

7 tips for rebuilding social connections within your team

For managers.

CONTEXT

After the long period most people have spent working remotely, it is likely that team members have distanced themselves relationally due to the constraints that remote work may have imposed. As many people are working in a hybrid context, it may be relevant to examine the actions to take to rebuild and solidify relationships between coworkers. Therefore, here are some tips for promoting social connections at work, whether they be for working in person, remotely or in a hybrid context.

The seven tips were grouped into three themes:



Tips for decreasing relational distance

[Page 2 →](#)

1. TAKE THE FIRST STEPS BY OPENING UP FIRST
2. CREATE OPPORTUNITIES TO SOCIALIZE



Tips on management style

[Page 5 →](#)

3. TRY TO ADOPT A TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP STYLE
4. MANAGE EXPECTATIONS
5. SHOW EMPATHY



Tips on potential stressors

[Page 8 →](#)

6. TRY TO REDUCE STRESS DUE TO OVERWORK
7. PAY ATTENTION TO THE EFFECTS OF THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

Tips for decreasing relational distance



Distance is an important principle when regarding relationships at work, both between employees and with managers.

Two dimensions of distance are particularly important to consider in organizational environments where being present in person isn't always possible:



PHYSICAL DISTANCE

Physical distance refers to the objective and observable space between two objects (e.g. an employee lives 100 km away from other employees).



RELATIONAL DISTANCE

Relational distance refers to the emotional gap between two people. It is more about the perceived relational proximity of the people involved.

As such, it is just as possible to feel far away from someone physically close to you as it is to feel close to someone physically far away.

According to research, a close relational distance (or a strong sense of proximity) can benefit many aspects of remote work.

A strong sense of proximity can:

- ➔ Facilitate communication and collaboration.
- ➔ Promote feelings of trust.
- ➔ Increase employee retention.
- ➔ Result in better overall performance of workers and managers.
- ➔ Be positively associated with the commitment and satisfaction of individuals within the company.

However, there is a trend that physical distance generally leads to greater relational distance. Seeing as perceptions of distance or proximity are an essential dimension of social relationships, it is important to act in order to promote feelings of proximity between managers and employees.

Two tips to reduce relational distance

1 TAKE THE FIRST STEPS BY OPENING UP FIRST

Many managers adopt a listening approach by asking their employees questions to try to connect with them. It is important to be attentive and to ask questions, but many employees may see this approach as intrusive to their privacy and sometimes even an attempt at control by their boss.

This perception can then lead employees to become closed off rather than open up.

To avoid this outcome, managers can **open up about themselves** before adopting a listening approach, by talking about their personal lives, interests and personality, for example.

By taking the first steps, the manager leads by example and shows a willingness to connect to others and establish a good relationship. Only then will it be easier to adopt a listening attitude. Employees will also potentially be more open to answering questions and getting to know each other better, which all helps to reduce relational distance.



2 CREATE OPPORTUNITIES TO SOCIALIZE

Since things are uncertain in these turbulent times, many activities are taking place remotely, whether fully or partially. In many cases, working remotely tends to formalize interactions between people and promotes task-based relationships. Working in the same space in an in-person environment can promote more casual exchanges that allow people to get to know each other and socialize, which is sometimes sufficient to reduce relational distance.

However, it is possible to build and maintain good relationships even when working remotely by offering opportunities to socialize, which can counter physical and relational distance. These opportunities to socialize can happen both in person and remotely.

If gatherings are possible, we suggest the following ideas:

- ➔ Outside excursions, such as a hikes, sports or structured team building activities.
- ➔ Birthday celebrations.
- ➔ After-work drinks.

If you prefer remote activities, you can:

- ➔ Schedule meetings or teleconferences for casual exchanges (e.g. to talk about everyone's weekend).
- ➔ Create a group or group conversation on social media (e.g. Facebook or Teams) to feel connected to others by being able to communicate quickly.
- ➔ Coordinate breaks and chat on video calls.



In short, it is possible to create other opportunities to socialize, other than what was listed, depending on your preferences. You can even ask your employees what they would like to do, in order to promote participation.

Tips on management style



3 TRY TO ADOPT A TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP STYLE

A transformational leader has unparalleled influence on their team members and possesses a vision of the future that drives their attitudes and behaviours.

This type of leader **models valued behaviours** and inspires and motivates employees to go above and beyond. They also stimulate employees intellectually by making them **question the status quo and think of better approaches**. They also pay attention to their **employees' well-being and development** and can even go as far as to stimulate and foster the growth of new leaders.

Employees with a transformational leader often have:

- ➔ Better performance.
- ➔ More work satisfaction.
- ➔ More organizational civic behaviours that go beyond their job description.
- ➔ Less intention of resigning.

In a remote situation, this type of leadership can compensate, at least partially, for the negative effects of physical distance and can contribute to better relationships between managers and employees.

In summary, these results are due to the transformational leader's ability to be on the same wavelength as their employees, thereby promoting easier and more effective communication.

The behaviours to become transformational leaders **can be learned**. It may be prudent to consider **training on the subject** to be well supported in learning these behaviours and to take full advantage of this leadership style.

4 MANAGE EXPECTATIONS

As a manager, it is important to communicate the expectations well between you and your employees, particularly in cases where these expectations are not met. An expectation that is not met can create tension in the relationship and make it uncomfortable, causing it to erode. Therefore, it is advisable to **regularly take stock of the expectations** that have and have not been met for **both the manager's expectations toward their employees and the employee's expectations toward their managers**, since relationships go both ways.

It is important not to presume that an individual should know what they need to do and what is expected of them. Each individual is different and values behaviours in a different way, so they may not prioritize the same behaviours as another individual, which is why it is important to make certain expectations clear.

There are as many different expectations as there are relationships. Some examples are: arriving to work on time, wearing suitable clothing, filling out a certain report, providing clarification when asked, being motivated and cooperative and demonstrating independence.

Clarifying the expectations of the different parties from the start of a relationship helps avoid disappointment and ensures that the relationship develops proactively.



5 SHOW EMPATHY

Empathy can be summarized as a **state** or **activity** geared towards others or their situation.

It can be divided into two components:



AFFECTIVE EMPATHY

Refers to one's emotional response to the situation of another person.



COGNITIVE EMPATHY

Refers to the ability to adopt another's point of view by inferring or imagining their thoughts and intentions.

When someone is empathetic, especially **emotionally**, their actions can foster the development of social connections based on trust, support and cooperation.

In specific cases where something has to be shared between employees (be it resources, time, or something else), it may be wise to show **cognitive** empathy, which means trying to put yourself in the position of others, rather than showing emotional empathy. This allows for a fairer distribution between employees.

Here are some tips to better show empathy:

- ➔ It is better to be **calm** and to maintain a **neutral** point of view that is not influenced by your own habits and emotions.
- ➔ You must **avoid judging** the individual you are addressing, which means not assessing or interpreting the other's behaviour and not seeing what they are doing or feeling as good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable.
- ➔ Try instead to focus your attention on **understanding** what is happening to the other individual.
- ➔ You must **give as much importance to the individual's expressed emotions as their ideas** and avoid filtering the message according to what interests or concerns you. In this way, it is important to pay attention to what can come solely from our interpretation, since we can have biases that distort the message of other individuals.
- ➔ Learning about a person, for example through asking them questions, helps us get to know them better, as well as better understand how they see things and what they feel when faced with certain situations. Finally, you can try to imagine yourself in the other person's position by cognitively playing their role in order to better understand their point of view and how they are feeling.

Tips on potential stressors



Knowing that working from the office can promote social interactions and socializing, it may be important to pay attention to what might make employees want to work from the office rather than from home. Therefore, we will now pay close attention to a stressor on which managers can act and which can influence an employee's choice of work location, in cases where employees can choose whether to work from the office or from home.

6 TRY TO REDUCE STRESS DUE TO OVERWORK

In a study where a company's employees could choose whether to work from home or the office, employees tended to choose to work from home when they experienced stress related to a heavy workload the day before.

Being overworked is characterized by excessive cognitive, emotional and physical demands with respect to the time allotted to perform the required work.

Excessive workload can be due to various changes related to the pandemic or the major upheavals currently taking place. For example, some employees may find themselves performing work usually done by assistants (who are no longer at the office), such as printing or scanning documents and obtaining signatures from supervisors. Some workers have had tasks added to their workload that did not exist before, such as frequently filing reports on a project's progress or attending meetings that are held too frequently. To reduce the workload:

- ➔ Reduce the number of tasks.
- ➔ Discuss with the employee to reprioritize tasks.
- ➔ Equip employees when you ask them to perform new tasks.
- ➔ Avoid asking employees to work overtime.

Employees with an acceptable workload will more often work from the office than from home, which may increase the amount of social interactions possible between employees.

7 PAY ATTENTION TO THE EFFECTS OF THE WORK ENVIRONMENT AND MAKE CHANGES IF NECESSARY

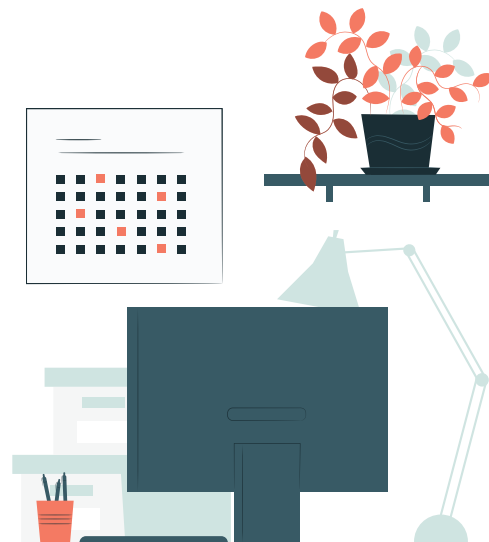
If you want your employees to physically come back to work, whether through a hybrid model or fully in person, it may be important to pay attention to how the workplace influences employees.

The office's physical elements and design can play an important role in forming work relationships and networks. On the other hand, some workplace elements may be potential stressors for employees, which can become obstacles in their performance, motivation and relationships with others.

Here are some workplace elements that can influence employees:

- ➔ Spatial organization (e.g. closed or open office layouts, the distance between desks, the location of meeting rooms, etc.).
- ➔ Decorations (e.g. artwork, colours used in the office, markers indicating locations for individuals and groups, etc.).
- ➔ Environmental conditions (e.g. temperature, sounds, ventilation, etc.).
- ➔ Presence of resources needed for different purposes (e.g. technology, assorted equipment, meeting rooms, washrooms, etc.).

There are many possible configurations within a workplace depending on the type of work being done. Therefore, it is advisable to examine the changes you could make to the work environment so that it can best meet your needs and encourage employee interactions and relationships.



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