

How to Be a Good Colleague During the Coronavirus Crisis

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Relaxing personal boundaries with work colleagues may open the door to more trusting relationships—which is what we need in a time of intense isolation.

Photo: Martin Tognola

If there has been one joyful revelation in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis, it is the way so many people have stepped forward to serve and support their communities.

That instinct doesn't need to wait until the end of the workday.

Even though we're separated from our co-workers, we can and should think about how to be better colleagues at this very challenging moment. That means setting aside the competitive struggles and ladder-climbing that are a normal part of our everyday working lives, and instead focusing on how we can be of service to the people we work with.

Depending on your company culture and your own personal style, this might be a very big shift. It may involve relaxing your ideas about what's appropriate in a professional context,

so that you can be a little more human with your colleagues and provide logistical or even emotional support. It might involve being more open about your own life or family circumstances, so you can laugh together over the interrupting children or barking dog during a web conference. It might even involve pausing or subordinating your professional goals, so that you can go the extra mile for a colleague who is having a particularly bad day.

Relaxing these boundaries may open the door to warmer and more trusting, collegial relationships—which is exactly what we need in a time of intense, often painful isolation.

Bonding through adversity

That transition may well be easier than you think, now that you and your colleagues are seeing one another in more personal contexts. Once you watch that cutthroat colleague comforting his 3-year-old when she wanders into view, or witness your dressed-to-the-nines boss on a web conference in sweats and a ponytail, you may find it easier to see them as actual human beings. The knowledge that you're all facing the same crisis may give you some sense of bonding. And the small things that once drove you apart—the way one person peppers her emails with emojis, the way another communicates in ALL CAPS—suddenly seem trivial, or even endearing.

Still, taking the next step and actually offering support to a colleague can feel a little awkward, because you don't want to be intrusive—and you may be uncomfortable in the role of confidant. Start by dipping a toe in the water: ask how a colleague's family is holding up and staying healthy. (You don't have to ask every single time.) If a colleague shares a worry about an elderly parent or about her own vulnerability, take the time to ask some questions that show sincere concern. But don't offer advice unless it is requested, and pay careful attention to any verbal cues or facial expressions that suggest your colleague is ready to wrap up the personal part of your interaction. Simply giving someone the room to express their anxieties is an act of compassion, especially if you can do it without judgment and without making someone worry they have violated some kind of professional boundary.

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While you're reaching out, make a special effort to extend personal support and connection to at least one relatively new or junior colleague. Think about how much harder it is to learn the ropes when the ropes have all gone home for the foreseeable future. If you're already mentoring a colleague, double down on that relationship and let your mentee know that you're available for more frequent calls, advice or maybe even some life guidance.

Whether you're making small talk or doing a deep dive, remember that people have vastly different levels of personal anxiety right now, and vastly different tool sets for dealing with it. Don't confuse the way someone presents with the truth of how they are actually coping: Some people who seem fine may be in real trouble, and some people who seem like they are falling apart may just be sharing their anxieties as a way to move through them.

And remember that not all support you offer has to be emotional; you might also think about providing more pragmatic help. Teach your colleague to use Slack even if you're not in IT; help an overloaded colleague complete the PowerPoint deck she would have finished three days ago if her children weren't home. Just avoid making spontaneous offers you can't follow through on, and be direct about your own boundaries and limitations.

In the midst of all this, feel free to lean a little on your colleagues, too. When so many of our usual relationships and interactions have been disrupted, we all need to get more emotional satisfaction from the relationships that are still in place.

You don't have to get into heavy stuff at all if it makes you uncomfortable; you can form a stronger personal bond, and increase your sense of connection, with much more casual fodder. Consider allowing yourself a little time to talk about what you're each bingeing on Netflix, or to compare notes on how you're keeping your children occupied, or, most important of all, where you last saw hand sanitizer for sale. These little doses of chitchat are like vitamins that fortify us for the next 24 hours without outside contact.

A brighter tomorrow?

Throughout all these interactions, it is crucial to remember that just about everyone is going through one of the hardest periods of our lives. We are just going to have to forgive each other for occasional lapses in courtesy, moments of temper or days of subpar work.

The scary and hopeful thing is that we are all going to be changed by this experience, individually and collectively. We could certainly be changed for the worse, left with collegial relationships that are resentful and frayed, and with a company culture that is brittle and guarded.

But we can also be changed for the better. We can emerge from this trial with collegial relationships that are newly compassionate, trusting and effective; with company cultures that are more supportive, more forgiving and more close-knit. We can emerge into a world of workplaces in which humanity is the norm, and not the expectation.

That is the world I want to live in, when I finally leave my house.

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Share Your Thoughts

Have you noticed changed boundaries between co-workers during the coronavirus crisis? How are you navigating them? Join the conversation below.

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