

If You're Not Building Bridges, You're Building Walls: Create connection with curiosity!



How can we create more connection in our groups and teams when everyone is so different? Whether it's due to differences in generations, cultures, or ethnicities, it can make people feel very isolated and alone and eventually cause them to leave. On top of these, we also have today's challenges where some people work from home while others are in the office; some people are very risk-averse and want strict health precautions and others object.

The other day, I was presenting a program at a Fortune 500 company. Afterward, I ended up having an interesting conversation with one of the employees in their IT department. The program I gave was called *"What Makes Other People Tick? Understanding and Appreciating Our Differences."* We could all agree that our differences can be beneficial, giving us more ideas, providing a wider variety of skills and experiences, etc. And we all acknowledged that differences can also cause us a lot of stress and frustration. We discussed how greater understanding can lead to improved teamwork, collaboration, and communication. But the details of that is another story. I want to get back to the conversation I had after the program.

This gentleman came up to me and said, “Wow! What you say makes so much sense. It seems to me you're either building bridges, or you're building walls. And if you're building walls, *your people are going to leave.*” I thought that was brilliant!



He said, “I get it. I get the importance of creating connection and understanding. And yet,” he said, “I work in a group where we have huge generational differences. ***I have nothing in common*** with a good portion of the people in my group.”

He proceeded to tell me more about the challenges in his group and the turnover. As we discussed his situation, I proposed the idea that people don't need to have things in common to make connection. If he wanted to help his teammates stay engaged and feel appreciated, then he could just **get curious about them**. He could get curious about what they're interested in, what they do, and what they like. Even though he may never find something in common with them, he was showing that he cared enough to ask.

He commented that it seemed like a good idea, but he was just an employee, just another person in the group. He said, “I can't force my boss to create opportunities for us to connect and learn about each other. And we are under a lot of pressure because of tight deadlines. **There just isn't time.**”

I smiled, “Isn't that funny? It's like ***you're too busy to do anything about retention*** in your group.” He said, “Yeah, retention is pretty bad. Our numbers are pretty low. And my boss wonders why. But it's because we're always busy.”

I started to tell him about the research that shows the many advantages when employees connect with each other, when they feel they have a friend at work, and when they feel like other people understand them. Then I told him about Google's Aristotle project; how Google decided to use their abundance of resources and their access to vast amounts of information to understand what makes an ideal team. They spent lots of money and lots of time. And yet, all the things that they suspected would create a great team; like having the right personalities, having the right combination of backgrounds wasn't what ended up mattering most.



They found that the number one most important factor for creating a high functioning team is **psychological safety**. It's the concept that team members trust each other, that they have each other's back, and that they can freely share ideas without feeling embarrassed. It means that they can be themselves and that they care about each other.

To create that trust, you need to help people understand and appreciate their differences and to create those connections. Again, he agreed. He said, "But I don't feel comfortable approaching my boss. I don't know that he would listen

to me."

I've encountered these words all too often. It seems ironic. **If you were the boss, wouldn't you want to know?** Wouldn't it be great if we had trusting relationships with our managers and supervisors so we felt comfortable sharing what we hear in our teams, what we feel, and our ideas? I've been fortunate to have many such experiences.

This employee commented that a lot of people would talk to his boss just before they left. They would tell the boss that they didn't feel appreciated, that people didn't listen to them. And so they were leaving. He said, a lot of times, it was people who were top performers. "Maybe they're not the loud ones. Maybe **they're not making sure other people know about their work or their ideas**. Sometimes it's because of cultural differences. Certain cultures are more reserved and respectful around authority instead of exclaiming about all of their virtues and all the things they've accomplished."

Again, I understood. I said, "So what can you do? You're one person. But you can still look for those opportunities to ask questions, to get curious, to make connections. And maybe opportunities will come up where you can make suggestions to your boss, like having a working lunch where people have a few minutes to visit, to ask about each other's weekends, to ask about their interests, to learn about their life experiences."

You could suggest that your group take personality assessments like DiSC or Myers-Briggs. Or you could learn about each other's strengths with an assessment like the [High5 test](#). There's even a [Team Strengths Assessment](#) that tells you how each of your strengths compliments those of others. These kinds of tools are great for learning how you can work and communicate together to achieve the best results and foster that feeling of safety and trust within your team. This is what building bridges is all about.

We both agreed that **if you're too busy to do anything about your employees' retention, then you must not be bothered by the cost of turnover, the cost of retraining, the cost of finding another candidate.** You must not care about the cost of getting people up to speed, of having them feel competent and being able to do a good job.



When you step back and look at the bigger picture, it's almost hilarious. How can we believe that we're too busy to take even a few minutes now and then to help build that psychological safety, to create an environment where people want to stay? Where they trust their comrades and feel important as a human being and that their work matters? It all starts with understanding and appreciating our differences. Even when it's hard to find things in common, we can ***use curiosity to build bridges and tear down walls.***



Want more ideas on how to build connection with your remote workers? Check out my article, [Ideas to Keep Your People Engaged and Connected While Working from Home.](#)

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