetings may be beneficial depending upon the circumstances and the relative newness and strength of current relationships.

Let's call this meeting our "Huddle" or "Just Coffee" — and make it understood this is about life and not about work [basically it is the front-end of our LIFE Circle methodology]. Using Zoom or your favorite communication platform, have your entire team on the call, and just go around giving every person on the team 3 minutes to Check-In.

Give them the opportunity to express how they are feeling, to say what is on their mind or in their heart. One of our favorite questions is: "Tell us something about yourself that no one else knows" - which serves to create a sense of vulnerability that builds trust and connectedness. In one such session the team found out that one of their colleagues, Andrea, play classical guitar professionally and had for more than 35 years — and no one knew!

Give them the opportunity to explain their workplace challenges such as homeschooling, sharing workspace with a spouse, roommate, or partner or entertaining little ones that may be making it difficult to meet project deadlines. This will serve colleagues in developing a more positive narrative about why deadlines or other responsibilities are not being met as they would be in a normal workplace. On one such call, the team learned that a colleague, Sara, had 3 children, a working spouse, and just one computer to share among them!

Again, the meeting is not about work itself, discussing projects or to-do lists, all of which can be done on another call intended for that purpose.

We encourage Team leaders to make "Just Coffee" a weekly habit until the lockdown allows us to return to work. Getting everybody online, looking at each other, expressing how we think and feel, will greatly assist in keeping our teams connected in these challenging times — assisting in maintaining trust and our social relationships.