TINA HALLIS, PH.D.
Speaker and Trainer
608 448-3576
www.ThePositiveEdge.net
Tina@ ThePositiveEdge.net

Ideas to Keep Your People Engaged and Connected While Working from Home

If your organization is like many others these days, your people are finding themselves working in a very different "normal." Some may be enjoying the change and flexibility of working from home, while others may be desperate to get back to their workplace. Despite the wide range of situations people find themselves in, there is one struggle they have in common – staying connected with their coworkers, their teams, and their bosses. The connection I'm talking about is more than just communicating updates and instructions with email or even video chat. In fact, there is much more at stake than just making sure people know what to do.

Connection Drives Trust, Collaboration, & Motivation

Studies related to Positive Psychology and employee engagement have shown that feelings of connection and belonging are critical for employee and organizational success. These feelings are the foundation for trust, collaboration, and motivation. For example, studies by Stanford Psychologist, [Greg Walton,](#) show that merely *telling* people that they're collaborating on a task will boost motivation and job satisfaction.

I was curious to learn how companies were addressing this challenge with the limitations of virtual platforms. I decided to do some interviews and research to see what I could learn and share. I not only heard about some very creative approaches; I also learned more reasons why it's so important to make sure people feel connected during these difficult times.

REASONS TO BUILD CONNECTIONS

Besides the more obvious need to keep the business moving forward, there are other reasons organizations need to take action to foster feelings of belonging with their people.

We need other people. Studies show that people with strong social networks have less stress, greater health, and even live longer. For some employees, their primary social interactions are at work. Maybe they live alone or have a full family life at home, so they don't have active friendships outside of their workplace. They've now lost this regular connection and may feel isolated, abandoned, and lonely. According to Greg Walton, "We are a social animal, and we're built to be together. That's why the feeling of loneliness, especially over long periods of time, is one of the most toxic experiences a person and a body can have. It's a greater risk factor for death and disease than smoking."

More than ever, people need to feel appreciated and receive recognition to offset the disconnect of working from home. This is easier during everyday conversations at work with coworkers and

managers, but now it takes extra effort. According to Dr. Paul White, an expert on Authentic Appreciation in the Workplace and co-author of *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace*, "The single most important lesson we have learned for effectively communicating appreciation to remote colleagues is that ***one must be more proactive*** than in face-to-face relationships."

Dr. White's research found that although people working from home still rated *Words of Affirmation* as the most desirable, the second-highest rating of *Quality Time* increased from 25% to 35% when people worked remotely. *Acts of Service* came in third with *Tangible Gifts* in last place. Now the challenge becomes two-fold; first is remembering to *tell* people that you appreciate them and their work even though you're not seeing them in-person; and second is finding creative ways to spend meaningful time with them with the limitations of virtual technologies.

People are facing extraordinary uncertainty. There are so many unknowns including the future of their work, whether they will have a job, whether they will be able to pay their bills, when they will be able to see their friends and family in person, etc. I was intrigued to learn that our brains process these unknowns as **danger**. Our survival instincts take over in an attempt to keep us safe. They cause a heightened state of fight or flight and tell us that we should anticipate the worst possible outcome, just in case. This fuels *extreme stress*. The best way organizations can help their people navigate the uncertainty is to provide constant updates. Continual communication and checking in with your people can help them feel supported and that their company cares about them.

BENEFITS OF HAVING TO WORK FROM HOME

I also discovered some unexpected benefits of this new work life.

Some people shared how the current situation has made them rethink how they do things. They find themselves reassessing their priorities, like their time with family and kids. They realize they need to slow down because their life was too busy before all this happened. This new pace makes them wonder if they even want life to go back the way it was.

People are seeing the very "human" side of their colleagues. Apologizing for interruptions from kids and pets is the new normal. There is more understanding and patience as everyone tries to manage their home life with families.

People are being more real and sharing how they're feeling because this crisis makes it more socially acceptable to do so. Talking about their challenges helps people realize that they're not alone. It creates a bond from mutual "suffering" that builds trust and rapport.

What can you do to ensure that your people feel involved and connected? Here are some ideas to try. Be sure to consider the personalities of your people. Are they quiet and reserved? Are they

more extraverted? Also consider the culture you're trying to promote. Is it more casual and fun? Is it more serious and low-key?

IDEAS TO STAY CONNECTED AND OFFER SUPPORT

- Set up virtual **water cooler time, coffee hours, or happy hours** for teams or groups. Pick a common topic for people to discuss. Break into smaller groups to make conversations easier.

- Have managers offer virtual **office hours** to make sure everyone's questions are getting answered.

- Have **food delivered** to each team member and enjoy eating together during your virtual meeting. Everyone loves free food and not cooking.

- Utilize numerous ways to **share updates, feedback, ideas, and challenges** from one-on-one meetings, group meetings, companywide meetings, emails, intranet sites, etc.

- Use **surveys** to ask your people how they think the company is handling the crisis, to ask for ideas on how to make working from home easier, and to ask how they're doing. Encourage participation by entering answers into a raffle for prizes like pizza.

- Offer coffee **chats with executive leaders** so people get a chance to ask them questions and to feel connected and heard.

- Send employees **gift packages** from local companies. Everyone likes surprise packages and feeling like someone cares about them.

IDEAS TO GET TO KNOW YOUR COLLEAGUES

- Get a glimpse into people's nonwork lives by asking them to share five pictures to help others **get to know them**. These could include family, hobbies, favorite vacations, etc. Consider setting a time limit if needed. Have every team member share at the same meeting or rotate and have a few share at each meeting.

- Go **back in time** by asking people to share 2 to 3 pictures from when they were younger. For example, everyone brings their sixth-grade picture or high school graduation picture. Mix them up and have a contest to see who can guess which photo belongs to which colleague.

- Have some fun by picking a **theme for choosing pictures** to share. One meeting could be photos of pets (live or stuffed animals). Other meetings could focus on pictures of dishes

THE POSITIVE EDGE

TINA HALLIS, PH.D.
Speaker and Trainer
608 448-3576
www.ThePositiveEdge.net
Tina@ ThePositiveEdge.net

they cooked, something interesting they found outside, something unusual and unique to their home, etc.

- Have a newer or larger team that's still getting to learn each other's names and faces? Try a game of **BINGO**. Compile everyone's photos and use a service like BingoCardCreator.com to create your custom cards.

- Get a **tour of people's homes** or workspaces. Learn more by having them share their favorite room or feature of their home. What would they change?

- Take advantage of your group's expertise by having team members share a virtual **"teaching"** class related to one of their hobbies. It could be a class about cooking, crafts, bike repair, woodworking, magic tricks, etc.

- Discover **hidden talents** by asking team members to share their musical, comedy, or performance abilities. Enjoy some live entertainment or a pre-recorded event. You may be surprised at what some of your team can do!

- Put up a map and have people mark **where they live**. Use a map of the city area, state, country, or world, depending on the group. In Zoom, people can use the annotate function to put an arrow that shows their name. Otherwise, the host can mark it on an image or slide they share on their screen.

- Have a virtual **potluck** where each member enjoys a favorite dish they made and shares their recipes. This is fun and helpful since people are cooking more meals at home.

- Ask people to submit their favorite recipes they've tried or relied on while cooking more from home, and compile the recipes into a "**Quarantine Cookbook**." Get the kids and grandkids involved by holding a coloring contest where the winning picture will be the cover of the cookbook.

- Do a virtual **book club** where people discuss a book as they read it at the same time. The group decides if they want to nominate their favorite fiction or business book or choose something no one has read before.

- Learn each other's **favorites**. One week could be sharing a few of your favorite movies, favorite books, favorite songs, favorite recipes, favorite sports, favorite apps, etc.

- Dig deeper by having everyone take a **personality or strengths assessment** or have them review a past assessment. Ask each person to share a couple of insights from their report. Now that it's harder to read people's body language on virtual platforms, it's even more important to know (and remember) coworker's personal style, strengths, and preferences.

IDEAS FOR HEALTH AND WELLNESS

The Positive Edge

TINA HALLIS, PH.D.
Speaker and Trainer
608 448-3576
www.ThePositiveEdge.net
Tina@ ThePositiveEdge.net

- Have daily posts about **wellness resources, new recipes, and challenges**. For example, one week could be a challenge around getting 10,000 steps every day. Another challenge could be meditating for 10 minutes every day.

- Connect employees to a local **Phone Pals Program** where they can use their paid volunteer hours to have friendly phone calls to vulnerable homebound individuals that are experiencing social isolation during this time.

- Share messages about various charities and their available **service activities** during social distancing.

- Get your blood moving by coming together for a **virtual exercise class**. Try different types such as yoga, tai chi, qi gong, Zumba, etc.

- Encourage people to have "**walking meetings**." Besides getting some fresh air and exercise, they could also share interesting sights in their neighborhoods.

- Have people share their **favorite "self-care" tips** they've found helpful while being at home. Examples might be cooking healthier, exercising more regularly, or taking time to relax.

IDEAS JUST FOR FUN

- If your group is up for it, have a **virtual dance party**. Pick a genre and have people dress the part.

- Play with different **dress-up themes** for your meetings. Maybe everyone wears a funny hat, funny socks, their alma mater attire, favorite sports team gear, Hawaiian shirts, 70's or 80's outfits, etc. Have everyone send in pictures and create collages to share.

- Create a **cooking challenge**. Pick 3 or 4 ingredients everyone has to use. They can make anything they want, and they have to taste it "on camera." Choose traditional ingredients or get creative with unusual combinations.

- Try a **scavenger hunt**. Create a list of things people may (or may not) have around their homes. Add everyday items to the list, like a favorite coffee mug or favorite snack, favorite decoration, favorite kitchen gadget, etc. as well as a few unique items, like a Rubik's Cube or a shoehorn. Set a timer, share the list, and see who can come rushing back with the most items on the list.

- Test each other's knowledge with a little **trivia**. Mix questions about your organization with other traditional, fun, or strange questions. Get ideas by searching for trivia questions online. Have people compete as individuals or form teams in breakout rooms.

- Have fun with this **drawing challenge**. Form teams if you have breakout rooms, or one person can describe an object to all the other players. You can create a list of simple objects to choose from ahead of time. This person can only use generic names for shapes (circle, square, oval, etc.) and their location as they try to instruct the other people how to draw it. At the end, everyone shows their drawings, and each person tries to guess the object.

- Check out options to create team **games and puzzles** using Google spreadsheets with Flippity.net. Examples include Bingo, quiz show, word scrambles, etc.

- Have team members send you a picture of **something they've created**. These might include a craft, artwork, sewing/knitting project, or auto restoration. Have people guess who did which creation.

- Ask each other **"Would you rather?"** type questions, such as "Would you rather have really long arms or really long legs?" or "Would you rather have super strength or super speed?" Search for "would you rather" questions online to get more ideas.

- Explore other **game show** type sessions or problem-solving with services like Kahoot, Quizizz, Quizlet, etc.

I would like to thank the following people for sharing ideas from their organizations.

- *Jeff Palkowski, MHRM, SHRM-SCP, PHR, Senior Human Resources Specialist Workforce Relations at University of Wisconsin - Madison*

- *Tammy Wacek, SHRM-CP, PHR, Senior Human Resources Business Partner at NeuGen*

- *Sheree Yates, SHRM-CP, PHR, Senior Director of Human Resources at Educational Credential Evaluators, Inc.*

- *Jay Stephany* SHRM-CP, PHR, HR Generalist at Network Health WI

By Tina Hallis, Ph.D., speaker, author, and founder of The Positive Edge. Her mission is to share the science of positivity to improve the quality of people's work lives and the quality of company cultures.