



# Beyond the Webcam: How Can Leaders Build Meaningful Relationships?

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Forming authentic relationships with team members has always been essential to working effectively—but how are those relationships affected by working remotely? [Barry Pokroy](#) and [Dave Stevens](#) argue that connection isn't necessarily formed during in-person interactions, it really comes down to asking the right questions.

For many, the pandemic has forced us to find new ways to connect at work without being physically present, and all kinds of technology have been used in this effort. Still, the gravity of living through the past year has taken its toll and many leaders have had to stand by and watch fatigue envelop their battle-weary teams. Maintaining energy among team members is an ongoing challenge—and COVID has brought it home in spades.

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What we do know is that motivating employees often comes down to connection—how do we foster connection in this virtual world we've constructed at a record pace? While many lament the exhaustion of "Zoom fatigue" and miss interacting with their colleagues in-person, I would argue that connection—*real* connection—isn't the default when



interacting in-person. In fact, many in-person interactions can be superficial; When you've had a hard day and a store clerk says, "Hi, how are you?" most of us don't unload our emotional baggage onto them. The same goes for many interactions we have with colleagues.

The question then becomes: How can we foster a sense of real connection in the workplace and make communication meaningful and personal—whether interacting in-person or virtually?

## Care vs. Cure

It's helpful to borrow an analogy from the medical profession. We can understand *cure* as fixing what ails you, say by a treatment or prescription, where the interaction between physician and patient is essentially *transactional*. You have these symptoms? Here's the antidote. But cure alone might not look below the surface to ask what caused the symptoms in the first place.

That's where *care* comes in. Care raises the level of the conversation from the *transactional* to the meaningful by asking questions that are *relational* in nature. How long has this been bothering you? What have you been doing that may have brought it on? Are there any other matters you want to talk about? We provide care by *showing* we care. And sometimes in business—as in medicine—there is no obvious cure, which makes care even more critical. We show we care by asking questions, by demonstrating that we are interested in hearing what others are thinking and not just what's on our own mind.

## The importance of asking the right questions

The quality of the relationship that leaders develop with individual team members depends on the quality of the conversations they have with them. But putting energy in the conversation requires engaging people with questions that deepen the connection with them.

### Quality of Questions → Quality of Conversation → Quality of Relationship

The best questions are those intentional ones that get us thinking about matters that are important to us. These are usually open-ended questions that demand a fulsome response and can't be answered summarily with an automatic or robotic reply. Broadening the dialogue in this way re-instills vibrancy and energy. Intentional questions can achieve four key objectives with team members, they:

- open up the dialogue with others
- pull them into the conversation
- motivate them to share their story
- allow you to gain insight into their world



## Some examples to get things rolling

So, what types of questions can you ask to draw others into the conversation so they tell their stories? The focus should be on the levers that make people proud, motivated and curious about their lives, but also on the barriers that make them dejected, anxious and even angry. Here are some examples to start things off:

1. What aspect or quality makes you most proud of your work?
2. What sorts of problems keep you awake at night?
3. What areas of your work/organization cause you frustration and what can be done?
4. What has been your biggest challenge with COVID—personally and in business?
5. Have there been any silver linings with COVID?

These can be tough questions to ask and they're not easily snuck into a workplace conversation amid the pressure to get work product out the door. You'll need to consciously plan for those one-on-one situations, before or after meetings or workplace discussions. These one-on-ones should be an imperative business discussion.

## Up, down and sideways

The focus here is on leaders energizing their teams, since managers bear responsibility for their employees' motivation, mood and, ultimately, output. But the same conversational skills can be of great advantage to all team members, communicating in every organizational direction. It's difficult to collaborate with a colleague (or a boss) who is exhausted or disgruntled, so moving the conversation from transactional to relational can be effective here too. Formulating the right questions—and using the necessary listening skills that follow—can go a long way.

## Bringing back the energy

It's normal for all of us to hit bumps at work that zap our energy and make it hard to soldier on. And the permanence of a computer monitors between us and our fellow workers only exacerbates things. Good leaders recognize the signs of fatigue when it sets in and deploy conversational strategies that deal with them. By focusing our questions on the *relational* rather than the *transactional*, the *meaningful* rather than the *superficial*, we can bring energy back to work.



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## Our Contributors

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