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Rebuilding Relationships Across Teams in a Hybrid Workplace
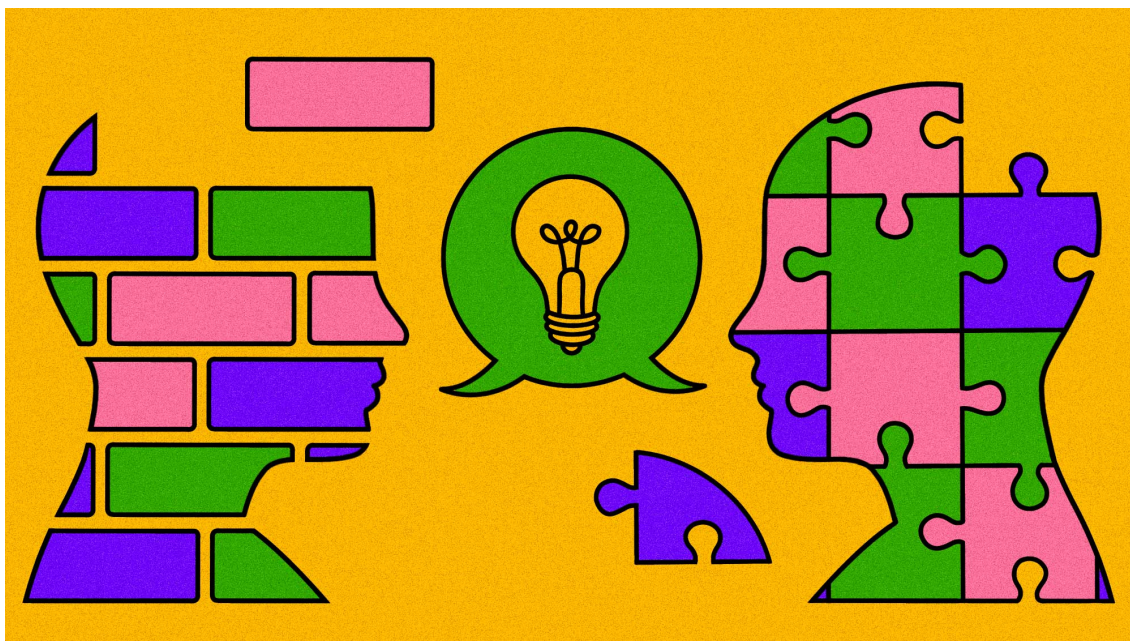
by Ron Carucci

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Illustration by Vickie Sieczka

Summary. The coming year of inventing our way toward whatever our workplaces will look like offers a marvelous opportunity to refresh and reinvent cross-functional relationships. Working to rebuild these bonds is especially important because most people won't be returning to... **more**

As people slowly return to some form of hybrid workplace, bonds that tie them to one another must be rebuilt. Over the past 18 months, most organizations have experienced some degree of

fracturing as social connections and cultural cohesion have been strained. The challenges of remote work, dramatic uncertainty, the clumsy process of figuring out what returning to the office could look like, and the mass exodus of workers fed up with cultures that make them feel devalued have all served to threaten a sense of community. On top of all that, most of our remote work interactions have been with our immediate colleagues and focused largely on the tasks at hand — research from Microsoft suggests that cross-functional collaboration went down by 25% as interactions *within* groups increased during the pandemic.

But fragmentation isn't a byproduct of remote work. It results from a lack of intentional bridgebuilding to link discrete groups and regions. Silos were certainly prevalent before the pandemic — hybrid work has simply created new requirements for effectively connecting teams that must work together to achieve shared outcomes.

Working to rebuild bonds is especially important because most people won't be returning to work as the same people they were before the pandemic; the last 18 months have changed all of us in some way. Our values and priorities have shifted. Our senses of meaning and purpose have broadened. Our anxiety has increased. For some, tolerance increased while for others, it decreased. In short, we have to get reacquainted with who we've each *become*. Otherwise, our natural biases that formed about who each of us *were* will kick in, creating unhelpful dissonance as we react to each other as we did prior to the pandemic. For example, one executive said of his colleague, "She used to have the best sense of humor, but now quips I make that she would always laugh at get no reaction at all." He'd failed to consider that she was emotionally exhausted because her family was hit especially hard by Covid-19.

Here are three approaches I've seen help leaders and their teams reestablish strong connections across organizational boundaries as they've shifted to hybrid work environments.

Create new shared identities

Humans are naturally tribal beings. We bind with and narrowly identify ourselves as one of our immediate group. By default, those outside the group are "other" — and likely not to be trusted. This type of we-they thinking will intensify if cross-functional connections aren't strengthened. Enabling people to establish new shared identities that bind them to one another more broadly helps reorient their brains to new relationships, seeing colleagues who were once "they" with fresh eyes.

Research from NYU's Jay Van Bavel found that our brains quickly shift away from previously held biases when we work together in solidarity. In one experiment using brain imaging, a set of people whose amygdalas revealed a variety of implicit biases about certain types of people showed that those biases were dramatically reduced when participants were told those same types of people were now "on your new team." The closer we affiliate with our "we" tribe, the more outsiders become "they." The solution requires broadening the definition of we.

In one organization, to break down unhealthy tribalism, we established cross-functional teams to take responsibility for various aspects of the organization's cultural health. Teams focused on things like learning and education, innovation, community building, and hybrid work health and were composed of members from numerous functions and regions, all resourced and empowered to act. Creating an affinity to a team with broader purpose immediately helped improve cohesion and collaboration across the organization.

Accelerate solidarity

Recent research from McKinsey revealed that the strongest drivers of people quitting was not feeling valued (in other words, like they and their work mattered) and lacking a sense of

belonging. They lacked what I refer to as organizational solidarity: creating strong ties to one another and to a shared purpose so people never question either.

Relationships across functions are especially challenging to form with solidarity when you haven't seen or spoken to one another in a long while. In one client organization where there had been a lot of change in one division during the pandemic (a new organization design, new people, and shifts in people's roles), we did a comprehensive re-onboarding of everyone in the organization. Leaders realized that if we didn't level the playing field for everyone, trust would take too long to build. In a two-day session of round-robin conversations, people gathered to "meet for the first time…again." Each person came prepared to share their responses to five prompts:

1. The most significant thing that's different about me since the pandemic started is…
2. The thing I'm most concerned about returning to work in our hybrid approach is…
3. I'm most excited about this team's ability to…
4. The help I need to be successful on this team is…
5. The contribution I feel I can make to your success is…

It was a heartfelt two days full of emotions and surprises for the group. Most notable were the many comments from tenured employees about seeing their long-standing colleagues in a fresh light while accelerating trust with their new colleagues. One participant said it well: "My default position with other departments has been to assume the worst. But when they showed up with that level of commitment to me, I knew I had to trust them." These results are further evidence of what my own 15-year longitudinal study revealed: Stronger cross-functional relationships are six times more likely to produce trustworthy behavior.

As you begin bringing people back to work in whatever form that takes, invest the time to reset relationships not only within your team, but also between your team and key organizational partners. Use the opportunity to shed old baggage with rivaling cross-functional partners and start new by strengthening weak ties.

Build leadership learning cohorts

The ultimate determinant of cross-functional health is the quality of leadership over the teams that must cooperate to get things done. Leaders who model empathy, curiosity, proficiency with conflict, and a genuine desire to create widespread shared success build the strongest cross-functional partnerships. But these leadership skills don't often come naturally, especially to highly results-oriented leaders who've been raised in overly hierarchical environments.

I've found the fastest way to build strong, consistent cross-functional leaders is to immerse them together in cohorts of leadership development. In nearly a dozen organizations, we've built cohorts of 12–16 leaders who journey together in their own learning and formation for 6–12 months. The content is focused on key skills and knowledge they need to drive the shared results their functions must produce. Recently, we've oriented content to how the organization needs to rethink leadership in a hybrid workplace. Small sub-teams spend time on real projects aligned to strategic goals that create added value for the organization, and pairs of "peer-coaches" are assigned to meet weekly to exchange feedback and advice on identified development areas. I've found that the relationships that form during these cohort journeys remain deep for years beyond their initial time together.

As you bring leaders back to your "new normal," invest in their development by establishing cohort learning communities that will bind them to one another — and their shared organizational

aspirations. They will naturally cascade their newfound broader orientation down to their teams, who in turn will connect more effectively with their cross-functional peers.

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The coming year of inventing our way toward whatever our workplaces will look like offers a marvelous opportunity to refresh and reinvent the most important relationships in our organizations: the ones between those who, together, create results and cohesion for the enterprise that no one team could create on its own. Don't squander it.

Ron Carucci is co-founder and managing partner at Navalent, working with CEOs and executives pursuing transformational change. He is the bestselling author of eight books, including *To Be Honest* and *Rising to Power*. Connect with him on Linked In at RonCarucci, and download his free "How Honest is My Team?" assessment.

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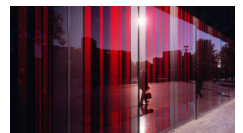
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