

Remote Work Engagement Across Generations

Building genuine connection in a remote workplace takes intentional effort—and it looks different depending on who's on your team. These chapters tackle two related challenges: keeping employees socially engaged when the watercooler is gone, and navigating the real generational differences that shape how people experience remote work. With perspectives from business leaders and research on generational dynamics, you'll gain practical tools for fostering inclusion and morale across a diverse, distributed team.

CREDIT HOURS 2 | FIELD OF STUDY BUSINESS | EXAM QUESTIONS 10

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LEARNING ASSIGNMENTS AND OBJECTIVES

Assignment

- Study the full course materials included here.
- Complete the review questions after each chapter.
- Answer 10 final exam questions.
- Final exam is scored immediately, 70% or better passes.
- Certificate of completion is available in your account.
- Failed exams can be retaken free of charge.

Course Objectives

- Recognize the ways in which remote worker emotional needs can be met.
- Recall the differences between the various generations that comprise a modern workforce.

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Chapter 1: THE WATERCOOLER HAS MOVED: ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIALIZING REMOTELY

Chapter Objective

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Recognize the ways in which remote worker emotional needs can be met.

It used to be that the watercooler was a place for random, impromptu conversations with employees and managers at the office. If you saw someone heading for the watercooler, you might decide to get a drink and head over to strike up a *conversation*. The term watercooler moment resonates in popular culture. Television shows such as *Game of Thrones*, *Friends*, and *Seinfeld* have been dubbed watercooler shows because people would talk about the previous night's episode around the watercooler with their co-workers.

What this demonstrates is our social nature. We look for a connection with each other, whether it is at work or school or in other settings. Being social and interacting with each other are human nature. It has been observed that when we are not able to be socially interactive, our overall well-being begins to break down in both a mental and physiological manner. People need social interaction in order to remain healthy. A business also needs for its people to have social interaction in order for it to remain healthy as an organization.

I mentioned in the last chapter that a good part of business is built on relationships. That is true in multiple aspects. Building personal relationships with co-workers builds stronger teams. The personal relationships create bonds of trust and a willingness to go the extra mile for a teammate. Good relationships bring good results. Companies should encourage strong relationships between co-workers to build stronger team players. These are virtues and interpersonal skills that will serve them well even after they have left the company. During a forced work-from-home situation, making conscious efforts to enable socialization of the team is even more important. It has positive impacts on the health and mental wellness of your employees. It helps to bring your teams together.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL ISOLATION

Well before the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers were studying the feelings of isolation that came with working remotely. Even before the additional stress of the pandemic, remote workers had reported feelings of loneliness and isolation. The pandemic compounded that isolation when regional stay-at-home orders were enacted so that going out and meeting with friends after work

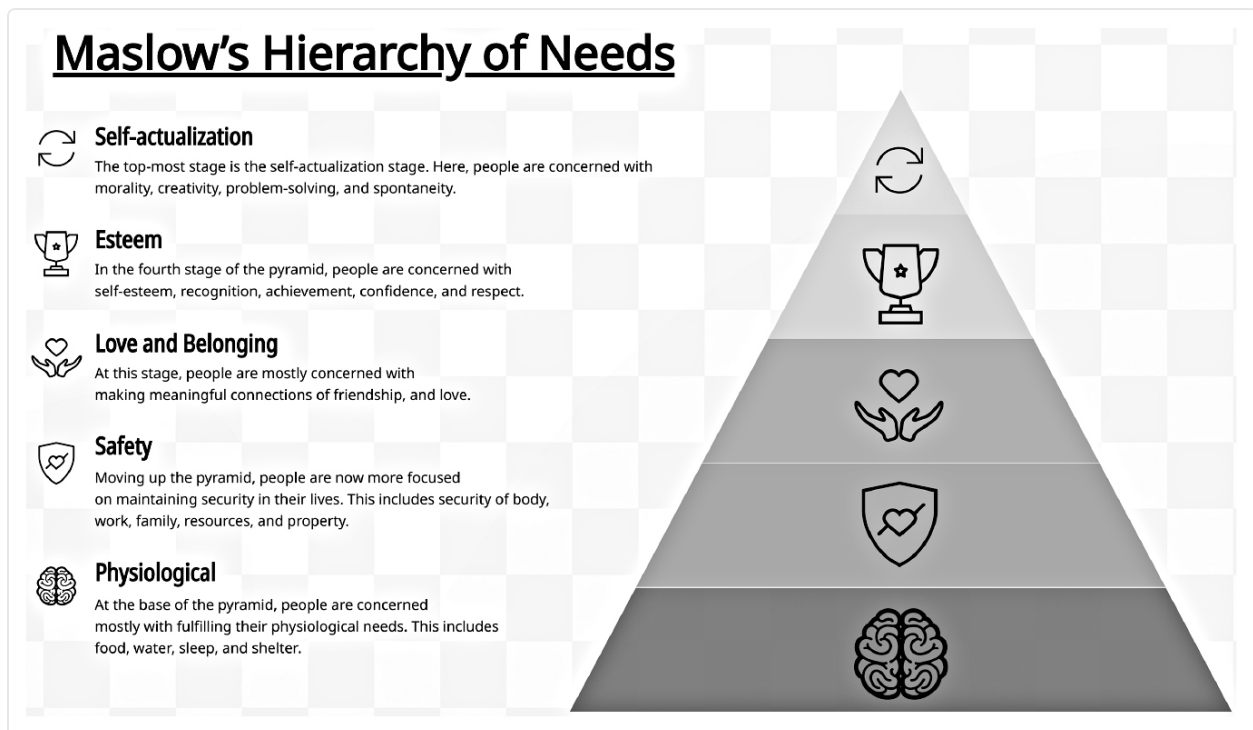
was not an option. With the added stress of a forced work-from-home situation stemming from a sudden event or crisis, those feelings may also become magnified for your own employees.

It's Far More Than Loneliness

As discussed in Chapter 1 of course 82351B, “You Can’t Go to the Office: Where Do You Go from Here?”, economist Nicholas Bloom studied 1,000 workers from Chinese company Ctrip and found that after nine months of doing their job from home, roughly half of the remote employees would prefer to go back to work at the office. That was true even though it meant a 40-minute commute each way for them. The reason cited by respondents was feeling lonely, but the issues are more complex than a mere lack of company or missing out on spending time with friends. Humans have an inherent need to feel that they belong.

Abraham Maslow was an American Psychologist born in 1908 who was best known for his work on the hierarchy of the five basic human needs that motivate human behavior (Figure 8.1). The base of the hierarchy is a person’s physiological needs. Once a person satisfies the needs at that base, motivations for their next higher needs begin to emerge. They build upon each other. For example, the base needs would include items such as food, water, rest, and warmth. Once these needs are met, a person would try to achieve the next higher needs of safety and security. However, safety and security have deeper meanings than merely physical security, and it helps explain the feelings of isolation that emerge from being separated from the team during remote work.

FIGURE 8-1: MASLOW’S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS



Safety and Security

Being in an environment that is familiar and routine gives us a sense of security. It becomes a safe space where we can feel comfortable. We maintain our sense of security and safety when we remain in those predictable situations. Routines such as getting up and dressed, heading out for the commute to work, and walking into the building to go to our workstation Monday through Friday can provide a feeling of security.

We may feel agitated when that predictable pattern is broken, especially if it remains that way for a long period of time. We start to become stressed if we are uncertain when we can return our routine. We begin to feel insecure about our future.

Love and Belonging

The next level of needs involves love and belonging. Again, the motivations behind these needs run deep. We have a fundamental need to feel accepted and be part of social groups. We feel accepted through our positive social interactions with peers. It is the interaction with those groups that help us to experience loving others, being loved, and feeling like we belong.

It's the social interactions that are key to these feelings of love and belonging. Without them, these feelings become less certain and may seem as if they are endangered in some manner. Unknowns that arise when we are forced to work from home can also cause us to feel vulnerable and amplify insecurity about our continued belonging to a group. This accounts for the high number of responses to numerous polls of remote workers during the pandemic who reported feeling cut off, unappreciated, and isolated from their group. Whether these insecurities have merit or are imagined, they feel very real to the individual due to their separation.

Esteem

Comprised of the first and second tiers of needs impacts the third tier, which is the need for esteem. According to Maslow, this need is two pronged. It involves feeling good about oneself as well as feeling valued by others. There is a need for recognition from others and that what they contribute to the group is important. This recognition helps build the individual's self-confidence.

When they do not receive that recognition at regular intervals as they normally would, they feel less confident and their self-esteem drops. At the same time, if the needs below this tier (belonging and security) are not being met, then self-esteem also suffers. Each tier is built on the stability of the level below it.

The Need for Social Interactions

According to the well-known study by social psychologist Roy Baumeister and psychologist Mark Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," people need satisfying social interactions with their groups on an ongoing basis with

regularity. The need to belong is so powerful and fundamental that a lack of these interactions result in a variety of health issues as well as a desire to form new relationships if a person feels their needs are not being met from their current relationships. In the workplace, this could translate to seeking employment elsewhere.

The lack of social interactions with co-workers leaves many employees with feelings of anxiety, which then magnifies their feelings of being cut off or out of the loop with what's going on with the team. This in turn increases the feeling of being isolated.

The resulting feelings of loneliness and isolation build on each other. Unknowns in any circumstance can make people feel vulnerable. When those unknowns are attached to large aspects of their lives, such as their career paths and their ability to earn an income, it will affect their mental and physical health.

Avoiding Social Isolation

Let's put together all we have discussed about social isolation. A forced work-from-home situation results in an abrupt and sometimes unexpected physical separation from the group. Typical work-from-home employees are separated from the everyday interactions that occur in an office that would ordinarily help reaffirm their feelings of acceptance and belonging. Not being physically around others also means lost opportunity for organic interactions with other members of their group. That loss of daily watercooler moments can negatively affect their feelings of security about belonging to the group. Those negative feelings can become further magnified by uncertainty during a forced work-from-home situation and result in even more stress and distress. As all of the fundamental needs become vulnerable, those in the forced work-from-home situations feel the loneliness and isolation that remote workers have been voicing. They feel disconnected and left out.

Leaving these issues unchecked will result in both physical and mental health issues in remote workers. To alleviate and prevent these negative impacts to employees, managers must alter their own methodologies when it comes to remote team management. Managers must become more engaged and look for signs of stress and possible burnout. Along with deeper engagement, employers must create more opportunities to show recognition and appreciation of team members' achievements. Employers must also create avenues for social interaction between team members. Combined, this all helps team members and their sense of belonging to the group, which is a fundamental human motivation.

In times of high stress or trouble in one's life, belonging becomes a safety net that helps one feel secure again. Belonging allows for opportunities to unload and share with others the causes of anxiety. In business, a strong sense of belonging will help foster environments where people are more productive and overall more confident, dedicated team members.

BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR ISOLATION

For many companies, the first time they have the entire team working remotely will be when they are hit with a crisis. That means that it may be difficult for those in leadership positions in those companies to know when employees begin to feel isolated and disconnected. It's understandable that managers may not know who on their team may be struggling.

Oftentimes, strong players on the team will choose not to speak up when they are struggling. They tend to try to push through the problem, thinking that the issue is a personal one to overcome on their own. Some of the strongest team members are hesitant to complain, especially during a crisis that affects the whole company.

Those who you see typically as highly connected to the rest of the team will probably be among your most productive under normal circumstances. By highly connected, I mean that they interact with others often and are very involved in projects as well as social conversations. When those individuals feel disconnected, they will likely become less productive as well.

When they feel disconnected, they begin to feel isolated, and that is when they become less engaged with their work and with the rest of the team. Feeling disconnected will lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation, which can lead to employee burnout. At the same time, feelings of loneliness and isolation can lead to feeling disconnected, which can also lead to employee burnout. They are all connected and feed off each other.

What to Look For

¹ A December 2019 article in *Psychology Today* discussed the effects of feeling disconnected in workers:

Feeling disconnected from the people you serve often disconnects you from yourself, especially for the many of us who are motivated by a sense of mission and purpose. This disconnection can lead to depression, substance abuse, and even suicide, all well-noted burdens associated with loneliness. So, while loneliness may not in itself be a symptom of burnout syndrome, it is almost universally a consequence. And loneliness can actually cause burnout, as well as one's susceptibility to it. People in the throes of work-related exhaustion, self-doubt, and defeatism are more likely to withdraw, interacting less and less, and effectively isolating themselves from the people around them. And those who already are experiencing loneliness in their lives may lack the emotional and spiritual resources required to feel replenished and resilient under challenging circumstances. A person in this position can be vulnerable to even more burnout, compounding the feelings of isolation and loneliness.

In May 2019 the World Health Organization listed Burnout as an "Occupational Phenomenon":

Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions: 1) Feelings of energy depletion or

*exhaustion; 2) Increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; 3) Reduced professional efficacy. Burnout refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.***

As you can see, these feelings of loneliness are part of a larger and more serious picture. They are not to be taken lightly or dismissed as something to just power through or ignore. Left unchecked, they can have profound effects on individual team members and on the team as a whole (Figure 8.2).

FIGURE 8-2: EFFECTS OF SOCIAL ISOLATION ON HEALTH AND MORTALITY