



- REPORT -

Q: HOW CAN I FORGE BONDS REMOTELY?

A: Leaving your comfort zone and allowing your vulnerabilities to show can improve communication and increase productivity

By LYDIA SLATER

Looking back, it seems extraordinary to remember how much we all laughed at 'BBC Dad'. It was in 2017 that Professor Robert Kelly's report on South Korea was interrupted by his four-year-old daughter strutting into the room, pursued by her little brother in his baby walker, and finally by their harassed mother. The video went viral, and the family became minor global celebrities.

Today, such domestic interruptions are part and parcel of the working day for us all. Indeed, while I was on Zoom with Carole Robin in December, discussing the difficulties of our new way of working, my husband wandered into view behind me and, oblivious,

started rummaging under the Christmas tree, presenting her with a view of his trousers' seat. Fortunately, I was aware that in Robin's philosophy, exposing your vulnerabilities (or your spouse's) can be a positive thing. These moments of unvarnished honesty help us to make connections at a time when we have never been more isolated from each other. 'People do business with people,' she explained when we talked recently. 'And the more we can see each other as people, the stronger our relationships are likely to be, and the more productively we are likely to work together.'

Robin was the Lecturer in Leadership at Stanford University, where she and her colleague David Bradford taught a course in

interpersonal dynamics, affectionately known as 'Touchy Feely'. Subsequently, she co-founded Leaders in Tech to bring these same much-needed principles to Silicon Valley executives (a cohort not famed for their social skills). Four years ago, she and Bradford began writing *Connect*, a distillation of their approach to relationship-building at home and work. Its publication now seems particularly well-timed: 'Though obviously we had no idea it was going to launch in a pandemic!' Without a doubt, maintaining team morale and focus has become more challenging over the past months, as the novelty value wanes, boundaries blur, economic uncertainty increases and the idea of Zoom socialising after work seems more like torture than a treat. Remote working can make it harder to be creative; to supervise a team; to share information. It exacerbates already existing silos. And yet survey after survey shows that most of us don't want to go back to the old ways of working either. Clearly, then, it is vital that we find a way to connect with colleagues who are physically separated.

'I believe that a lot of communication has become more transactional,' says Robin. 'We're all exhausted, and the last thing we want is to get on a call and say, "How are you *really*?" The kind of conversation you might have had over a cup of coffee just isn't happening, and that has distanced us all. And talking about feelings is hard enough face-to-face.' Among the techniques she advocates is self-disclosure, forcing yourself to operate about 15 per cent outside your comfort zone to reveal your vulnerabilities. This then encourages colleagues to reciprocate, fostering better understanding all round. Far from being unprofessional, as most of us have been conditioned to believe, expressing your emotions at work actually builds strong team bonds.

She also recommends picking up on 'pinches' – tiny irritations – before they turn into 'crunches' – major issues – by giving specific behavioural feedback: when you take X action, I feel Y emotion. ('When you interrupt me, I feel disrespected,' for example.) And for those of us who hate giving feedback, she suggests mentally reframing it as a gift – rather than dishing out criticism, we are trying to help those we work with to become more effective and successful.

The process of learning to lead in this way is intense and time-consuming. Course students on Touchy Feely are placed in a 12-person group that meets for about 60 hours over a 10-week term to practise the techniques. Curious to find out if there were quicker fixes, I reached out to my own networks to ask leaders

what has helped them to foster better connections during this time.

Interestingly, almost everyone agreed that, sick to death though we might all be of Zoom parties, it remains essential to create opportunities for remote socialising. The Penguin publishing house offered an initiative in the second lockdown where participants could sign up to have a virtual cup of tea with each other. 'One of the best lockdown team-building experiences I've had was when my manager scheduled a weekly check-in on Friday afternoon, where we could chat about anything other than work,' says Cate Sevilla, the author of *How To Work Without Losing Your Mind*. 'You didn't have to join if you didn't want to, but it was a great way to talk about whatever was going on. We even ended up reminiscing about Polly Pockets and obsessing over the Connell's Chain Instagram account. It was a slice of normality in a very odd situation.'

'The team was also quite creative, so one of our designers would lead "inspiration sessions" and we'd share screenshots or collages of whatever we were watching, researching or enjoying outside of work.' In a similar vein, Helen Tupper and Sarah Ellis, the authors of *The Squiggly Career*, recommend apps such as Donut, which randomly matches you with your co-workers to spark conversations.

'This is a great way of replacing the random moments of connection you might have previously had in the office.'

Meanwhile Estelle Girardeau, Club Med's managing director for the UK and Northern Europe, has set up a virtual walking challenge to encourage activity within her workforce; there is also a weekly kudos email, in which staff can thank their colleagues, and an upbeat daily post on the work chat taken from Action for Happiness' website.

And I, though personally shy and constitutionally allergic to 'cheesy' initiatives, found it a strangely moving experience to ask my team at the end of the year to tell us all what they were each proudest of having achieved at work, while these days, our weekly meetings begin with a public shout-out to those who have gone the extra mile.

It's fascinating to think how differently we will relate to one another when (or if) we get back to the office. Meanwhile, the next time real-life issues – my own or my colleagues' – intrude into the remote-working day, I'll welcome them as a opportunities to forge stronger bonds, rather than a reason to switch off the camera... □ *'Connect: Building Exceptional Relationships with Family, Friends and Colleagues' by David Bradford and Carole Robin (£16.99, Penguin Life) is out now.*

'The kind of conversation you might have had over a cup of coffee isn't happening, and that has distanced us all'

BRIDGE THE GAP

Four apps to connect with colleagues at a distance



DONUT

This syncs into your existing frameworks (like Slack) and suggests 'watercooler' chats with teammates, aiming to replicate office-based camaraderie.

www.donut.com

KAHOOT

This game app allows you to make and share trivia quizzes with your team and can even enliven presentations with interactive polls.

www.kahoot.it



TANDEM

Billed as a 'virtual office' environment, it allows seamless screensharing and video calls to enable better team collaboration.

www.tandem.chat



SHAPR

This social app is brilliant at helping you broaden your professional network outside the office.

www.shapr.co

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