

The paradox of social distancing: We've grown closer to co-workers during the coronavirus pandemic

May 13 2020, by Andrew Gaudes



Working from home means people see their co-workers in a different and more personal context. Credit: Dylan Ferreira/Unsplash

While driving to work in the first week of 2020, I came upon the aftermath of a horrific vehicle collision involving a pedestrian. An hour later, I was in a meeting with colleagues at Brock University. Although still disturbed by what I saw, I didn't share the experience with anyone.

A few days later, [Ukrainian Airline Flight 752 was shot down by Iranian missiles](#), killing everyone on board—including dozens of Canadians who were closely affiliated with universities across Canada. Here again, at a meeting with colleagues, I didn't bring up this tragedy. Despite the fact many Canadian academic institutions had just experienced a staggering loss of brilliant minds and their potential to improve our world, it wasn't addressed by me or anyone else in the room.

I was so troubled by my own failure to discuss these events, I reflected upon what prevented me from sharing and expressing my feelings. By no fault of any one individual, we are first and foremost driven with workplace purpose within our organizations. As a result, we have neglected our connection to each other to focus on getting the job done.

Now, however, this desire to prioritize performance over relationships has been challenged with the onset of a global crisis—one that could redirect our purpose and redefine human connection.

Virtual, not in-person connections

As COVID-19 moved across the globe, we had little control of its approach beyond washing our hands, not touching our faces, remaining physically distant and staying home. At many offices, non-essential operations were moved into a remote workplace and co-workers connected virtually over video conferences.

And then something remarkable happened. We began to see the people we work with in their own environments—in home settings with partners, children and pets. Some of our co-workers showed up with bedhead. Others wore hoodies.

We began to experience a more complete picture of our colleagues, managers and employees as people. And we began to ask, with the

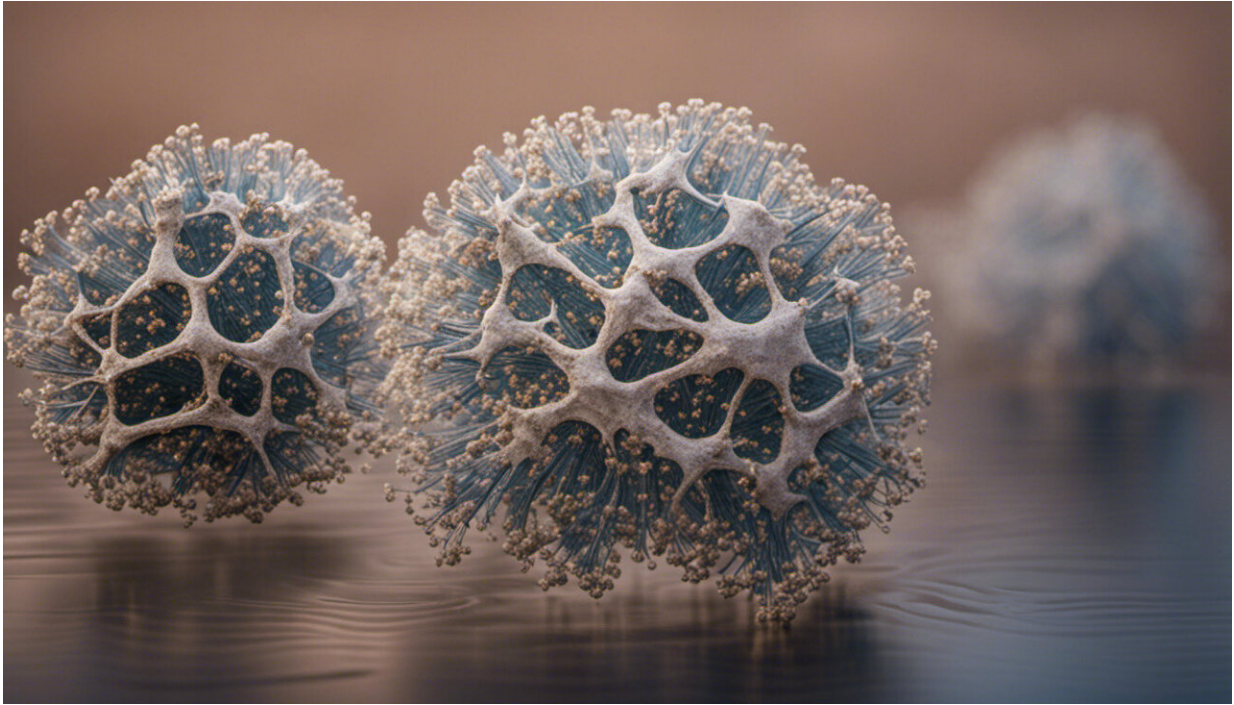
greatest level of sincerity: "How are you?"

In my work —research and practice on virtual methods of collaboration and crisis management —maintaining a human connection is an important factor towards successful outcomes.

For remote methods of working, [such as virtual teams](#), we rely on technology to effectively deliver on tasks assigned through the day. However, it's also important to socialize and connect with others. In a world supported by technology, people still long for personal, human contact. Simply put, high-tech requires high-touch.

Need for human interaction remains

[In coping with disruptive events](#) and moments of crisis, communication and human connection are imperative to working through difficult situations. While the current environment prevents us from being together, our need for human interaction still remains.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Physical distancing and [social isolation](#) has meant that for the first time ever, we have been truly able to identify with people around the world. Whether the [news reports](#) are coming from Wuhan, Milan, Mumbai, Dubai or Montréal, we are all experiencing the same risks and anxieties.

In [teaching ethics and social responsibility](#), we discuss how our capacity to empathize decreases by the distance in context, family, region or race. The requirement to maintain a physical distance has, paradoxically, decreased our emotional distance to each other. We share the same pain.

"[We will get through this together](#)" has become the clarion call of many political leaders and public health officials during the pandemic. What lies on the other side remains a question.

Today, I know that if I were in a meeting with colleagues and I was troubled by a tragic event, I would share my thoughts. I also believe others in the room would do the same.

Work culture will have changed

As restrictions are lifted and we start to return to our workplaces, life and organizational culture will have changed. There will be a sustained period of reflection where we will contemplate everything that's happened. We will come together, but physical distancing will still be necessary. Instead of embracing each other to help soothe the pain of months apart during a shared [traumatic experience](#), we will awkwardly look at each other, unsure of how to react.

How do we acknowledge and share in the mutual anxiety we have all experienced? We will need to maintain our physical distance, but that should not go without visual acknowledgement through a smile, a nod and likely the shedding of a tear.

When we finally leave our makeshift home offices and return to our places of work, we will likely bring with us a higher level of shared context—that we have literally all gone through this together.

Having experienced a shared purpose of surviving the virus, we will maintain a higher level of respect and empathy for each other. Managers should become advocates of this new behaviour and underscore that it's OK to feel the way we do.

Our "return to normal" will be different for each of us. There will be moments when a swell of emotions and spontaneous tears occur. Boxes of facial tissue—and hand sanitizer—will be standard issue for every workstation. Other times, we may momentarily forget the traumatic events we all experienced and continue just as we did before all of this

happened.

Most important, through all of this, we should not lose the importance of human connection. Our workplace is more than getting the job done. It is also a place to feed the soul, nurture relationships and create opportunities for people to engage and interact.

Ultimately, it is the human connection that will get us through this pandemic and sustain us as we collectively build the new normal in our workplaces.

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