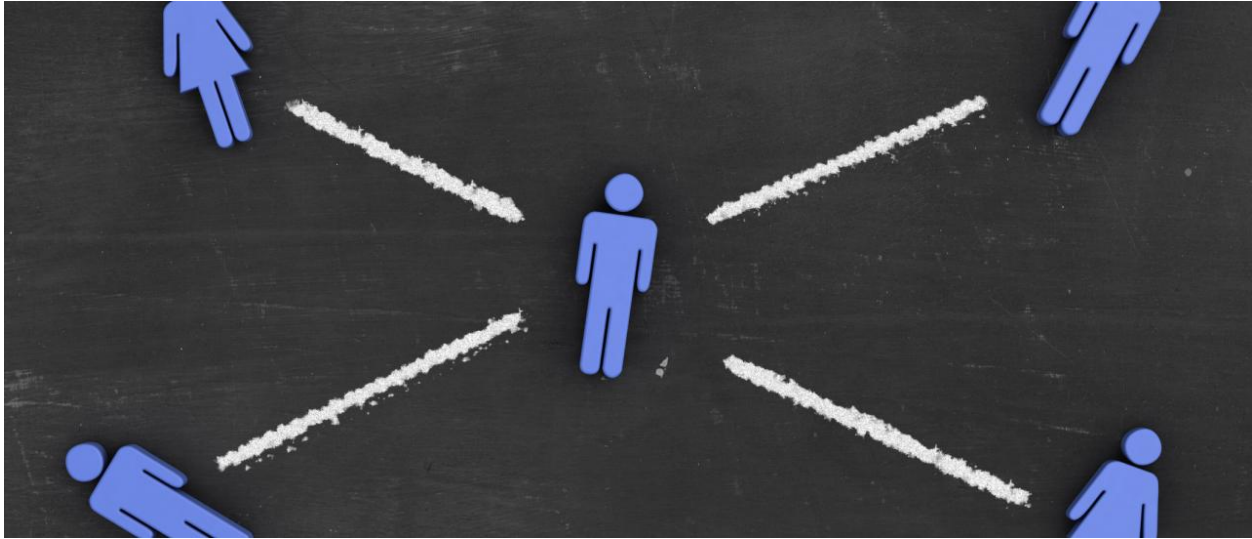


The Great Covid-Driven Teamwork Divide



By Michael Y. Lee , INSEAD Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour, and Koen Veltman (INSEAD MBA '09J), Founder, OrganizationBuilders

For most teams, the pandemic either brought colleagues closer or drove them increasingly apart. There are three key reasons why.

What makes a team more than the sum of its parts? Its cohesion or connectedness, which allows for pooling of individual members' strengths and compensates for their weaknesses. Accordingly, Google's landmark **Project Aristotle** study found that the single most important driver of team performance was not the skills, intelligence or personality of a team's members, but rather the quality of the team's interactions and whether members felt psychologically safe.

The Covid-19 pandemic is perhaps the greatest threat to team connectedness we have ever seen. Colleagues who were mostly co-located – often literally within arm's reach of one another – have been forced to

disperse across cities, even countries. As we saw this occurring, we fretted for the future of these teams. Would close working relationships built up over months if not years simply be scattered to the four winds? To capture the effects in real time, we [launched a survey](#) back in June about how teams were being impacted by Covid. More than 500 professionals around the world responded.

The findings surprised us. While 45 percent of the respondents said their team's level of connectedness had declined since Covid-19, nearly one-third (31 percent) said it had improved. Only about one in five reported no change. The pandemic, far from having a consistent effect observable across the sample, had created a divide. Teams that seemed better adjusted to the "new normal" were becoming more connected as a result, while those that adapted less saw the quality of their relationships decline.

Looking deeper into the survey responses, we identified three key levers that largely predicted whether a team's cohesion was growing or devolving in the wake of the pandemic.

1. Harnessing the communicative power of new technologies

Yes, technology-mediated communication is less information rich than face-to-face communication. But teams that became closer and more connected harnessed the power of technology to bridge divides and bring people closer.

First, teams with existing geographic divides found that the shift towards all virtual work put everyone on the same level and increased both information sharing and connectedness. Teams that had a majority of their members co-located while keeping a virtual subset particularly benefitted from the shift to all virtual. Talk of "levelling the playing field" and no longer being able to "forget those on the phone" were common for these teams.

Thriving teams also leveraged the multiple avenues of communication that technology platforms like Slack and Zoom allow. For instance, one manager said that she used the private chat function in virtual meetings to nudge different individuals to speak up at certain points. She contrasted this with having to wait until after meetings and said, *"From my point of view, it's better team interaction when it counts and it can make a difference."*

To thrive in Covid conditions, having the right technologies is a baseline. For struggling teams, insufficient IT systems and less usable platforms with poor

quality video or audio created frictions that significantly impaired the ability to connect virtually.

Thus, to enable connectedness virtually, organisations must invest in multiple high-quality communication channels and leverage their power.

2. Designing new interaction rituals for the virtual format

The shift towards virtual work almost completely abolishes informal interactions (e.g. coffee chats or water cooler talk). The value of these interactions is both functional – enabling a great deal of information transfer – and relational – providing opportunities to “catch up” and strengthen relationships.

Thriving teams created new rituals and practices to compensate for the loss of these valuable informal interactions. First, thriving teams changed their meeting cadence from longer meetings once a week to shorter meetings multiple times a week, or even every day (e.g. daily standups). These frequent shorter meetings improved communication in thriving teams and created a sense of togetherness without increasing overall meeting time too dramatically.

In addition, thriving teams are consciously building in time just to socialise and connect. For example, one team based in Ireland put in a weekly virtual “tea break” for team members to gather while another team implemented a daily 30-minute coffee break. Others have sought to create structured virtual social interactions such as quizzes and sharing playlists, book recommendations and even a film club.

As the examples above indicate, Covid-19 has prompted an increasing “formalisation” and structuring of team communications and interactions. While this presents some challenges and awkwardness, it has also made communication more intentional and inclusive for thriving teams. For example, one survey respondent said, *“We check-in on the whole team more now, where we probably left it to chance previously.”*

Struggling teams, on the other hand, have failed to create new communication rituals. Based on the comments in our survey, part of the cause appears to be an aversion to creating formal and structured interactions. Complaints about the awkwardness of such formal interactions was common in struggling teams. In addition, such teams clung to rigid and

old interaction templates. One respondent said that all meetings, even those that should last five or ten minutes, are now a minimum of 30 minutes.

Another obstacle is the lack of collective adaptation of rituals. Instead of creating collective spaces for team members to catch up and connect, these teams have relied on individuals to informally organise catch-ups on their own. Expecting these connections to be maintained bottom up requires greater coordination costs that end up reducing overall participation and connection time. Team leaders can leverage their positional power to cut through this “red tape” and create collective spaces for the team to socialise.

3. Leveraging the opportunity to show compassion and care

While the pandemic (and shift to virtual work) creates challenges for fostering human connections, it also presents opportunities. Rarely has our shared humanity and vulnerability ever been more apparent. We’re all experiencing stress, uncertainty and fear related to a common threat, and a potentially life-threatening one at that.

Instead of feeling helpless, members of thriving teams are reaching out to help one another. This helps to foster greater and deeper connections on the team. One individual said, *“This crisis and the willingness of the team to make sacrifices for one another was a big deal. It took us to the next level in terms of trust.”*

Another said of the increased generosity of spirit that individuals afforded one another, *“There was significantly less complaining on minor issues and certain team members solved these issues by themselves with a new quality you could almost call generosity.”* In one organisation, this generosity manifested in the “happiness team” sending gift hampers to members of other teams.

In thriving teams, this deepening of intimacy and connectedness has largely occurred on top of an existing foundation of trust and relational resources. The pandemic has enabled these teams that were already connected to strengthen their bonds even further. One respondent said, *“With Covid, our sharing has become even more deep and vulnerable and authentic. We already have a real depth, but it just became more solid to be this way especially at our global monthly check-in.”*

Struggling teams, on the other hand, tend to focus purely on work and efficiency, without attending to the human dimensions of work in Covid times. This is in part due to limiting beliefs about the possibilities of connection virtually. Several respondents on struggling teams articulated beliefs that virtual work makes human connection impossible. One individual said, *“Yes, you can use video and try to leverage digital collaboration tools / platforms but digital-only communication channels limit rather than liberate the emotional side of human interaction, in my opinion.”*

The great divide

Our survey offers a snapshot of how teams responded to the first wave of the pandemic. It is entirely possible that some of the damage – and enhancements – to team cohesion have since rolled back as teams adjusted to their new normal.

Yet our survey consistently finds that team relationships are highly vulnerable in Covid times. And it also suggests that the shift towards virtual work, and the collective stressors to which we are all currently subject, do not automatically spell relational disaster for teams. As with any human connection, it’s about putting in the work – and that effort must begin with leaders. The thriving teams in our impromptu study not only show that strengthening team relationships during the pandemic is possible, their examples also suggest some places to start: harnessing the power of new technologies, designing new interaction rituals and leveraging the pandemic as an opportunity to show compassion and care.

Michael Y. Lee is an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD.

Koen Veltman (INSEAD MBA ‘09) is the founder of ***OrganizationBuilders***.

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About the author(s)

Michael Y. Lee

Koen Veltman Koen Veltman is the founder of OrganizationBuilders.

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