



IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT THE TOOLS: THE WAY TO IMPROVE ONLINE COLLABORATION IS THROUGH EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

An organization becomes successful by creating human connections. So, what have you done to nurture those connections now that we are largely working remotely?

Powell, Piccoli and Ives defined a virtual team as a group of “geographically, organizationally and/or time dispersed workers brought together by information and telecommunication technologies to accomplish one or more organizational tasks.”

VIRTUAL COLLABORATION IS NOT NEW.

It goes without saying that virtual collaboration is not new to anyone! We have all had the opportunity to interact through one of the many virtual communication channels: emails, calls, video conferences, online-stored documents, direct messages platforms, creative online software and others.

Still, communicating online brings up an additional layer of complexity in particular because the use of online tools reduces emotional cues. And as human beings, we rely on those cues

to help us showing that we’re paying attention to the other party, show them respect, to bond and to create trust. Remember Albert Mehrabian’s rule about verbal and non-verbal communication?

He found that when we engage in communication with another person, only about 7% of the transmitted message comes through the actual words, 38% comes through tone of voice and 55% is transmitted through our body language and facial expressions. Now think about how much of that really “comes through” when you write an email or when you run a virtual video conference where your colleague is reduced to a 3cmx3cm image?

In other words: by communicating virtually, we are potentially missing up to 55% of the message we are intending to send.

So, what can we do?

BUILD REMOTE PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS.

Virtual collaboration in today’s environment is no longer just about working simultaneously or working together online; it is now a temporary remote relationship that must lead towards a common goal.

The ability to use online collaborative tools is probably not the most important skill your team currently needs. Of course, online technical skills are important, but we now need to place more focus on our relational skills as they can be a game changer in virtual team effectiveness.

Emotional intelligence (EQ) is the ability to manage our own emotions and to understand the emotions of others.

Studies show the higher the EQ of each team member, the greater the success, exceeding the sum of the team’s individual talents. EQ also accelerates the overall group development.

According to HBR, emotional intelligence helps build trust, to create a group identity, and stimulate group efficacy - three critical conditions for group collaboration.

GIVE YOUR TEAM THE CHANCE TO INCREASE THEIR LEVEL OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE WHILE INCREASING THEIR REMOTE RELATIONSHIP WITH EACH OTHER.

“Socially and emotionally intelligent conversations are the glue that sticks a team together”

explained Janine Wyborn, a consultant in employee remote strategy.

PROMOTE RANDOM AND SPONTANEOUS INTERACTIONS AMONGST YOUR TEAM.

As social beings, we need human interaction. Let's try to recreate that moment when people interact on not necessarily work-related topics. That moment when you would meet your colleague at the coffee corner and discuss your weekend, your kids or the last soccer game.

Now that coffee corners are out of reach, you need to design opportunities that allow your team to meet randomly - just as if they were meeting at the coffee corner.

This will increase the chance for your team to build better, stronger and more reliable relationships with each other, and there for helping them to stay connected and improve their virtual collaboration.

For example, you could use an online tool that enables random team generation. It's called "Comment Picker". You simply enter the names of your team, and the number of teams you want. Then just send your whole team a note to let them know who they will talk to at the "virtual coffee corner".

If you don't want to use a specific tool for this, a simple excel sheet with random sampling could do the trick too.

Another virtual opportunity to create human connections is to set aside time for your team to check in informally by

designating time before an official meeting time as catch up time. This connection that can seem on the surface to be "unproductive" is a crucial moment of human interaction in your virtual context and will help foster more deep and personal interactions between the team.

ENABLE VIRTUAL EMPATHY.

Empathy has been defined by Cohen and Strayer as the understanding of and sharing in another's emotional state or context. Daniel Goleman, best known for his writing on emotional intelligence, posited Empathy as a key component of emotional intelligence.

So back to square 1 and Mehrabian formula: how do we show empathy virtually, when we miss so many non-verbal signals?

To practice empathy virtually, you need to be able to capture as many cues as possible.

Increase the chance to see more, listen more, and feel more. Favour visual conferences instead of chats or emails, plan meetings with fewer participants. Turn your camera on, and more importantly, ensure all participants have their cameras on where the person who is speaking appears full screen.

If your company does not allow video conferencing for security reasons, get creative! At least do the informal check-in using your smart phones, so that you can better decipher the current mood of your team-mates in the virtual space.

If you are communicating through email, make sure you think about the current situation of the person you are sending the email to, and before pressing send, re-read your email from their perspective to understand how your message may be received.

IN A VIRTUAL SETTING YOU NEED TO PROACTIVELY MONITOR YOUR TEAM'S FEELINGS.

In the virtual space, many of the signals that help us understand someone's emotional state of mind are more difficult to see and read. Hence never build an assumption that everything is fine, just because you can't see if anything is wrong.

If it's in a situation where your remote team never sees each other in real life because of geographical distance, or now, because most of us are forced to work from home and we are missing informal interactions in elevators and around coffee corners: we need engineer interactions to stay in touch on the human level and monitor what's going on below the surface: by design.