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Collaboration And Teams

High-Performing Teams Don't Leave Relationships to Chance

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Summary. Research has shown that employees with close connections at work are more productive, creative, and collaborative. They're also more satisfied with their job, less susceptible to burnout, and less likely to leave. Managers can create the conditions for work friendships to flourish through three simple actions. First, make it easier for employees to identify commonalities. When you introduce a new hire, share colorful details about their personal interests in your welcome message. This will show you care about them as people, and make it easier for them to bond with others who share the similar interests. Second, you can highlight shared goals. Draw attention to projects that require a team effort or emphasize how your goals can only be achieved by working together. Finally, turn tension into connection. Disagreements can offer a lot of value, including more creative solutions, better decision-making, and higher performance. You can turn moments of tension into connection by recommitting to work together ("I bet we can figure this out"), acknowledging people's contributions ("You clearly put a lot of work into this") or valuing their expertise ("I've always appreciated your insight into clients").

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At first glance, workplace friendships can seem trivial — a nice to have that's distinct from traditional organizational objectives like productivity, efficiency, and profitability.

Nothing could be further from the truth. A wealth of studies reveal that by fueling our basic human psychological need for belonging, meaningful workplace connections drive many of the outcomes central to high-performing teams.

For starters, employees with close connections at work are more productive, creative, and collaborative. They also report being more satisfied with their job, are less susceptible to burnout, and

are less likely to leave their organization to pursue another role. In other words, not only are they better contributors, they provide more stability to a team.

In contrast, when employees feel disconnected from their team or lonely at work, their performance craters. Their ability to focus deteriorates and their willingness to collaborate plummets.

Worse, they devote valuable cognitive resources attempting to hide their loneliness from others, leaving less mental firepower for completing projects. In short, they become less capable of doing their jobs.

Now, it's one thing to logically appreciate the value of close connections, and another to know what to do about it. After all, what can a single leader possibly do to get coworkers to bond?

The short answer is plenty.

Research suggests that workplace friendships don't just happen by chance. They blossom under certain conditions, many of which leaders can strategically engineer, even in a remote or hybrid environment. Here are three evidence-based strategies that leaders can use to leverage insights from the science of close connections.

1. Use commonalities to spark friendships.

Studies indicate that one of the strongest drivers of friendships is similarity. The more workers have in common with one another, whether it's a favorite TV show, weekend hobby, or even the same birthday, the more likely they are to click. In a fascinating study of best friends who remained close for nearly 20 years, researchers found that the strongest predictor of long-term bonding is the level of similarity when friends first meet.

Managers can leverage this insight by making it easier for employees to identify commonalities. Onboarding offers the perfect opportunity. Instead of simply introducing new hires by their professional experience, consider interviewing them to uncover a few colorful details about their personal interests, and sprinkle these details into your welcome message.

Introducing new team members by their personal interests immediately humanizes them and empowers existing team members to find commonalities over which they can bond. Moreover, inquiring about personal interests demonstrates to new hires that you care about them and value their individuality. It's also a differentiator. In a world where 88% of employees believe their company's onboarding process can improve, designing an introduction that sets the stage for friendship not only sets an organization apart, it paves the way for more effective collaboration.

2. Highlight shared goals.

It's easy to assume that employees reporting to the same manager will naturally view themselves as a team. Yet that's not always the case. A crucial aspect of leading teams is therefore ensuring that employees view their colleagues not just as coworkers, but as teammates. The question is, how?

Social psychologists have long appreciated that shared goals, or the experience of working together toward a common objective, supports the development of friendships. And indeed, studies show that workers who view their colleagues as essential to their success build closer friendships, have fewer disagreements, and view their work as more meaningful.

The challenge in many organizations is that shared goals are often surprisingly difficult to identify, especially when members of the same team are working on different projects. It's when we *don't* feel like our objectives align with those of our colleagues that we witness the emergence of cliques, silos, and conflicts.

And yet shared goals can still offer leaders a valuable opportunity for building a team mentality, even when collaboration is limited. For example, managers can draw attention to the ways projects require a team effort. Doing so can be as simple as highlighting an important collaboration, or publicly thanking an individual whose contributions are vital to a team's success but are easy to overlook.

Another option is to emphasize team-wide goals (such as objectives and key results, or OKRs) that can only be achieved through working together. Depending on the department, team OKRs may include increasing referrals, improving organic traffic, or optimizing employee engagement scores.

Shared goals can also foster team-building outside the office, during recreational activities. A well-designed social activity can do more than deliver a fun experience, it can present the conditions that empower colleagues to work shoulder-to-shoulder toward a common objective. In other words, skip the office happy hour and invest in a collaborative cooking class.

3. Turn tension into connection.

Research indicates that workplace disagreements often erupt when people experience an absence of relatedness — when they feel undervalued, unappreciated, or perceive a lack of respect. The less connected people feel, the more likely they are to interpret a difference of opinion as a personal slight.

But disagreements can offer a lot of value if you navigate them correctly. Far from signaling office dysfunction, workplace disagreements can yield more creative solutions, better decision-making, and higher performance.

The best leaders do more than defuse conflict — they use relationship-building statements to turn tense moments into opportunities for deeper connections. These can take the form of recommitting to the partnership (“I bet we can figure this out”), acknowledging your partner’s contributions (“You clearly put a lot of work into this”), or valuing their expertise (“I’ve always appreciated your insight into clients like this.”). The trick is to quickly reassure your colleague that your disagreement has nothing to do with your relationship, and everything to do with finding the best solution.

Used correctly, relationship-building statements can do much more than put out relationship fires. They are a vital conversational tool for fostering collaboration, expressing appreciation, and ensuring that contributors feel valued.

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For too long, workplace friendships have been left to chance. Yet the research is clear: feeling connected to our colleagues elevates productivity, reduces turnover, and fosters better teamwork. As such, it’s a powerful and underutilized tool for creating high-performing teams.

Fortunately, research indicates that leaders can do a great deal when it comes to nurturing employee friendships. By utilizing insights from the science of close connections to promote

bonding, teaming, and productive collaborations, any leader can fuel their team's need for relatedness and elevate performance.

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