EA Insights

EXECUTIVE ADVANTAGE LLC

The Sandbox

Ever see 2-year-olds playing together in a sandbox?

If you answered "yes", think again. You probably saw 2-year-olds together *IN* a sandbox. But, unless they were truly extraordinary, they likely weren't *PLAYING TOGETHER*. They were sharing the same space.

As our world slowly grapples with how and when to resume life in light of COVID, the way we work may not look the same as it did 2 years ago. So, how will we play…er, I mean, work…together going forward? And, how can we make our new work configurations productive no matter how they look?

That's our topic for this edition of **EA Insights**. Keep reading, and let's consider how we can still make time in our changing sandbox(es) worthwhile.

All the best,

June

June Melvin Mickens
Executive Advantage, LLC

Quotes

"Relationships with people in general, in no matter what capacity, are something that's very emotional. They mean a lot to you."
~Emma Chamberlain

"That's all small talk is -- a quick way to connect on a human level -- which is why it is by no means as irrelevant as the people who are bad at it insist. In short, it's worth making the effort."
~Lynn Coady

"People are so fearful about opening themselves up. All you want to do is to be able to connect with other people. When you connect with other people, you connect with something in yourself. It makes you feel happy. And yet it's so scary -- it makes people feel vulnerable[.]"
~Toni Collette

The Secret Weapon in Getting Back to Work Post-COVID

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If you're like me, you've probably seen a million articles lately about preparing for workplace reentry in the post-COVID world. Okay, a million may be a stretch…but some days, I wonder!

Seriously, though, much of the focus has been on whether or not people can be required to be back in the office, about the legalities of vaccine mandates and/or testing, and about how to function -- fully onsite or according to some hybrid model. Don't get me wrong; all of these are critical topics for consideration whether you're on the employer or the employee side of the desk. However, for some workplaces, I think that there is another topic that really might be the secret weapon for helping to create or hold onto teams that will demonstrate productivity and collaboration no matter where their seats may be located in the future.

What's the secret weapon? Emotional Proximity!

Let me explain. The *proximity principle* is wrapped up in the notion of forming relationships. The way this happens is by encountering people regularly and engaging with them. You see, it is through contact that bonds are developed.

In many respects, though, we've been conditioned to think that we absolutely need *physical proximity* in order to have connection. The traditional thought has been that, for relationships to form, people need to be in the same location. And, we've carried this mindset into our notions of the workplace -- to lead a team and/or to perform work effectively, we must share physical space. While being on location certainly is essential for some industries or roles (after all, it's kinda hard to operate a car wash team remotely), it's not required for everyone. Nor does being together in shared space automatically equate to successful engagement. (Just think about the 2-year-olds physically together in a sandbox. Are they playing? Yes. But, are they playing together? Well….)

Instead, whether physically proximate or not, introduce *emotional proximity* into the equation, and it's a whole different ball game! If emotional proximity is the goal, then it matters less whether people are in the same place; the more critical factor becomes the quality of their interactions. Team members may be situated across town, at different ends of the country, or around the world, but their physical distance pales in comparison to the closeness and camaraderie they are able to create.

Thus, as we plan for how we'll function come the fall (or even thereafter) and grapple with work after COVID, there certainly is a question of *where* we all will work. However, in many respects the more important question is *how* we all will work. And, planning out how you'd answer either question really shouldn't be pushed out until infection rates drop and/or restrictions evaporate. The *how*, especially in

"Technology has changed…interaction quite a bit. Now it's really easy to communicate with a large group of people in a really short time, and that...opens a lot of possibilities. You can do a lot of things with it that you couldn't do before. It's kind of fun to figure out how that can be employed."
~Misha Collins

"When you really listen to another person from their point of view, and reflect back to them that understanding, it's like giving them emotional oxygen."
~Stephen Covey

"I connect with people on a daily basis."
~Zac Efron

"Human beings are social creatures. We are social not just in the trivial sense that we like company, and not just in the obvious sense that we each depend on others. We are social in a more elemental way: simply to exist as a normal human being requires interaction with other people."
~Atul Gawande

"The best remote companies I've seen do almost everything online, via email and telephone. But they also get together face to face on a regular basis."
~Margaret Heffernan

a possible multi-location scenario, is a matter for us all to begin taking serious steps toward today.

So, what might help to develop or strengthen emotional proximity? Let's consider this from the perspective of both leader and staff member.

Leaders: Whether your team members are in the office or elsewhere, cultivating emotional proximity requires intentionality. There certainly are situations in which teams just click. Unfortunately, that type of automatic connection can't be counted on, which means that, if it is to happen, it's up to you to encourage it.

How might it look to encourage emotional proximity?

- <u>Try holding weekly or biweekly team meetings as a start (cameras on, for those off-site)</u>. This helps you and others to see one another and read body language. In meetings, don't do all of the talking, and do your best not to always be "the presence" in the room. Weave in discussion topics and brainstorming questions. Encourage interaction and collective, creative thinking. Facilitate occasions for people to work, celebrate, and even commiserate together.

- <u>Create workgroups or staff pairings</u>. Connecting people, when appropriate, to join forces on an assignment provides the chance for them to connect in ways that solo work does not. This often is an extremely effective way to strengthen bonds among group members.

- <u>Set a regular schedule of check-ins with each person</u> at least monthly (though biweekly is preferable). These one-on-one confabs allow you to get to know each person individually, talk about what's going well and where there may be challenges, and work together on continued growth and/or new opportunities.

- <u>Block out drop-in times on the calendar</u>. Open the physical or virtual door, and let folks know that you're available for them to chat, to engage in joint problem-solving, etc. You may start with one person in the room with you and, before segment end, have several sharing in an impromptu manner.

Note that you can't (and shouldn't try to) force people to like each other. On the other hand, you can seek to create a safe environment for people to open up, share, and get to know one another. Also, you've got to model the type of respectful emotional proximity you seek for your team. When you both cultivate and show, over time you set the stage for bonds to flourish among those on the team so that you're working well together whether near or far.

"I understand that I'm able to connect with people; I have an emotional bonding with people."
~Aamir Khan

"Trust is the most important part of a relationship, closely followed by communication. I think that if you have those two things, everything else falls into place -- your affection, your emotional connection."
~Vanessa Lachey

"One of the very rewarding aspects of my work has been the interaction with a superb group of colleagues and friends…."
~Mario J. Molina

"If we approach other people understanding our own value, being confident in who we are, being centered and grounded, it's actually easier for us to connect with them because we can listen more deeply and we can express ourselves more authentically without fear of being judged or not being enough."
~Vivek Murthy

"When you connect to someone on a human level, and you get to know about them, you can begin to love the things that make them different."
~Ruth Negga

"A friend is an emotional bond[.]."
~Simon Sinek

Staff Members: The full responsibility for developing connections doesn't lie at the leader's feet. Every person on the team has a role to play if you are to function in an emotionally proximate way. So, what might a staff member do?

- <u>Don't be a hermit!</u> Whether you're working from home or in a cubicle in the office, hiding out doesn't foster team connections. Don't make people wonder if you're still a part of the company; let them see your face.

- <u>Actively participate in meetings and other sessions</u>. You have ideas, questions, thoughts…share what you're thinking so that teammates get to know you and can come to appreciate all that you have to offer.

- <u>Connect regularly with your manager</u>. Although it may be tempting to wait and always let your manager make the first move, don't. Reach out to let your leader know what you're working on, the progress you're making, the questions you have, and so on, especially if something comes up between your regular one-on-one meeting times. This helps that busy supervisor know that you're there, you care, and you desire to be an active and productive part of the team -- wherever your primary work location happens to be.

<u>Moving to our next work phase just may have more of us working is different configurations than we did in pre-pandemic days. For that reason, it really is essential that we figure out how to do so in ways that will allow us individually and collectively to function smoothly and effectively. For assistance in planning success for yourself or for those on your team, reach out to us at *Executive Advantage*</u>. We'd welcome the opportunity to help you map out steps to expand your ability to work well with the onsite and remote members of your team. **<u>Contact us today</u>**.

"There is enormous value in face to face interaction."
~Sebastian Thrun

"Whether it's your family, friends, community that you connect with, don't be afraid to reach out. That's my biggest advice…. Don't be afraid to reach out and ask questions. Ask for help, because you never know where you'll find it."
~Vanessa Williams

"Use each interaction to be the best, most powerful version of yourself."
~Marianne Williamson

About Executive Advantage

At *Executive Advantage*, we are committed to providing results-based business and management consulting, leadership development, and coaching support. We partner with business leaders to build healthy, well-functioning organizations, where goals are met and people thrive. We also partner with individuals to create professional (and personal) lives with clearer direction, improved results, and greater balance.

To learn more about *Executive Advantage*, contact us **online** or at (301) 280-5950.

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