

Cultivating Connections Now and Moving Forward

“How are you?” Has this once generic greeting been a conversation game changer since the onset of COVID-19? The once rhetorical and sometimes disingenuous greetings “How are you?” as well as “How have you been?” have taken on new meaning long after we find ourselves on the other side of the pandemic.

Faced with shifting economics, WFH, childcare, and school as well as romantic and social challenges, staying in touch and cultivating connections with family, friends, colleagues and the community at large is a lifeline to the future. Hosting or sitting in on a business, social or family Zoom meeting does not suffice to stay connected.

Our new lingo now includes “zoom fatigue”, so for many virtual meetings it is a challenge to focus or truly connect. How about some tips and tools to enhance your efforts?

Zoom calls, WebEx , a phone call or any type of meeting focused on business will benefit now more than ever from what I label “the picture frame of small talk” around each and every business conversation. For a few minutes before and a few minutes at the end of the business meeting lead and end with small talk. Carving out time at the start of meetings to catch up a little is a key ingredient. These connecting conversations create and enhance business friendships. And as we all know people do business with their friends! Many meetings might start with some informal small talk, with team members sharing small pieces of their lives and families. This is a good thing: Research shows that teams that sometimes share personal information perform better than teams that don't. When leaders model this, it often boosts team performance even more. But the switch to video conferencing can sometimes make it feel like you have to get down to business faster.

One would expect virtual family meet ups or girlfriend happy hours to easily jump from one person to another and one topic to another. Yet more often than not there are

uncomfortable pauses, or family monopolizers, those who never contribute energy or information.

How about a 1 minute check-in per participant to launch each get together or meeting?

Ask each person to contribute one minute on:

Bucket list item

Number one self-care activity

Best takeaway from lockdown and the journey we have been on these past 2 years

Book, movie, TV or podcast recommendation

For meetings of larger groups request attendees to be prepared to display a picture from their past week, or month during the first few minutes. Most would not want to miss out on this opportunity to see what others are willing to share. Plus this may encourage folks to login on time or a bit early!

In the past during our face-to-face conversations and during the course of meetings, we often picked up on social and visual cues: Someone leaning forward who might wish to add to the conversation, or someone with a bewildered expression responding to a point that is made. But these cues can be harder to see on video, potentially resulting in people speaking up less or a simply a lack of connectivity in conversation.

Visual listening cues can make a difference. For example, when you need to engage, keep your eyes focused on your fellow video chat participants, instead of on your inbox or social media, and show that you're listening by nodding and smiling. Remind yourself to look into the camera rather than at yourself onscreen. This will help everyone better read emotions, analyze ideas and maintain a link to the conversation.

And don't forget that phone feature on your phone! It is simple to schedule a call or spontaneously reach out rather than the text or email.

Some good conversation launchers are:

How are you holding up?

What is new with the family since we last caught up?

I was thinking about you when I saw/read about....

I am thankful to be able to talk with you/I am thankful to be able to catch up with you

Let me tell you about this _____ I loved.

Something that made me smile lately is...

Catch me up on your latest home project....

Be sure to avoid falling into conversations that in any way resemble the following: “You think that is a tough situation, wait till I tell you what is happening for me.” It may be reflexive to try to relate to someone when they are sharing a negative experience but this can unintentionally lessen what they are going through. Responding with: “Yes, I know...” can lead to frustration and a disconnect as well. Think back to a conversation you had with a friend or family member who is expressing their frustration with a situation happening in their life. Have you ever listened to someone vent about a situation, and responded with “yes, I know how that feels” when you have never actually experienced it yourself? Certainly not in the exact same way. You may instinctively be trying to show your understanding, but it can be very frustrating to the person who is sharing their story. It is much better to respond with, “That must be so frustrating”, or “My heart goes out to you that you have so much on your plate”. If you have the time, encourage the other party to tell you more using verbal cues (examples: “What happened next?”, “How does that work?”, “Give me an example of what you mean by that...”) to embolden them to continue to talk.

If someone has chosen to share a negative or sensitive experience with you, it is important to not only listen to them, but acknowledge and thank them for choosing you as someone they are sharing this with. It is true that COVID causes worry and unease, but it can promote a bond, because we actually have a conversation that shares a commonality. This is the time to let the people on the zoom or phone call know how much you appreciate them and how precious each interaction can be for you.

Anyone reading this can be a leader and role model displaying new techniques, and innovative approaches to staying in touch and cultivating connections.

Debra Fine is a former engineer, now keynote speaker and trainer and the author of the bestselling book *The Fine Art of Small Talk How to Start a Conversation, Keep It Going, Build Networking Skills - and Leave a Positive Impression* (Hachette)