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!