Managing Remotely Pt2 – Reduce Affinity Distance

# Build trust and sense of connection

Many of the challenges of remote working centre around feeling isolated from colleagues, out of the loop especially if some colleagues are together at the office and some on their own isolated, perceptions of power imbalances where you have different satellite offices, lack of social connection, lack of feeling your manager is looking out for you and both team members and managers feeling uncertain that people are doing the work – especially in places where there is a culture of “working at home” = “day off” .

## A non-exhaustive/starter list of some of the elements of trust

* knowing each other well enough to feel safe to be vulnerable, and share thoughts and feelings honestly, and to have honest conversations.
* know that other members of the team are also pulling their weight and working even when you can’t see them
* knowing that your reports are getting on with their work, and are on track to meet targets and deadlines, without you seeing them at their desk. Having confidence in them without falling into the trap of micromanagement.
* knowing that your manager ‘has your back’, cares for you and is there to support you, even when you can’t just go over to their desk to ask a question or have an informal chat at the coffee machine.
* Feeling valued by your manager, your peers, and recognised for the work that you do and the contribution you make to the team effort.

**Add other elements of Trust that are important to you and your team in the context of your workplace and remote workin**g.

*Brainstorm ideas and actions you already do that can build and maintain trust and a sense of connection with your colleagues, peers and team members.*

## Tips to reduce Affinity Distance and the social disconnection of remote working

Make sure your people feel heard and understood which builds trust and strengthens relationships.

### Clear and transparent strategy for connecting and communication

* DAILY Check-in meetings – these do not replace your 121s or regular team meetings. See part 1.
* Make a habit of keeping everyone in the loop- quick email/chat/message/heads up at the check-in. Balance the need for keeping everyone informed without overloading or distracting with too much or the wrong kind of information. This is why it is important first to clarify your communication strategy and agree what information to share in which way, so that it is also easily found at a time when someone needs to recall it, not just at the time when it is sent out.
* Make it easy for people to raise questions and talk about concerns, especially as some issues may affect many people but some people may not feel able to raise them. Openly invite people to call/contact you and let them know when it is a good time or when to avoid interrupting you (e.g. your power hour). Some managers schedule time for informal ad-hoc connection chats.
* Make team meetings inclusive for all – see part 1. Arrange at times when all can attend and/or prevent one-way inconvenience. Share inconveniences of meeting times fairly and avoid arranging meetings and check-ins at times that are always bad for the same one or two people. If you have blended working environment with some people in the office and a few remote workers, avoid the typical scenario where it is always the remote person making adjustments to fit the office time.

### Offer encouragement and emotional support

It is important for managers to acknowledge stresses and know whether someone is struggling, which they may not feel able to talk about without encouragement from you as their manager. You need to know where they are so you can manage them appropriately, which may well mean you need to support them to get to where they need to be to work effectively. It is not effective to just start with what you want them to do in terms of tasks and outputs. First you must create the environment for them to excel. Your team look to you for cues for how to respond to situations, so it is important for you to nurture and maintain your own mental strength, resilience, positivity and wellbeing so you can do the same for them.

* Recognise and acknowledge that people can feel isolated, anxious and stressed when working remotely, especially in difficult circumstances, and also demonstrate that you have confidence in them as individuals and as a team to get through it together and work to your strengths. This helps them to embrace the challenges with more purpose and focus.
* Show empathy and compassion. Have a genuine sincere interest in the person and stand in their shoes/see their perspective. Answer their questions show interest in them as a person and how they feel.
* Build rapport. Make time for informal chat on line to build rapport, strengthen relationships and have a mutual understanding of shared context and then make appropriate adjustments (see Part 1). This can have a profound impact on engagement and performance. E.g.:
  + Start each call/meeting (group or 121) with a round where each person says how they are that day and relative time in their working day/shift. This acknowledges the emotional state and the time of day (if working in different time zones) or time left in your work shift (if in same time zone but on flexible working hours) for members on the call.
  + Plan follow-up actions according to each person’s availability. If it is near the end of a work day/shift, acknowledging this and arranging for urgent follow-up work to be done the next day/shift can make a big difference to people feeling respected and valued.
* Listen to their concerns and desires. Invite them to say how they are feeling, what is working and not working, empathise with their struggles, show you care and support by talking through how they can address the issues.
* Understand how they are coping with the shift to remote working and setting up their workplace at home – covered in the working remotely module.
* Commit to regular 121s with your team members where you are NOT focusing just on tasks. There is a great temptation when time is short to focus all meetings on operational and task requirements. These meetings are following your agenda, as manager or leader. However, to raise engagement, motivation and a sense of being valued, you need to also arrange 121s with your people that are 100% focused on them. In addition to the points above,:
* Understand what motivates them and how to tap into their motivations. Understand their barriers, and how to support them to manage around them.
* Ask about their aspirations, what development would they like and how can you help them progress. E.g. what projects could they be involved with, how can you grow their role and help them keep learning?

### Provide opportunities for remote social interaction

Structure ways for employees to interact socially and have informal conversations about non-work topics while working remotely, so they get to know each other in the same way that you get to know your colleagues in the office. This is vitally important to build the social bonds that are essential for trust and the sense of belonging that helps people collaborate effectively and achieve shared goals. Examples include:

* Plan time at the start of team calls for non-work chat and catch-up e.g., how was your weekend, how are your family doing, etc.
* When feasible, ideally have team retreat or invite remote workers in to visit office periodically (depending on your geographic spread, it may be realistic to do this monthly, quarterly, or once a year).
* Virtual Pizza parties / quiz sessions, / coffee and cake / wine and chat meetings - virtual events help reduce feelings of isolation and promote a sense of belonging. Choose an activity that resonates with the people in your team. Sometimes it is a Bring Your Own food/drink etc. to the virtual call and some organisations arrange pizza deliveries to their staff.
* Invite your team members /colleagues to suggest activities that work for them to feel more connected.

# SHOW Recognition and Appreciation

As manager, the way you can show recognition makes an enormous difference to how your people feel about their work and how they feel valued. It is a critical component of building trust and a sense of connection. Appreciation flows from valuing another person – and the best way to get to appreciate someone is to get to know them better as a person, where they come from, their background, their current circumstances, what they like and don’t like etc. When we learn about each other, we’ll get to understand each other better, and appreciate the challenges we each face and discover similarities and shared interests which help to build the relationship.

To show authentic appreciation you must have a relationship with the other person. Otherwise your intended appreciation is likely to be misperceived as manipulative; feel awkward and miss the mark of what makes them feel appreciated.

If you show recognition or give someone appreciation in their least preferred language they don’t notice that you are recognising them and they don’t feel appreciated or valued.

– E.g. words. You can praise all you like but it doesn’t mean anything to the other person and they don’t respond or feel valued. This drains your energy and it drains their motivation as they feel their efforts are going unnoticed and unrewarded, while you believe you are recognising them and they are ignoring it. It undermines your relationship and ability to work together at your best.

*TIP*: 1) Maximise energy for you and the other person by finding out their preferred language and showing appreciating that way instead.

2) Make your appreciation very specific for it to have the intended impact.

These notes are adapted from the book *The Five Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace* by Chapman & White.

### Appreciation is a good investment

* It raises engagement
* It shows recognition and that you value someone
* People like to be around you – you are encouraging them and making them feel valued.
* People’s need for appreciation is usually unmet which reduces motivation, engagement and trust.
* Appreciation is only valued when you use it appropriately, i.e. a genuine feeling to communicate respect and value for the person, not just ticking boxes which creates cynicism.

### Improve relationships by being an encourager

Showing appreciation helps you to build trust, strong relationships, grow your network, and enhance your influence and ability to achieve your team and personal aspirations. Nothing great is ever achieved alone. To get buy in, people need to trust you and you need to genuinely appreciate them! However, for them to feel appreciated by your actions, you need to show that you appreciate them in a language that matches the way they feel appreciated.

### Make it personal

Every person has a preferences for one or more of the five languages:

* Words of Affirmation.
* Quality Time
* Acts of Service
* Tangible Gifts
* Touch

Do you know yours? Your reports and your managers? Your colleagues, peers and team members’ preferences?

# 1. Words of Affirmation

Global comments are demotivating (e.g., good job. Well done. etc.) Specific and timely comments are motivating.

* Character traits, particularly positive personality traits (e.g., positivity, optimistic, organised, etc.) – look beyond the immediate performance and show appreciation for the inner nature of the person, which reflects their cumulative choices over time. E.g. – I admire the way you are optimistic. I sometimes get discouraged and when I talk with you I come away with a more positive perspective. I appreciate that.
* Praise for specific accomplishments, efforts and traits. Positive feedback on your actions.
* (NOTE – take care where praising accomplishments that you recognise the result coming from the effort put in and their actions, experience, knowledge, collaboration with others etc. as this supports a growth mindset and creates a positive culture that encourages creativity, innovation and learning from mistakes. Take care not to praise in a way that ties results and accomplishments to a personal character trait, because this can promote a fixed mindset and blame culture where mistakes and failures are felt personally, covered up, and not learned from, which results in an environment that erodes positivity and performance. For more information see Carol Dweck’s *Growth Mindset* and resources on positive mindset.)
* How and where to give verbal appreciation – Personal 1on1, praise in front of others who are important to them, if it suits their personality type, written, in public only if they like the spotlight.
* MUST BE SINCERE and authentic. Align with your body language – people feel instantly if your words are not genuine.
* For working remotely: multiple formats of communication; send physical cards and e-cards; arrange social chat time at start of meetings; praise in way that others see it (copy on communications, say at video conference) as well as in the 121.

## ACTION for Words of affirmation (Praise, Positive Feedback)

Have you received a verbal affirmation or positive feedback recently? How did you feel?

Can you recall if/when did you give one to a colleague/ co-worker? How did they respond?

What types of verbal affirmation affect you most? What types do you not prefer?

Think of someone whose work makes a difference for you – specify what you value about what they do and communicate it to them how they make your life better at work.

* On a scale of 1- 10 how important are words of affirmation to you?
* On a scale of 1- 10 how important are words of affirmation to your manager?

# 2. Quality Time

Show you value someone by spending your precious resource of Time giving attention to them.

Alternatively, the time you give does not have to be with you as manager, it could be to spend time with their peers or time on a personal project that they want to do.

Examples of quality time include **Quality conversations**: Dialogue. LISTENTING to their hopes, fears, aspirations, and about things that are meaningful to them.

* Focus on what you are hearing and avoid trying to problem solve for someone, as that minimises relationship. Maintain eye contact.
* Resist the impulse to interrupt.
* Listen for feelings as well as thoughts. Observe body language. Affirm their feelings even if you disagree with their conclusions. Then examine the conclusion and explore different perspectives.
* Ensure you arrange 121 meetings with the people you manage that focus on developing the person in their role and only includes these quality conversations. One of the biggest complaints about managers is that they don’t have proper 121s, as many managers dominate the agenda with their concerns and focus only on the operational task-related matters, which should be kept for separate meetings, (which may also be one on one).

**Shared experiences**. To feel connected and encouraged. For example, attending events, eating together, activities, and team days. Etc.

**Collegiate working on a task**. This is very meaningful for many people, especially when you believe that what you do makes a difference and your contributions are recognised and valued by others.

Small group dialogue can be a better quality time experience than a 121 for some people who are not comfortable speaking 1on1 to a supervisor or people in authority. They are more likely to express openly in small group. When you listen attentively and express appreciation for their openness, they feel appreciated.

## Important considerations/potential barriers for collegiate working on tasks:

*Who* – understand what actions they desire and from whom they want them.

*When* – find ways to spend quality time with colleagues during the work day as part of your normal work tasks. Avoid creating something extra or beyond work hours which conflicts with family time.

*Where* – location or means of team connection if not in close proximity… e.g. online chats.

*How* *you show up* – You need a sincere and positive attitude showing you genuinely want to be there and be present when spending the quality time together for it to be valued, and you need to be doing something that the other person actually wants to do. (E.g. not there unwillingly /out of compliance, still focused on work, or watching the clock)

## Quality time for remote working

* Schedule call for chat and emotional check in / allow colleague to call and share frustrations
* Undivided attention while on call – no multitasking
* Time at start of calls for non-work related conversations
* Team virtual social / coffee and cake/ quiz etc.

## ACTION for Quality Time

1. On scale of 1-10 how important is it for you to have quality time with your supervisor? Your peers and colleagues?

2 What types of quality time do you enjoy? Does it depend on who is there? (Team/supervisor)

3 What kinds are realistic in your work setting and what would not suit your work environment?

4. Have you ever experienced a difficult life event when a colleague or manager took time to listen? How did that feel?

5. How and when is working together cooperatively on a project demonstrated in your organisation?

Ditto – from your manager’s perspective?

# 3. Acts of Service

Ways to show appreciation with acts of service include: to show caring attitude. Pitch in and get things done. Help to do something the other person is not good at. People also feel appreciated when others reach out to help. Actions speak louder than words. People who appreciate acts of service often value some help much more than receiving praise or a gift.

* Make sure your own responsibilities are covered before volunteering to help others.
* Also make sure your help is not actually holding them back from learning how to do things- give them a chance to do it first.
* Ask before you help. Jumping in unwanted creates tension and is not seen as positive but taking over. Politeness often means they say no to a general question ‘can I help you’, so be specific E.g. is there anything I can do that will make your work go better for you this week? More specific than can I help you on anything. Find out specifics and understand their needs.
* Don’t assume you know what help they want or need. Ask questions to understand what they would like. Don’t do what you think needs to be done. Check first. E.g. what would be helpful to you? How would you like the task to be done? When would be the best time to help? Demonstrate you are willing to help in ways most beneficial to them.
* If you help, do it their way. Not your way. Especially if they are perfectionist. So they feel it is done right and appreciate your contribution.
* Serve voluntarily. Can’t be done under duress – then is act of duty not appreciation.
* Check your attitude is positive in offering help. A negative/critical attitude is not liked and they won’t feel appreciated.
* Complete what you start. Otherwise they are not encouraged or feel appreciated. Communicate upfront any limits on your time/availability and plan what you can do appropriately.
* How you help out a colleague is context specific.
* For remote workingschedule calls/meetings when convenient for them / share the inconvenience fairly among team members; assign help with tasks when needed; arrange times for checking emails once a day/at specific times vs anytime, to respect their time; check in to see how their time is going.

## ACTION

On a scale of 1- 10 how important are acts of service to you?

What is something someone could do that would make your work go more smoothly?

Who could you ask what you could do to help you getting task/project done on time?

When someone helps you, what is important about how they help you? What should they do or not do?

Ditto – from your manager’s perspective?

# 4. Tangible Gifts

The gift must match what the person likes/appreciates. A wrong gift can be offensive.

A gift is not part of salary or bonus – that is your work contract.

A gift that shows appreciation is usually small items that are meaningful to the recipient which they value, and show personalised appreciation. That means you need to get to know your colleagues personally and know what they like and enjoy.

Only give gifts if the other person appreciates them. Only 6% of employees report gifts as their top valued language of appreciation in the workplace.

Examples include Food – favourite in workplace, chocolate, cakes, pizza, coffees, shared with colleagues. Also cards and experiences – tickets to events, restaurants, activity vouchers etc. Certificates/plaque/personalised trophy as award or recognition.

Time off/ Flexible time so can go shopping/carer duties.

AVOID – gifts that offend or are inappropriate for the individual (e.g. chocolate for a diabetic)

Gifts for remote working - email fully pictures inspired by recent conversations; physical cards and e-cards e.g. for birthdays, to say thank you, celebrating a task completed; e

## Action

On scale 1- 10 how important is receiving gifts for you?

If 7 or more – what kind of gifts are important?

What have you received in the last year? What hit the mark? What didn’t?

Ideas for new/different types of gifts for colleagues that they might enjoy?

# 5. Physical Touch

This is the least used language of appreciation in the workplace. It is not easy when remote working.

Acceptable touch in the workplace: Hand shake. Hug. Touch on the shoulder or arm. High five. Pat on the back. (Remote workers: virtual high five, wave hands, sometimes people touch hands to screen.)

Look for nonverbal reactions – does the other person show comfort or discomfort?

Whether you use touch depends on how close the relationship is and also on culture.

Explicit touches show appreciation when you put thought and effort in them, e.g. an extended handshake while saying I really appreciate what you did and I won’t forget the effort you poured into this project.

Benefits of touch: Spontaneous celebration. Communicate care, concern and empathy

Disadvantages of touch: CAUTION: Physical touch is open to misinterpretation (e.g. as abuse, sexual misconduct) due to mixed perception of the recipient vs the intention of the person touching. The potential for misinterpretation is higher when the person feels they can’t say no or say that they don’t like the touch (e.g. to someone in authority or more senior). All touches are not created equal – the touches that make you feel affirmed may not make another person feel affirmed or appreciated and instead may make them feel threatened, disrespected or abused. Learn from the other person what they like and dislike.

## Action

On a scale of 1 – 10 how important is touch to you as a means of feeling appreciated?

What types of physical touch do you consider affirming at work?

What kinds of touches make you feel uncomfortable?

What guidelines would be good to agree with your colleagues – who are touchers and who dislikes it?

Over the past week, what types of touches did you give to others/ how did they respond?

Who have you encountered who seemed to draw back from touching? What kind of conversation could clarify what is or isn’t’ appropriate touch for them.

## OVERALL

What is your most preferred language?

What is your least preferred language?

What do others need to know in order to show appropriate appreciation to you?

As a manager, what do you need to know about your team members’ preferences to ensure they receive the appreciation you give them as you intend – i.e. so you can speak their language of appreciation?

**Blind spots** can be a barrier to building trust and strong relationships within your team.

* Your least preferred language which you don‘t do and you don’t notice when others want it.
* Your most preferred language: you only show recognition in this way and your intentions are not appreciated by others who don’t have this language. You don’t understand why they complain that you don’t appreciate them, as you believe you are recognising them frequently!

# Showing appreciation when working and managing remotely

One of the biggest barriers for showing appreciation over a distance is the opportunity for brief chance encounters that you get when you are in the same workplace with your colleagues.

This is why it is so important to add extra time at the start of meetings to put a social 5 minutes check in on the agenda and have social catch-ups with your remote team members as a team and in 121s, making sure that you are fully present and not multi-tasking, so you give them your full attention. Interestingly, remote employees more frequently cite quality time being important for them to feel appreciated (35%) than employees in the workplace (28%).