**Being Present...While Staying Apart**

Since early 2020, the idea of being present has taken on new meaning as Zoom calls, Facetime and Microsoft Teams chat have replaced many in-person meetings, coffee dates, and networking events. For us, utilizing video and chat changed how we communicated. Our ability to see each other on-screen in 2020 increased morale and significantly lessened the feelings of isolation some experienced while sheltering at home. Though we looked forward to being physically together again, our connection with each other is maintained while we’re apart.

As we moved to work from home in March of ‘20, I expected that we would be doing this for a month, maybe two – tops. During this time, I’m glad we didn’t wait to get back to the office to connect with each other – or our customers and business associates. While we were thinking about going back to normal, we were at the same time entering the new normal without even realizing it.

As all of us continue to move forward, how do we continue to move beyond circumstances and keep our relationships from becoming stagnant? How can we enrich our virtual interactions to deepen our relationships in new ways?

Here are ideas for being present in each other’s lives, even while staying apart.

**Ask unexpected questions**

Here are two of my favorite questions that make people think and can give you deeper insight into who they are and where they’re at:

* “How does your spouse/significant other/best friend feel about you working here?” It’s one thing for you to love your job, and it’s a whole different thing if your spouse loves it.
* Close a conversation or meeting with this one: “On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being ‘I’m not going to make it’ and 10 being ‘greatest day of my life,’ how would you rank your current mental state today?” Follow it up by asking why, and you may hear some impactful stories.

**Add your personal touch**

People notice when you invest personal time and energy into thoughtful gestures.

* It may seem like an old concept, but dropping handwritten notes take an investment of time, and it says something about the value of the recipient. Compliment them for something or encourage them – they’ll be flattered that you invested yourself.
* Do you know someone’s tastes, interests, or favorite things? Make a personal delivery of something important to them that will give them a reason to smile. Their favorite snack or beverage, something to entertain their kids, or treats for the pets you get to see on those video calls!
* Take some personal time and offer your services for free. A friend with a vast resume and cover letter experience offered her free services to those who needed help in a LinkedIn post.
* You could also grab some groceries or provide a meal for a co-worker who may be going through a rough time.

**Try stuff**

Find creative ways to communicate by experimenting.

* People can interpret a text message or email based on how they feel in that moment, but a short, personalized video helps narrow how your message is received. Creating a one-minute thank you video breathes life into a relatively lifeless email.
  + Here’s an example of something I did when my team broke a company record in 2020 [**Team Appreciation Video**](https://youtu.be/-TnRUcvgbog)
* Though I wasn’t much of a runner, I took up the challenge of training for a half marathon during quarantine with a co-worker who became my virtual running buddy. We shared our progress and encouraged each other, which deepened our relationship, both personally and professionally.
* Get a group of co-workers together to read a book and talk through the concepts over video chat. The dynamics of your relationships will change. It requires time, but from my experience, it guarantees a lasting bond.
  + Atomic Habits by James Clear is a great option
* Start a channel for fun in whatever you use for chat at work. Make it a place where people can share based on topics. We use Teams and call our channel the “Water Cooler”. Movies, games, funny videos, playlists, pet pictures, gardens, and food all show up.
  + You set the tone as the leader, show your people how to have fun and not cross the line.

**Things to keep in mind**

* Not everyone will feel like you. Navigating our ever-changing personal and business environments affects individuals in different ways. People are dealing with a lot of variables, and not everyone sees things from the same perspective.
  + It’s an obvious concept but one that people regularly ignore
* Remember, it’s not about you. Try to start with the viewpoint of someone else. It helps combat our natural selfishness and orient our motives.
* Be creative in how you approach things. Changing how we engage to fit the current circumstances is essential, so don’t be afraid to take something that is working and add a new twist to it.
* In my experience, everyone has good intentions, but intentions aren’t enough. Consistency in taking action separates people and tells an incredible story. Be the person willing to be there when needed. It’s why I respect my mentor so much and why people love the iPhone – we know we can count on them.
* Don’t forget about connecting with people outside of your organization. It’s important to keep connections with vendors, suppliers, supporters, and local leaders. They need connection and encouragement as well. Send a “just because” message and see what happens.

As we continually change how we communicate and connect, don’t get caught up in doing things perfectly. Find what works, then do it. Don’t be afraid to change things up to keep it meaningful and fresh.

People need to be encouraged and uplifted right now, so be willing to engage and inspire – don’t wait for someone else to reach out to you. And if something doesn’t work, blame the coronavirus – people will understand!

**NEED MORE?**

For more ways to improve your working environment, listen to episode 73 of the IOL podcast, [**The Generosity Culture**](https://podcast.impactofleadership.com/podcast/generosity-culture-april-shprintz/) with April Shprintz.

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