

How Proximity Can Save Your Team Culture

Three rules can help foster a more resilient culture.

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This article is part of our Steelcase [360 series Making Distance Work](#) about working remotely.

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The world of work that we will return to after the Novel Coronavirus will be distinctly different from the one that we recently left behind. Organizations that once insisted that their teams could never successfully work remotely will suddenly be convinced that distributed teams and working from home can be an effective and productive work mode. Contrarily, organizations that have long promoted remote work will suddenly realize that sending people away from the office wholesale comes with dramatic side effects.

Loneliness and loss of connection, a workplace epidemic that has grown increasingly disruptive, will likely spread and threaten the cultural bonds within many businesses.

Inside of any great problem, however, is the possibility for great opportunity. By understanding the drivers of loneliness, and the instigators of our loss of connection or sense of belonging, we might discover simple action steps that any organization can take to foster a resilient culture. We might also, in turn, create more meaningful workspaces for the return of our teams.

The Power of Propinquity

One of the most compelling drivers of connection is our sense of [propinquity](#). This is our natural human tendency to develop tight interpersonal bonds with the people or things that are closest to us. Propinquity exists at the core of every team, every intimate relationship, every social bond that we create. Propinquity is why your physical workplace matters as much as it does.

Twenty plus years ago I supported a workplace design project with one of the largest U.S. banking systems as they transitioned into a flexible work model they called “Future of Work.” It was an early attempt at [agile](#) and teleworking before those concepts found the mainstream. In many ways this way of work was incredibly successful. Employees reported a 41% increase in workplace satisfaction, a 10% reduction in lost time to distraction, and a 12% increase in satisfaction for the time they had for concentration.

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These statistics told a powerful story about the benefits of giving people choice over their work experiences. These numbers also hid a curious side effect. The organization was known for their tight workplace culture. Team members quickly developed meaningful and familial relationships with the coworkers that they sat next to every single day. They would attend each other’s children’s birthday parties and host weekend cookouts together. This is not an uncommon experience in many workplaces. When teams transitioned to the “Future of Work” model however, something changed. An insight shared with me by the “Future of Work” project manager was that when employees stopped sitting next to the same people every day, those relationships fractured and the culture of those teams ultimately suffered due to the lack of daily connection. People stopped going to each other’s children’s parties and weekend cookouts.

What the organization was experiencing was the power of propinquity. Unfortunately they were experiencing its negative side, what happens when a strong sense of connection fades.

Three Rules of Propinquity

Propinquity is an emotional response. It is driven as much by our hormones as it is by our intentions. Neurotransmitters produced in deep recesses of our brains, such as oxytocin, influence our sense of trust, emotional bonding and connectedness. These automatic responses can be left to chance or they can be shaped and influenced by intentional experiences that we design into our workday – both physically as well as virtually.

To harness the power of propinquity for your team, whether working from home or from the office, consider how you might address these three rules:

THE RULE OF PROXIMITY

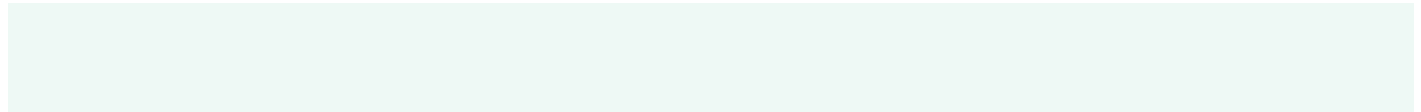
“The closer you are to someone the more likely you are to develop a bond.” Similar to what teams found in the “Future of Work” project, our proximity to each other leads to deep connections. Sharing the same physical space (or possibly virtual space) increases our chances that a relationship will develop and that our cultural influences will intertwine.

THE RULE OF FREQUENCY

“The more often you connect with someone the stronger that bond will become.” As we develop bonds, they are strengthened by the frequency of our interactions within them. The more often we see, touch and engage each other the more resilient the strands of that bond will become.

THE RULE OF AFFINITY

“The more similarities you share with someone the faster that bond will grow.” This is perhaps the most troublesome rule as it presents within it the risks of unconscious bias. It is our nature to be drawn to and to think only about people and things most like ourselves or our own interests. We seek out and develop fast connections with the people, and ideas that we most intimately and innately understand. As we shape our teams and our workplaces, we must be mindful to create experiences that promote and support a diverse experience for our entire organization, and to consider the needs and affinities of both those most like and unlike ourselves.



Proximity at Work

To help our teams adapt to this changing world of work, both now in this time of increased remote work — as well as upon our return to the physical workplace — consider these action steps to help promote proximity among your teams.

START YOUR DAY WITH YOUR TEAM

Take a lesson from agile work-models and kick off every single day with a quick group meeting. If you are working remote, choose to do this as a video call. Make this meeting mandatory even if it is not technically necessary for the tasks your team is performing. Do it for no other reason than to ensure a connection exists between the team members. Use it as a watercooler moment – share stories, discuss pop culture, keep it light and fun.

SEE FRIENDLY FACES

If your team is utilizing videoconferencing for collaboration – be relentless in your enforcement that everyone shares their video feed. Seeing each other, reading our body language and being reminded of our friendly faces, reminds us that our team is made up of people. People just like ourselves – people who we care for and who care for our shared success.

CREATE AFFINITY TEAMS

Consider finding ways for the team to celebrate their shared affinities for things non-work related. Create groups who can stream themed Spotify playlists while working remote – with Slack channels to “call in requests.” Establish book clubs (or Netflix clubs if your team is so inclined). Workout together from home with group exercise apps such as Peloton or Nike Training Club. Help your team make time to bond over their shared interests.

RETHINK YOUR WORKSPACE

As your teams start returning to the office, consider ways to celebrate the reason this place exists. It is no longer just a place to sit at a desk. Our workplaces must now become a place to connect, to reinforce our culture, to share in our proximity, and to serve all of the work experiences that are better than any individual desk could ever be. This may include places to meet, to focus, to create, to think, to collaborate, to share and to develop the bonds of a strong team.

Culture Triumphs Over Disruption

The global disruption of the COVID-19 virus will be long felt as it touches the lives of our friends, families, co-workers, partners and customers. Remembering that our human community is both resilient and interdependent allows us to have faith that no matter the challenge we will continue to benefit from and seek the power of our positive interpersonal connections. For those of us leading teams of people through this time or helping organizations transition to ever greater use of remote work – it is important that we remember that it is those frequent connections that build trust, align goals and foster our organizational culture. With a mindful approach to the influences of propinquity we can each ensure that our organizational cultures can remain strong no matter where or how we work.

Christopher Good is creative director at One Workplace, a Steelcase Dealer. His work is dedicated to changing the way we think about the built environment. He is an advocate of the design thinking process and believes in the power of design to do good things for other people.
