Building a Better (Virtual) Workplace

Today’s workplace often is not a “place” in the physical sense at all. It can be a network of employees and managers working at home or in satellite offices thousands of miles apart. Or it can include both telecommuters and workers in a traditional office setting. Whatever the setting, the need for fostering teamwork and creating a sense of community is critical.

The good news is that communication tools such as instant messaging, Web-based conferencing software and e-mail can give virtual teams the power to meet, share notes, brainstorm and plan via online networking.

But, remember, technology doesn’t replace the need for personal contact. “We have a strong belief that technology will be a substitute for good management and good communication,” says project management consultant Martin VanDerSchouw. It may take a little more effort to pick up a phone or schedule an occasional face-to-face meeting, but it is an important part of forming and maintaining productive work relationships.

Here is some advice on building a better virtual workplace.

Maintain the personal touch

E-mail is a very efficient way to get information from one mailbox to another. But a phone call is often just as easy and allows employees to interact with each other on a more personal level. If available, a Web-based video conference can enable off-site staff to see as well as hear one another when they meet to collaborate and plan.

VanDerSchouw suggests leaders use different channels of communication (such as in-person meetings, the telephone, Web conferencing) and not rely just on e-mail. And whatever channels are available to you at a given time, choose those with the highest degree of personal contact. Linda Pophal, author of Managing Off-Site Staff for Small Business, says dispersed workers and managers “still need some face-to-face interaction.”

Create team spirit by celebrating individuals

“Employee of the month” awards aren’t just for traditional office settings. Such recognition may be even more important in dispersed workforces, where people often work alone and may wonder if anyone’s noticing.

“Just because you don’t see them doesn’t mean they’re not important,” says Perkett. Her firm names an “MVP employee” monthly. She says the honor includes an article in the firm’s online newsletter and a small gift—such as a Starbucks card for a dedicated coffee drinker—that shows “the company knows you as a person.”
Employees need to reach out, too

Employees must take responsibility for staying in touch. In addition to the communication suggestions described above, the following tips can help:

- Attend office meetings.
- Update office colleagues about projects.
- Know others’ schedules.
- Establish “office hours.”
- Touch base with team members weekly.
- Get office news.
- Request feedback often.
- Check your progress often.

If possible, attend office social events. If that’s not possible, keep in mind that the social activities that do so much to build team spirit and morale at a conventional workplace are possible among dispersed employees as well. But they can’t just be planned around the water cooler. They require more thought and initiative by the employees.

Resource


Sources: Christine Perkett, president and founder, Perkett PR Inc., Boston, Mass.; Linda Phophal, principal, Strategic Communications LLC, Chippewa Falls, Wis.; Martin VanDerSchouw, president and CEO, Looking Glass Development LLC, Denver, Colo.

By Tom Gray
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Assertiveness Skills for the Workplace

Can a shy person excel—or even survive—in today’s competitive workplace? The answer is a resounding “yes,” according to career counselors, psychologists and executive coaches.

Know yourself

1. Are you quiet at work?
2. Do you speak up at meetings?
3. When you think you’ve done a good job on a project, do you keep that information to yourself?

If you answered “yes” to any of those questions, you may be more introverted than extroverted, at home and at work.

Toss out stereotypes
Not everyone understands shy people, especially in the workplace. Because they don’t toot their own horns, co-workers might think quiet people are unproductive, slow or even disinterested in what they do. In fact, nothing could be farther from the truth!

Shy people work just as hard as everyone else and, sometimes, harder. They might not speak up at meetings, but that’s because they want to think before they speak.

"Introverts at work are often quite articulate and thoughtful public speakers when given the correct situation and preparation," says Steve Langerud, director of career development for DePauw University. "We are socialized to see leadership and success as extroverted, aggressive, and male when, in fact, most of us are not all three and we succeed just fine."

**Acknowledge and honor who you are**

No one is totally extroverted or introverted, but it’s important to recognize and acknowledge where you feel most comfortable on the spectrum between the opposite poles of social behavior. If you’re shy, you tend to hold back and stay out of the spotlight, something you most likely learned as a child. Even if you want to, you don’t feel comfortable contributing to a group discussion.

"If we look at what we learned in our original organization—the family—and see how we have brought that behavior to our current organization—the workplace—we can begin to make the internal adjustments that will give us what we want,” explains Sylvia Lafair, author of *Don’t Bring It to Work*.

You may think you can be shy at home but outgoing at work, but psychologist Lafair says that is not the case. You can learn new behaviors to help overcome some stress you’re having at work or in social situations. But, even if you learn new behaviors, you will remain a shy person. Your basic personality will not change, even if you experience less stress than you once did in similar situations.

"Honor who you are because you won’t change,” advises career consultant Linda D. Henman, PhD. "Be heartened by the awareness that many senior leaders are introverts. They have learned to adjust their behavior to meet the demands of their jobs, but because they have the essentials of leadership—integrity, drive, and brains—they have made it.”

**Emphasize your strengths**

In general, introverted people are:

- thoughtful and inclusive in forming work teams
- more focused on process than outcomes
- able to contribute as much to a workplace as anyone else
- often strong supervisors
- calm under pressure
- reflective and analytical
dependable
able to “walk the talk”
likely to say what they mean and mean what they say
consistent

Expand your network

Job coaches offer the following networking tips for shy people:

1. **Establish connections with colleagues or potential employers through online websites**, such as LinkedIn, Facebook or Twitter. Internet networking offers you a way to introduce your strengths and abilities to others before an interview or meeting. Through these sites, you can build common ground before you meet someone in person.
2. **Look for informal ways to network within your workplace**. Volunteer for fundraisers, sports teams or social programs.
3. **Join Toastmasters International to gain practice in public speaking**, suggests Robin Ryan, author of *Soaring on Your Strengths*. Put your skills to work in civic or service organizations before you bring them to work.
4. **Work on your written presentation skills**. Get training, if you need it, in word processing, graphics, photography or PowerPoint.

Try something new

Don’t hide your personality—turn it into a strength! Milan P. Yager, president of National Association of Professional Employer Organizations, says shy people should focus on their abilities when talking about their work. Say something like, “I’m glad I was able to contribute my research [or strategic thinking, organizational skills or whatever] to Project X.”

Plan what you will say in a meeting or any important conversation, suggests David Levin, author of *Don’t Just Talk, Be Heard!* When you speak at meetings, use positive, non-personal language. Make sure you are connecting emotionally to colleagues when you speak to them. Use stories whenever you can. Keep the focus off yourself, but on the work at hand.

Watch your body language. Don’t cross your legs or arms, and don’t hide your mouth while you speak, warns Maryann Karinch, author of 16 books about human behavior.

Have more meaningful conversations (in the form of feedback to direct reports, for example) and fewer superficial ones (such as gab sessions at the water cooler).

Although we tend to act one way, we also have power within us to take that pattern and move it to a healthy, positive, opposite one, Lafair says. She teaches a technique called OUT, an acronym for observe, understand and transform. Here are her tips for changing behavior, but not personality:

1. **Observe** yourself in different settings throughout the day, for several weeks. Take note of times when you feel shut down, intimidated, or uncomfortable for not speaking up. You’ll begin to see where your buttons get pushed.
2. **Understand**. Look back at how you responded in uncomfortable situations when you were a child. When did you
hold back your feelings? When was it unsafe to speak up? What made a message dangerous?

3. **Transform.** Take a risk and do something different. If you are in a meeting, speak first, no matter how hard that may be. If your tendency is to please people, practice saying the word “no” out loud. If you always say “yes,” try to say what you really think the next time you are asked.

Knowledge is power. Lafair believes that practicing these techniques will help you change behavior slowly and steadily. Even subtle change can help you cope better in stressful situations.

Whatever you do, be proud of what you are and what you contribute to the team. Despite what you may have heard, introverted people are valued in the workplace. As one job coach said, “You can always count on an introvert!”

**Resources**

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By Paula Hartman Cohen
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**Workplace Happiness: What Everyone Can Do to Set a Positive Tone**

You can’t do much about the economy or the state of the world. But you can make your workplace a little happier—maybe a lot happier, if others follow your example.

The secret to such power lies in what social scientists call the “contagion effect” of emotions in groups. Your emotions not only affect those around you. They also can spread to total strangers. In one study tracking 4,739 residents of Framingham, Mass., for 20 years, researchers James H. Fowler and Nicholas A. Christakis found “clusters of happy and unhappy people” in the town’s social network. “The relationship between people’s happiness,” they said, “extends up to three degrees of separation (for example, to the friends of one’s friends’ friends).”

The typical workplace is far smaller than Framingham, and the impact of one person’s mood or behavior can be much more obvious. So what can you do to set a positive tone? Here is some advice from management experts and psychologists.
Small gestures count

Smiling and saying hello to co-workers takes little effort and could have a big effect. Sigal Barsade, a management professor at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, says such small gestures can be like “striking the match in the workplace—the match toward positive.”

One person’s body language and facial expressions also can affect a group’s emotions, as Barsade found in a laboratory study. Being nice to other people also helps develop a culture of reciprocity, where everyone tacitly agrees to return the help and emotional support they receive.

Barsade admits that it is easier to create a positive atmosphere if you’re not acting alone, but if you don’t start the process, who will?

Curb your negatives

You can spread negative emotions as easily as positive ones, especially if you are not conscious of your effect on others. “Try to understand how your behavior makes experiences” for others, says Purdue University psychologist Howard Weiss. “A lot of the time, we create negative experiences in other people because we behave in ways that we know are wrong but we can’t control ourselves,” he says.

Weiss suggests replenishing your “regulatory resources” by taking time off from the emotional work of self-regulation. Getting away from the workplace social setting during the day can be useful. Barsade says a short “time-out” can be helpful when you find your mood sagging and don’t want to bring others down. Even just stepping outside the workplace for a few minutes of reflection can do the job.

Watch what you bring to work

If you start the work day grouchy, chances are that you will end it that way. In a study of call-center employees, Wharton professor Nancy Rothbard and Steffanie Wilk of the University of Ohio’s Fisher School of Business found that the mood people brought with them to work had a stronger effect on their day (and their performance) than anything that happened at the workplace. (They also found, happily, that positive moods have a more potent impact on productivity than negative moods do).

Such research makes the point that there’s not a sharp boundary between work and the rest of life. “You don’t enter some sort of cloister when you go to work,” says Weiss.

But you can work to soften the impact of your mood when it’s a bad one. “The first thing is to be aware of it,” says Barsade. “This goes a long way toward diminishing it, because at least you’re paying attention.”

And if you come to work cheerful, so much the better for your co-workers—as long as you don’t hide the positive emotion that you feel.
Managing Change With Resilience

Resilience is the ability to return to the original state or form after being stretched, compressed or bent. It is the ability to recover from adversity. Needless to say, developing resilience is a highly desirable quality in today’s ever-changing world.

In his book *Resilience: A Change for the Better*, Daryl R. Conner outlines five characteristics of resilient people. They are:

- positive
- focused
- flexible
- organized
- proactive

**Positive**

Resilient people are optimists. They display a self-assurance that is based on their view that life is complex but filled with many opportunities. Optimists believe that defeat is temporary and its causes are not solely their fault, but rather due to unfortunate circumstances. Conversely, the pessimist believes that defeat will last a long time and assigning blame to someone—including him or herself—is necessary.

Here are some tips that may help you to further develop a positive characteristic:

- Use a journal to maintain a list of daily accomplishments, no matter how small, related to your change initiatives.
- Accept compliments and praise from others with a genuine “thank you” instead of discounting them.
- Concentrate on becoming better at a new task rather than perfecting it.
- Practice using positive “self-talk” phrases, such as “this too shall pass” or “I will only ask myself to do the best I can rather than never to make any mistakes.”

**Focused**

The focused characteristic of resilient people has to do with having a clear vision of what they want to achieve. Focused people take the time to write down their goals, objectives, obstacles and the strategies they will employ to find solutions for problems facing them.
Here are some ideas to help you become more focused:

- Visualize yourself as you would like to be one year from now after successfully making the transition through the change. Put a sign or picture on your bathroom mirror or desk to remind you of your vision.
- Set specific short-, medium- and long-range goals for yourself relating to your change initiative. Base your goals firmly on your personal values.
- Ask someone you trust to review your goals and give you feedback and suggestions on how you can further target the steps needed for successfully making the transition through the change.

**Flexible**

Flexible people are those who demonstrate a special pliability or adaptability when responding to uncertainty. This resilient characteristic requires that you identify and compartmentalize your fears when facing new and intimidating situations.

Here are some suggestions that may help you to further develop flexibility:

- Swap sides in a discussion where you disagree with someone—you argue their side and ask them to argue your side.
- Identify someone who typically approaches things differently than you do and ask them for input on a particularly difficult aspect of your change initiative. Listen to their ideas without interrupting them or passing judgment.
- Drive a new and unfamiliar route to a store or a friend’s house. Make note of what you see that’s different from your usual route.

**Organized**

Organized people have the knack for developing structured approaches to managing ambiguity. They creatively plan, carefully set priorities and engage in deliberate action steps in order to accomplish tasks.

Here are some tips of simple to-dos to help you become more organized:

- Purchase and use a day planner.
- Take a few moments to think through and list the key steps you need to take to accomplish a task *before* you tackle it.
- Put pieces of paperwork and important information in clearly marked files and put them in an accessible place.
- Break down a problem, any problem, into smaller pieces—then tackle the easiest piece first.

**Proactive**

The proactive characteristic of resilient people means that they *engage* change rather than simply defend against it. They are not reactive. They take the offense rather than the defense. They take calculated risks and then apply lessons learned from past experiences to similar challenges facing them.

Here are some suggestions that may help you in further developing your ability to be proactive:
Develop plans for managing the worst-case scenario that might result from the change.

Practice assessing the risks about a change initiative by listing all of the pros and cons you can think of. Ask yourself: What if...?

Developing these resiliency characteristics takes time and practice. Give yourself the gift of time and reward yourself generously for your successes and efforts.

By Karen S. Dickason, LCSW, CEAP

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Shots for Safety

There are many shots, or vaccinations, that may keep you from getting sick. Some of these shots may also protect you from getting a serious form of the illness. Here is a list of shots that may keep you healthy. Talk to your doctor about which ones you need.

Flu

Flu is the short name for influenza. It can cause fever, chills, sore throat, and stuffy nose, as well as headache and muscle aches. It's easy to pass from person to person. Flu is very serious when it gets in your lungs. That's why it's so important to get a flu shot.

The virus that causes flu changes from year to year. This means you need to get the flu shot every year. It takes a while for the medicine in the flu shot to start protecting you, so you should get your flu shot between October and November. Then you will be protected when the winter flu season starts.

Pneumococcal disease

Pneumococcal disease is a serious infection that is spread from person to person by droplets in the air. It can cause problems with your lungs, or it can spread to other parts of the body. People 65 and older should get a pneumococcal shot. It’s safe and can be given at the same time as the flu shot. Most people only need a single shot. But, if you were younger than 65 when you had the shot, you may need a second shot to stay protected.

Remember, some illnesses or treatments can weaken your immune system. It’s important to talk to a doctor who knows your health history before taking any vaccine.

Tetanus and diphtheria

Getting a shot is the best way to keep from getting tetanus and diphtheria. Tetanus (sometimes called lockjaw) is caused by bacteria found in soil, dust, and manure. It enters the body through cuts in the skin.

Diphtheria also is also caused by bacteria. It can affect the tonsils, throat, nose, or skin. It can spread from person to person. Diphtheria is a very serious illness.
Most people get their first shots for tetanus and diphtheria as children. For adults, a booster shot keeps you protected; it’s important to get it every 10 years. Ask your doctor if you need a booster shot.

**Shingles**

If you had chickenpox when you were young, the virus is still in your body. When you are older, the virus may become active again and you can develop shingles. Shingles causes a rash of blisters on the body or face. It can be a very painful disease. Even when the rash disappears, the pain can stay. Now there is a shot for people 60 or older that may prevent shingles. Ask your doctor if you should get the shingles vaccine. Check with your health insurance to see if the cost of the shot is covered.

**Measles, mumps and rubella**

The vaccine given to children to prevent measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) has made these diseases rare. Measles, mumps, and rubella are often more serious in adults than in children. If you don’t know if you’ve had the diseases or the shots, you can still get the shot.

**Side effects of shots**

Common side effects for these shots are mild and include pain, swelling, or redness on the arm where the shot was given. It’s a good idea to keep your own shot record listing the types and dates of your shots, as well as any side effects or problems.

**Travel**

Check with your doctor or local health department about the shots that you need if you’re going to travel to other countries. Sometimes a series of shots is needed. It’s best to get them early, at least 2 weeks before your travel. For information about shots you may need, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website or call the information line for international travelers at 877-394-8747.

**Keep up-to-date**

Most of the illnesses listed in this fact sheet are much harder on adults than on children. Take the time to protect yourself by keeping your vaccinations up-to-date.

Source: National Institute on Aging, U. S. Department of Health and Human Services

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