

Ask the Expert: Virtual Teams



“How can we encourage casual, unplanned interactions while working remotely?”

Encourage Social Affinity & Increase "Physical" Proximity



What the Research Says...

- While interacting virtually, team members lose subtle, yet important, cues (e.g., tone of voice, facial expressions, conversational cadence). This can make virtual conversation feel more stilted and unnatural ([Ford et al., 2017](#)).
- Virtual teams tend to emphasize taskwork more than relationships ([Gilson et al., 2015](#)).
- Unintended relationships are most likely to form with greater social affinity and closer physical proximity ([Nahemow & Powell, 1975](#)).

Getting Intentional About Being Unintentional



Social Affinity

Team members can intentionally find ways to make more **personal connections**.

This might include affording time in meetings to share:

- What people did over the weekend.
- The hobbies and interests team members have.

Team Leaders can **emulate** and **signal the value** of these types of conversation to create a balance between taskwork and relationships.



"Physical" Proximity

In traditional offices, people will congregate around the water cooler or break room.

For virtual teams, the goal is to recreate a **"virtual water cooler."**

This might consist of:

- Coffee Chats
- Brown Bags
- Happy Hours

Virtual water coolers will be more impactful if they span groups, divisions, and boundaries.



Next Steps

- Teams can experiment and innovate with their strategies for encouraging unplanned interactions.
- Virtual teams can find themselves prioritizing taskwork as deadlines loom. This is an ideal time to revisit the group's commitment to relationships.



Additional Resources

- Recently, CCL developed a webinar that provides a deeper dive on how to encourage healthy relationships in virtual teams.
- **Learn more [here!](#)**