

TRUST IS BUILT THROUGH INTERACTIONS

Ever since I graduated from high school 20 years ago, I moved around a lot. One year in Colorado, three years in LA, two years in Charlotte, one year in St Louis, five years in Belgium, and now eight years in Denmark. As I moved around, I had to learn how to make friends and quickly connect with colleagues. And truth be told, I am not naturally gifted at doing this. I am a true introvert and trying to form relationships with strangers was not something I enjoyed.

When I look back over the years, I ended up making friends with the people closest to me, and I don't mean closest in terms of similarity or connection. I mean closest in terms of I saw them a lot. My closest friends in Charlotte were my neighbors and my classmates. My only friend in St Louis sat two desks down from me at work. This pattern continued in every place I lived. My roommates, neighbors, colleagues, and classmates were where I found friends.

Proximity and the frequency of interactions dramatically increase trust and feelings of closeness. Now this is probably not a profound revelation to anyone. We all have experienced making friends this way. But it isn't some old wives' tale we all believe. Research proves it's true. And in today's new reality of social distancing due to COVID-19, we need to understand how distance and interactions impact our relationships.

I like to read about research being done in areas of psychology, leadership, and business, and I came across this study in the book, *The Science of Likeability: 27 Studies to Master Charisma, Attract Friends, Captivate People, and Take Advantage of Human Psychology* by Patrick King. I have to give credit to King, because most research articles can be quite boring to read, and the most interesting ones are the hardest to find. But King was able to pull together some of the most interesting articles and write about them in an engaging and human manner. You don't need to be a psychologist to understand his key points.

So, I hope you like this article on how frequent interactions impact how people feel about you. I also recommend looking at my other tools and articles about working from home and virtual teams on my website: www.CavemanInASuit.com

You Have Stronger Relationships with People Who Are Physically Closer

The first study looking at how the number of interactions builds trust amongst people was published by Leon Festinger, Stanley Schachter, and Kurt Back in 1950. They examined the choice of friends and relationships within housing apartments. What they found was that relationships were often connected to how physically nearby the people lived. We now call this effect the "proximity effect." For example, people living on the second floor of a building were significantly more likely to be friends with other second floor residents, and not people living on the other floors. Even more interesting, the residents that lived near communal areas tended to have a broader range of relationships. For example, the people living near the stairwell or mailboxes on the ground floor had significantly more relationships with people on the upper floors when compared to other ground floor residents.

Festinger et al. believed that this was evidence that the foundation of friendships were small passive interactions. Very few people ever go up to someone and say, "let's be friends." For most of us, it starts with seeing each other around. Eventually, that leads to small talk and getting to know each other better. And if your interests are similar, it eventually turns into friendships. But it all starts with having small interactions.

Weradith is Why the Proximity Effect Works

At the root of the proximity effect is a phenomenon that has been studied since 1876 the "mere exposure effect." Basically, people tend to develop preferences for things merely because they are familiar with them. Through the lens of the proximity effect, friends are made with people we frequently see and are familiar with. And while that might make sense for friendships, the mere exposure effect also works on completely random things.

Robert Zajonc is by far the most well-known researcher who studied the mere exposure effect, and the majority of his studies showed just how silly the mere exposure effect can make people act. He would first show

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participants some random images. Later in the session he would reshoot some of the original images, but also add in some new images. Even though these were random images with no inherent value to the person, participants would rate the originally viewed images more positively than the new images.

The images Zajonc would use were things that often meant nothing to the participants, like polygons, Chinese characters, fictitious company logos, and made up words. But merely seeing the object once transformed it from something random with no value, into something that they liked. Think about this for a second. This would mean that if I asked you to compare two made up words, Weradith and Acaer, you would subconsciously rate Weradith more positively because you were exposed to it in the title of this section.

How to Apply the Proximity Effect While Working from Home

In an office environment, the mere exposure effect and the proximity effect occur all the time. We are constantly interacting with colleagues at their desk, bumping into them near the coffee machine, and eating lunch with them. Without even thinking about it, these constant interactions built trust and positive feelings for your colleagues. Unfortunately, we are now in an environment where physical proximity is not always possible.

If you want to build or improve a relationship with a remote colleague, focus on creating many small interactions. This does not have to seem like you are a creep or you are cyber stalking the other person. Focus on normal things. Text them or instant message them to check in. Or better yet, ask them to join you for coffee. It may sound silly, but I have known quite a few teams that have practiced “virtual coffees.” In essence, people would take 5-10 minutes to have a quick phone/video meeting to just catch up and see how the other person was doing. In this manner, they were able to replicate some of the proximity effect, even though it was by planned interactions.

I also suggest that you plan the proximity effect into your team meetings. In the transition to working remotely, many leaders will have the desire to replicate their in-person work schedule (i.e., have a weekly team meeting). But only seeing your colleagues once a week can be incredibly lonely. Instead, focus on many smaller meetings where you all use video conferencing. I also suggest you always put 5-10 minutes in every meeting to talk about non-work-related topics. In essence, you need to schedule the conversations you would normally have around the water cooler.

Customer Facing Roles Need to Leverage the Proximity Effect While Working Remotely

Customer facing roles (sales, customer service, etc.) should also use the proximity effect when building relationships with customers. Salespeople tend to know this, as they recognize that initial meetings do not often lead to a sale. They know it is the subsequent visits, when the customer has started to form a positive viewpoint of the salesperson and the products / services. So, for customer facing roles, do not sit around waiting for the customer to come to you. Even if you don't land a sale, merely visiting the customer will significantly increase their opinion of you.

But in this new work-from-home reality, your sales and customer service roles need to be living on video chat with their customers. Now is not the time to be hiding behind systems or emails. Put a face with the name, and proactively interact with your customers. By being actively aware of the proximity effect, you can leverage these small virtual interactions to build strong relationships. As you can see, half the battle of building relationships is just showing up and interacting with the other person. So, the next time you are going to the coffee machine, pay attention to what colleagues are around, and start improving some relationships.

Cary Bailey-Findley has spent the past decade building the Human Capital within three Fortune 500 companies and was awarded the ranking of #1 development organization in the world by the Association of Talent Development. He is currently building the employee development portfolio for Unity Technologies. He holds a Master's degree in Industrial and Organizational Psychology and a Master's degree in Business Administration.