

Building Scientific Trust Virtually

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By S. Kerkar
BUILDING SCIENTIFIC TRUST VIRTUALLY

How do you build, manage, and grow global oncology teams in opposite time zones amidst a pandemic? It's a question I asked myself as I accepted a new position eight months into the COVID-19 lockdown, knowing that my first interactions with a large part of our global teams would not be in person and that I would be relying on a virtual connection to bond, collaborate, and drive innovation.

Whether it's a home delivery or a dog barking, every employee's new working environment has been tested and is stressful at times with its unique set of distractions and challenges.

Solutions include encouraging each other to set up a quiet workspace and to embrace the fact that inevitably there will be distractions. Focus on the advantages of virtual meetings, which include instantaneous connection, constant communication, and live chats. Ensure everyone is familiar with the specified technology and offer fast support for any technical glitches. Testing the company's network capacity may even be necessary during these unprecedented times. I like to encourage free-flowing conversations, and if needed, even more discussion time after the day's business has been covered to talk about any concerns or even new ideas a team member may be mulling over. I've often discovered that it is during these last few minutes of the day when we have our biggest brainstorming sessions.

MOBILE PLATFORMS

Five years ago, we would not have been able to maintain the same level of communication and track our progress without mobile technology platforms. Our weekly meetings and planning strategies are conducted using mobile technology that enables us to share and edit documents and use video and live message chat extensively throughout the workday in multiple time zones. File sharing and collaborative report writing are parts of the DNA of every meeting. From a more detailed perspective, we can ensure we don't duplicate any of our efforts and that we remain focused on one clear strategy we all share as a company.

The technology also allows us to clearly define our goals and hold each other accountable for meeting those goals while addressing any roadblocks we may

encounter along the way. The apps can never replace a face-to-face meeting or even a Monday morning catch-up in the break room, but they are here to stay.

CREATING AN AUTHENTIC CONNECTION

When it comes to forming a human connection, research tells us that most of what we tell one another is non-verbal. So, it's our body language, our ability to smile, even with our eyes, that signals whether we trust someone. Although some of these expressions can be shared virtually, they are not exclusive to building an authentic virtual connection. Other factors include shared ideas, a common workplace, and most importantly, reliability. Throughout my career as a physician, scientist, and now drug developer, I've always remembered that empathy, or the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes, goes a long way in any work environment.

I've put that best practice to test over the past year. The uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 initially created a considerable amount of stress, as our teams tried to remain nimble and plan for many possible scenarios.

That's why I cleared my schedule, trying to adjust my daily workload to make time to check in with colleagues. Throughout the day, I prefer to space out calls, if possible, so I'm not rushed and have time to concentrate on a particular colleague's concerns he or she may be experiencing. Scheduling a virtual lunch or coffee just to catch up is a good way to stay connected and formulate bonds. Also, simply listening and engaging in random acts of kindness will boost a person's mood and spirit. It's long been documented that that eliminating stress and establishing an open communicative dialogue always leads to more productivity in the workplace.

The lessons we've learned during this pandemic have given us an opportunity to change the way we structure and organize our business model, to create a more meaningful work/home life balance based on trust and authenticity. **L**

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