The First Thing Leaders Need to Do

Leaders need to build community in the workplace as it is hard to trust people you don't know. **BY JANN FREED, PH.D.**

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What is the leading cause of death?
a. High blood pressure
b. Inactivity (little to no exercise)
c. Social isolation
d. High cholesterol
e. Alcohol
f. Obesity

If you answered c, you are correct. Vivek Murthy, the U.S. Surgeon General from 2014 to 2017, wrote a report that social isolation or loneliness is a more serious health problem than opiates. "Loneliness and weak social connections are associated with a reduction in lifespan similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day and even greater than that associated with obesity." It is connected, he wrote, "with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression, and anxiety."

We live and work in the most technologically connected age in the history of civilization. Yet the rates of loneliness have doubled since the 1980s. Today, more than 40 percent of adults in America report feeling lonely, and that number may be even higher. Research has found that the number of Americans with "no friends" has tripled since 1985. In England, Prime Minister Theresa May in 2018 appointed a minister for Loneliness, saying, "For far too many people, loneliness is the sad reality of modern life."

Interestingly, it does not matter if one is young or old; loneliness doesn't discriminate. As the Beatles sang decades ago, "All the lonely people, where do they all come from?"

BUILDING STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS

In writing "Leading with Wisdom: Sage Advice from 100 Experts," my primary question to leadership sages was this: What is the best way to prepare people to be the kinds of leaders needed in these uncertain times? Interestingly, one of the main themes was "Leaders Embrace Community." It is not surprising that people who don't know each other do not feel connected. It is hard to trust people you don't know.

Since social isolation is on the rise, building community in the workplace is not quick or easy. It needs to be intentional, thoughtful, and perceived as an important leadership responsibility worthy of investing the time for future significant returns in enhanced performance, satisfaction, and resilience.

To illustrate the importance of connections and support groups, consider the examples of Alcoholics Anonymous, Weight Watchers, and Dale Carnegie. Success usually is attributed to the support of the group. Corporate America needs to take a lesson from these and other groups that center around a support group.

In his report, Murthy identifies steps that can help build stronger social relationships:

- **Evaluate the current state of connections.** Quality of relationships is more important than quantity. The Gallup employee engagement questions known as the Q12 are a great place to start for understanding the culture.
- **Help people understand high-quality relationships.** Since this is not the norm, help people understand the value of strong social connections and how they should be mutually beneficial.
- **Make building community an organizational priority.** Make sure the organizational culture and policies support the development of trusted social relationships.
- **Encourage employees to reach out and help others and to accept the help of others.** When feeling lonely, reaching out to help or to accept help can benefit both parties.
- **Create opportunities to learn more about your colleagues' personal lives.**

For my monthly podcast, *Becoming a Sage,* I interviewed Peter Block, one of the top thought leaders in the leadership field. The author of

"Community: The Structure of Belonging," Block said the "first thing leaders need to do is build community," and he summarized it this way: In a patriarchal world, the main job of a leader is to maintain consistency, control, and predictability. But that world is not that effective. It is just popular because it offers certainty and safety. Yet in these times, we continue to choose certainty repeatedly because that is the way things always have been done.

Block advocates we start by having conversations around these questions:

- What did we come to create?
- What are the crossroads?
- What are the resentments or doubts about what we came to do?
- Who has ownership or accountability?

To build community, Block said the first step is *deciding* to build community. The second step is to acknowledge and write down, "My team's relationship with each other is more important than my team's relationship with me." If this is true, then every time the team gets together, the leader is thinking of ways for the team to be in small groups talking about what they want to create. I specifically asked Block to explain the basic steps:

- Break people into groups of three and come back together.
- At the end of every meeting, ask every member, "Who did/said something today that meant something to you?" This makes the focus of the meeting on what *is* working—not on what is *not* working.
- Ask, "What's the promise each person is willing to make today without any promise of return?"
- Ask, "If people fulfill their promises, will we fulfill the reason we came together?"

While the methodology seems simple, it is not the norm. But the questions build focus and accountability into a simple process that, when repeated, creates community.

CONCEPT OF BELONGING

Dave Ulrich has been ranked as one of the top business thinkers by several sources and is the author of "The Why of Work." Ulrich finds the concept of "belonging" a critical factor for overcoming social isolation and for creating organizational cultures where people thrive, not just survive. When someone belongs, there is a strong emotional attachment to another person or organization and their personal well-being increases, which enhances productivity and performance. Ulrich says,

"Organizations where we work, play, and worship should become settings for belonging."

When asked how to create a sense of belonging, Ulrich lists four key concepts:

- **Belonging requires work and effort.** Leaders who are too busy tend to erode belonging. It takes time and effort to invest in building relationships that work.
- **Belonging requires making social media more social.** "Use technology to build connections, not contacts." Utilize technology to share more personal experiences so people get to know one another at a deeper level.
- **Belonging requires empathy.** Leaders need to understand and feel what others are experiencing. This can be done by asking others how you might help them or being aware of their personal circumstances.
- **Belonging requires people who are agents for themselves.** Leaders can shape personal accountability by helping employees shift their perspective. The questions change from "Do I like my pay, boss, or working conditions?" to "Do I do my best to earn my pay, build a relationship with my boss, or improve working conditions?"

POETRY OF CONNECTIONS

Jim Autry, former senior vice president of Meredith Corporation and president of its magazine group, uses poetry to emphasize the messages he believes are important for leaders to understand. In his book, "Love and Profit: The Art of Caring Leadership," Autry wrote a poem I often use in workshops and courses. Here is an excerpt from "Threads" that reminds us of the significance of connections:

Listen
In every office
You hear the threads
Of love, and joy, and fear, and guilt,
The cries for celebration and reassurance,
And somehow you know that connecting those threads
Is what you are supposed to do
And business takes care of itself.

The final conclusion of the report by Murthy states, "Leaders must take action now to build the connections that are the foundation of strong companies and strong communities—and that ensure greater health and well-being for all of us."

As the Beatles also said, "We get by with a little help from our friends." 🆃