



Strengthening Connections

episode 007

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Overview

When teams have strong relationships and connect on a personal level, everything from dealing with conflict to sharing bold ideas to giving feedback is easier. It's important for managers to have healthy relationships with each of their team members and foster a sense of community among the entire team. Whether your team is small or large, co-located or geographically dispersed, you can use these 5 approaches, and others, to strengthen your relationships and foster connection.

5 approaches to strengthening connections with and among your team members:

1. Celebrate work-related and personal occasions
2. Share personal stories and photos
3. Take time out of the office for team building
4. Bring people together over non-work topics
5. Surprise your team with occasional special somethings

"To create a strong and engaged team, make building connection part of your team DNA."

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1. Celebrate Work-related and Personal Occasions

Identify and record important work and personal dates such as work start date and birthday. Add them in your contacts with reminders on your calendar for the day of as well as one week prior to give you time to prepare (e.g. purchase a card, order a cake or balloons, etc.)

Schedule 30 minutes for the team to celebrate all kinds of special occasions such as birthdays, new hires, work anniversaries, product launch anniversaries, big project milestones, a new baby or engagement. Order lunch, cake or other special treats for the entire team to enjoy. If you're team is virtual, offer to reimburse people for bringing their own treat to the celebration.

Coordinate a card for everyone to sign in honor of the special occasion. This may including other personal moments like completing a degree program or a death in the family. Consider sending flowers, food, or a handwritten card to the person's home if that seems appropriate.

Acknowledge religious and cultural holidays celebrated by each person. A simple holiday greeting is enough.

When a colleague departs of their own choice, share your appreciation for their contributions to the team and wish them the best on their next journey.

Celebration may be a special lunch, a card, or creating a unique gift for them to treasure.

“Honoring a person even when they leave demonstrates to everyone how much you care about your team members and their success.”

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2. Share Personal Stories and Photos

Start by sharing your own stories to role model this new behavior and avoid the feeling that you're prying. Topics may include your weekend plans, an upcoming or recently completed vacation, highlights from your kids or family life, learnings from podcasts and books, hobbies and other non-work interests. When you feel comfortable, inquire about others'.

Try using a chat app such as Slack, Microsoft Teams or Jabber. Create a channel/chat room for #vacation, #recommendations, #CoolStuff or any other topics your team find particularly interesting.

If you don't have a chat app and aren't ready to introduce one, use a system you already have such as email or a shared drive.

Use pictures to enhance the sharing. Post photos of weekend activities, vacations, and holiday celebrations. Use the chat app or create a group on another group message and photo sharing app like WhatsApp. If you're all on Instagram, consider making a special hashtag for your team photos.

Share articles or other content you enjoy and encourage others to do the same.

Ask for advice for restaurants, activities, movies, books, articles, TED talks, etc.

Share these publically in the chat app if you're using one.

Begin each one-on-one with your direct report by asking, "How are you? What's going on in your life?" When relevant, follow up on topics shared during the last one-on-one, e.g. how the kid's school play went, if they enjoyed the concert, etc.

As people begin to share, write down key information so you can reference it later, especially if you don't have a good memory. Include things like kids' and pets' names, hobbies, favorite restaurants, etc.

**"Pictures are an especially powerful way to build connections.
They help you really feel like you know someone."**

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3. Take Time Out of the Office for Team Building

Consider what format will work best for your team: a full day retreat, an after-hours event, a weekend gathering, or other format.

Use google to gather ideas for traditional team building activities and places to go in your city. Some common activities are meals, bowling, laser tag, escape room, scavenger hunt, picnic and outdoor fun. Be creative. You can also ask your team members to generate ideas.

A few things to keep in mind as you decide what to do:

- * What's your budget? Will your organization reimburse you? If yes, for how much?
- * How much time are you asking people to give outside of work hours? Are their families invited to join?
- * Does the activity require any special physical or other capabilities?
- * Is the activity one in which people may be embarrassed or uncomfortable?
- * Will alcohol be available?

For more adventurous ideas, you may want to ask your colleagues to select from a list of options or vote to ensure everyone is comfortable.

For team members who are not co-located, consider bringing everyone together for a few days. Include a mix of bonding activities and regular work time.

Out of the office get-togethers ideally will occur

- several times per year to reinvigorate the team and incorporate any new colleagues.

“The positive halo that emerges after some good fun together can last for months.”

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4. Bring People Together Over Non-work Topics

Start a book club.

- * Decide the time frame for book selection: monthly, bi-monthly, quarterly.
- * Propose a model for how books will be selected, e.g. each person (in alphabetical order) has a chance to select the book, three books will be offered and the group will vote, you'll use a existing recommended reading list.
- * Decide if reading the book will be optional or required. If required, be clear that people should view reading as part of their ongoing work responsibilities and can do so during work hours.
- * Start the conversation early by sharing thoughts via the team chat app. Create a #BookClub channel/chat room.
- * Schedule 45-60 minutes to talk about the book and learn from one another. This can be over lunch or as a workday meeting.
- * Create a list of open ended questions for the group to wrestle with. This will help the conversation get going.

Host lunch-and-learns.

- * Invite outside guests come to speak.
- * Ask team members to volunteer to share their expertise and passions.
- * Schedule 45-60 minutes for the presentation and Q&A. This can be over lunch or as a workday meeting.
- Play boardgames together. eg: strategy, competition

or collaboration ones. Check out Pandemic and Settlers of Catan.

“Give people something to talk about other than their work”

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5. Surprise Your Team with Occasional Little Special Somethings

Buy lunch for your team after a particularly long week or project, or really any time just to create an opportunity to eat together.

When you go on vacation, bring back a box of specialty treats to share.

Encourage others to do the same. Use the food as an opportunity to share your vacation experience or more about the culture of place you visited.

If you have a team mission statement or slogan, have it printed on a notebook, water bottle, sticker or other item. Provide one for each person.

Be creative! Some fun ideas include creating a team poster or holiday card, buying something particular for an individual based on a conversation (e.g. a book you were discussing.)

If you have remote colleagues, purchase a gift card to their local coffee shop or a favorite restaurant so that they can have coffee or a meal on you.

Instead of monetary or material rewards, give team members the option to donate to the charity of their choice. They can share why the cause matters to them and everyone can get to know the person more.

“Random little somethings show you are thinking about your team even when you’re not working.”