Build a Thriving Team by Thinking Like an Architect

By Michael Y. Lee

Two design tools can help teams structure their interactions in ways that promote bonding and collaboration.

The coffee chat. The lunch outing. The casual conversation after a meeting. These small informal interactions are one of the largest casualties of the pandemic-fueled shift to virtual work in many organizations. While individuals may benefit from having fewer work-related distractions and no longer needing to commute, work relationships and connections have suffered. As an employee in a global professional services company recently told me:

> "Before, I could grab 5-10 minutes easily [with a colleague] and we could discuss where we each stand and agree on a path forward. Remote working means putting things in the calendar and everyone is too busy to do this. I am isolated, disconnected, and do not feel like I am a part of the team anymore."

While the rollout of vaccines for Covid-19 will lead many to return to the office, remote work is here to stay as a norm, even after the pandemic is over. Left unchecked, the impact on relationships and team dynamics threatens not just the well-being of workers but also the quality of work outcomes. Research about team effectiveness shows that *relationships matter.* For instance, Google conducted a well-known study of its teams and found that the single most important driver of team performance—as measured by executive, team leader, and team member evaluations, as well as by sales numbers—was not the skills, intelligence, or personality of a team's members, but rather, whether they felt psychologically safe and the effect that had on the quality of their interactions.[1]

How can teams improve their relational dynamics in a world that's increasingly virtual, given the constraints posed by remote work? This may seem difficult to accomplish in the awkward, artificial social environment of Zoom and other remote-working platforms. But virtual interaction can accommodate team bonding as much as in-person interactions do -- not spontaneously, but through routinized, prefabricated ways of relating. Where team cohesion is threatened or lacking, these prescribed interactions become a kind of social scaffolding, supporting the development of trusting relationships.

This is precisely what happened with a globally dispersed technology-consulting team that I studied with Melissa Mazmanian of the University of California at Irvine and Leslie Perlow at Harvard Business School.[2] Though our research was conducted before the pandemic, the meaningful interventions in our experiment were entirely virtual and could easily be replicated in remote teams.

In the team we studied, interactions between members (some based in the U.S., some in India) were initially filled with distrust and fear. But we found that the group was able to transform those dynamics through structured interactions that encouraged members to share more of their whole selves, to be open and candid about work challenges, and to express vulnerability.

The key tools for promoting this collective interpersonal sharing were what we came to call *spaces* and *interaction scripts*. Spaces are social settings that are separate from the group's everyday work and that serve as zones of experimentation. Interaction scripts are concrete guidelines that specify the "what" and the "how" of a team's interactions, such as conversation prompts, topics for discussion, and prescribed speaking order. Here, we'll describe how teams can utilize spaces and interaction scripts – and why they make it easier to foster connectedness, openness, and respect between team members.

Discovering the Benefits of Spaces and Scripts

Before our experiment, the team we studied was bristling with distrust and resentment. The more senior U.S.-based team members questioned the commitment and work ethic of their India colleagues, describing them as "lazy" and "unaccountable," and gave them only routine work. The more junior India-based team members, meanwhile, felt underappreciated and underutilized, complaining that their U.S. counterparts treated them as doers rather than thought partners. India team members rarely spoke up about their concerns and experiences, believing it would be futile. Receiving only the barest of information about the broader context of their work from the U.S. managers made matters worse—it enlarged the gulf between the two groups. Geographic distance exacerbated the problem, too, but even the few team members who were based in the same location weren't connecting effectively. They didn't interact beyond what was necessary to complete tasks.

To combat these negative dynamics, the team agreed to participate in a two-part intervention run by external facilitators. First, team members agreed to meet weekly in rotating pairs for personal one-on-one calls — virtual spaces where one India-based team member and one U.S.-based team member would chat, not to talk about work, but rather to get to know each other. People were so uncomfortable with the idea of having non-work conversations that they asked the facilitators for support. So for the first several weeks, the facilitators provided personal questions that team members could ask each other, such as "What is one thing about you that others would be surprised to learn?", "Is there a story behind your name? Does your name mean something?", and "What did you study in university?"

The scripts helped alleviate team members' social anxiety about having these personal conversations. People talked about where they were from, their career paths, and their families. One U.S. team member learned that the wife of an Indian colleague was soon to have a baby. After participating in these calls, team members began to see each other not just as coworkers but also as human beings. They noticed this effect themselves, making comments like "It was the first time we really got to know each other" and "The personal connection makes it easier to talk about things related to work."

The second component of the intervention was a weekly "pulse check," where the whole team would meet virtually to discuss work challenges. Each week, every member answered the same four scripted questions: How are you feeling? How valuable is the work you are doing? How satisfied are you with your learning? Is your operating model sustainable? The answers were further scripted: Members were asked to pick one of four faces--smiling, accepting, frowning, or

crying—to indicate their response to each question, and explain why they chose that face. Other members were then asked to comment.

Strikingly, junior group members immediately shared more work challenges in the pulse checks than they typically shared in the group's regular meetings. For instance, an Indian engineer who was relatively new to the team acknowledged feeling overwhelmed by trying to come up to speed on a major project. She told the group, "I am probably stretching to my limit. I probably can't do this forever." In response, her manager and the U.S. project lead followed up with her to find ways to provide greater onboarding support and to build her workload more gradually.

Senior team members also shared their struggles. For instance, the U.S. project lead, in response to how satisfied he was with his learning, said, "I am between 'accepting' and 'frowning.' The nature of our work is so much driven by the deadlines, we don't get to focus on important things. I need to invest in myself…but that doesn't happen for various reasons." In conversations with junior team members, my research partners and I learned that such acknowledgements by senior team members didn't cause others to question their leadership, but instead humanized them in ways that made the team feel more connected.

Over the course of the intervention, we observed that team members progressively deepened their interpersonal sharing in the one-on-one calls and the pulse checks. Their engagement was tentative at first. But as the weeks passed, buoyed by the energy and connectedness they were experiencing, team members increasingly bought into the change process.

Indeed, a few weeks into the intervention, some junior India-based team members proposed adding a personal question to the four standard work-related pulse check questions so that people could get to know each other even better. One week, everyone shared a funny or embarrassing story. Another week, people shared two truths and a lie, and others had to guess which was the lie. In these meetings, the energy and openness in the team reached new levels, with team members laughing and joking with each other.

At this point the team took even greater ownership of the process, further adapting the spaces and scripts. For example, a few junior team members suggested building on the success of the personal one-on-one calls by adding small group calls to expand the personal connection time and to discuss professional development goals and work feedback. As anticipated, these small group calls elicited deeper sharing and team bonding. Near the end of the intervention, the group decided to use the entire pulse check to discuss how to better manage team workloads. This discussion generated new ideas for load balancing that the team immediately implemented.

By the end of the 10-week intervention, team members were openly discussing work issues and tackling challenges together. For example, when the team faced a pressure-filled deadline for a big client, members who finished their tasks early offered to help others who were scrambling, and those who needed help felt comfortable enough to ask for it. The project lead reflected afterward that the team's success in meeting the deadline was due to the change in the team's dynamics: "If we hadn't had [the intervention], we would still be…passing specs across the wall from one side to the other and not having this level of collaboration." Another team member reflected more broadly on how the experiment helped people communicate effectively: "People

are more expressive. There is a *platform* to express opinions and problems. Any one of us would not have taken the step to do that on our own."

Why Spaces and Scripts Work

Developing positive team dynamics requires individuals to take risks. That's largely because organizational norms tend to discourage the sort of interpersonal sharing that must take place to foster team connection. So the challenge of fostering positive team dynamics is a classic collective action problem: The team would be better off if every member spoke openly, but no individual member has the incentive to take this risk alone.

Giving the group spaces and interaction scripts can make it easier for members to collectively overcome this problem. Because spaces (like the one-on-one calls and pulse checks in our experiment) are separate from the everyday functioning of the team, they create openings for new group norms to emerge. Scripts complement spaces in two ways. First, by specifying very clearly what types of interactions should occur in a given space, scripts reduce uncertainty (and thus anxiety) about engaging in interpersonal sharing. Second, because they are the same for everyone involved, individual members who follow them are not deviating from the team's expected behaviors. On the contrary: When people in a group respond to common prompts to engage in interpersonal sharing, they are experimenting *together* with new norms. They are all equally vulnerable— no one is more exposed than the others.

While our experiment entailed a nontrivial time investment for the team we studied, groups can carve out smaller spaces within existing routines to connect in meaningful ways. For example, other teams we have studied set aside a few minutes at the beginning of meetings to check in with individual members on a personal level. They used brief scripts to prompt some type of sharing, such as listing a high and a low from the week or choosing one word to describe how each person is feeling. Even these very small time investments improved openness, trust, and respect in the groups that made them.

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Recommendations on how to foster positive team dynamics tend to focus on how team leaders should interact with team members — ask questions, listen actively, and exhibit humility — to signal to team members that it is safe to speak up when they have ideas or concerns.[3] While that's certainly important, team leaders can't simply focus on their own behaviors and expect interactions between all team members to change. At least early on, they also need to become *designers* of their teams' interactions.

Celebrated behavioural economists Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein have shown that being deliberate about choice architecture (by setting decision defaults, for instance, or carefully ordering options) can nudge people to make better decisions.[4] Similarly, being thoughtful about the architecture of interactions within a team—and using spaces and scripts as design tools—can nudge members to connect with one another personally and collaborate more effectively. That

can be done for virtual groups as well as those who meet face-to-face, which is good news in a world where remote work is no longer the exception.

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[1] https://rework.withgoogle.com/print/guides/5721312655835136/

[2] M.Y. Lee, M. Mazmanian, and L.A. Perlow (2020), "Fostering Positive Relational Dynamics: The Power of Spaces and Interaction Scripts," Academy of Management Journal 63, no. 1: 96–123.

[3] For example, see I.M. Nembhard and A.C. Edmondson (2006), "Making It Safe: The Effects of Leader Inclusiveness and Professional Status on Psychological Safety and Improvement Efforts in Health Care Teams," Journal of Organizational Behavior 27, no. 7: 941–966.

Detert, J. R. (2018). Cultivating everyday courage. Harvard Business Review, 96(6), 128–135.

[4] R.H. Thaler and C.R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New York: Penguin, 2009).