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High-Quality Connections: How to be Present When Distractions are Everywhere

We are social creatures and we are wired for connection. “In order to feel valued and cared for, we need other people to remind us that we matter,” says management consultant and business communicator Kellie Cummings. She describes a high-quality connection as “a brief exchange between two people that makes each person feel valued and more alive. These connections can occur in the workplace, and in more temporary locations like an airplane or a taxi.”

“When two people take time to really listen to each other and to acknowledge what the other is saying, each person is actually affirming each other’s dignity,” Cummings explains. “As a result of these brief, positive encounters—in which both parties experience felt vitality and energy—each person’s self-worth is elevated, which is tremendously important for human flourishing.”

Genuine connections validate others

“Making another person feel valued doesn’t happen through statements printed

on a wall or on a store receipt,” says Cummings, who speaks to groups on the topics of trust, communication and leadership.

“Meaning is transmitted through relationship, through connection, and through communication. When we recognize and affirm another person’s ideas and perspective, we validate that person. That’s how we make other people feel that they matter.”

Workplace well-being

Because humans are wired for relationship, organizations provide ideal settings for forming the social bonds that promote human flourishing, Cummings says. “Jane Dutton, the leading researcher on high quality connections, explains that positive relationships are an essential building block for thriving at work. In fact, people who work on teams that share high-quality connections experience high levels of psychological safety and trust.”

“It’s fascinating to



consider that each time we interact with someone in our department, the nature of that interaction can improve our mutual well-being,” Cummings continues. “Work gets done through social connections. We can learn to transform the nature of our everyday engagements so that they are less transactional and more life-affirming.”

“Science tells us that lack of positive human connection erodes our immunity to disease and increases our risk of anxiety and depression,” Cummings notes. “A recent survey by global health services company Cigna found that 50% of Americans feel lonely, and that the loneliness they feel increases their risk of anxiety, depression, and physical illness. Emma Seppälä, a Stanford psychologist, explains that positive social

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“People thrive on genuine connections—not with machines, but with each other. You don’t want a robot taking care of your baby; an ailing elder needs to be loved, to be listened to, fed, and sung to. This is one job category that people are—and will continue to be—best at.”

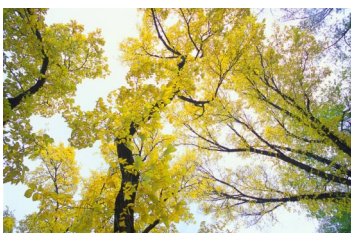
- Oren Etzioni

Task-related work removes us from valuable human connections

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“People don’t yearn for better communication. They crave understanding. Communication is the tool; trust is the goal.”

- Kellie Cummings



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Gary L. Wood & Associates, P.A.
4700 N. Habana Avenue Suite 300
Tampa, FL 33614
www.woodassociates.net

Editor

Patricia N. Alexander, Ph.D.
paalexander@woodassociates.net

Writer

Susan H. Burnell, APR
SusanBurnellAPR@gmail.com

connections actually strengthen our immune system, mitigate depression, and can even lengthen our lifespan.”

Collaboration and trust

High-quality connections also facilitate collaboration, which is the lifeblood of any healthy organization.

“Collaboration requires people to share ownership for their work product,” says Cummings. “These cooperative behaviors require trust, which cannot blossom when one person feels that they don’t matter to another person. The investment we make in fostering high-quality connections pays dividends when we need someone’s collaborative support in a project or task. Making sure that other people believe they matter improves their well-being, it strengthens our own well-being, and it improves organizational collaboration.”

Prioritizing human connection

“Challenges to building high-quality connections at work stem from our own biology and the way in which our brains work,” Cummings says. “Researchers at Case Western Reserve

discovered that when our brains are busy processing analytical information, they are unable to process social and empathetic information. Most job functions rely on concentrated analytical thinking of one sort or another. Our work is often assessed based on the tasks we accomplish. So it’s easy to believe that performing a job function is more important than the person standing in front of us.”

“To be attuned to the people standing right next to us, we need to intentionally disconnect from task-related work and focus on the human aspects of our work.”

“Small changes in interactions can improve human flourishing. For example, consider a manager who enters the workplace, goes straight to her desk, and gets to work.

While she may feel that she’s focused on tasks that matter, the people around her want to feel that they matter. The manager may be completely unaware that her behavior has a demoralizing effect on her team. Once she is aware of that, she can change how she enters the office and greets her coworkers. This small change will have an outsized impact on others—and by starting her day with positive greetings, her well-being improves also.”

Resources

Kellie Cummings: Trust, Communication, and the Science of Well-Being
www.kelliecumplings.com

Energize Your Workplace: How to Create and Sustain High-Quality Connections at Work, by Jane E. Dutton, Jossey-Bass, 2003

www.highqconnections.com

Three practical tips for better connections

- Increase your awareness of each person in your work area and their job functions. Awareness is the first step in behavior change. When you see the human dimensions of other people, you are more likely to respond empathetically.
- Intentionally alternate who you spend time with. It’s easy to take work breaks and lunch with a familiar group of people. By spending time with people you don’t know as well, you can expand your network and learn important details about those you work with.
- Express gratitude more often. One of the simplest ways to make another person feel that they matter is with the words “thank you.” By telling people that their efforts matter to us, we are also saying that they matter to us.

Source: Kellie Cummings