

BUILDING TRUST IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

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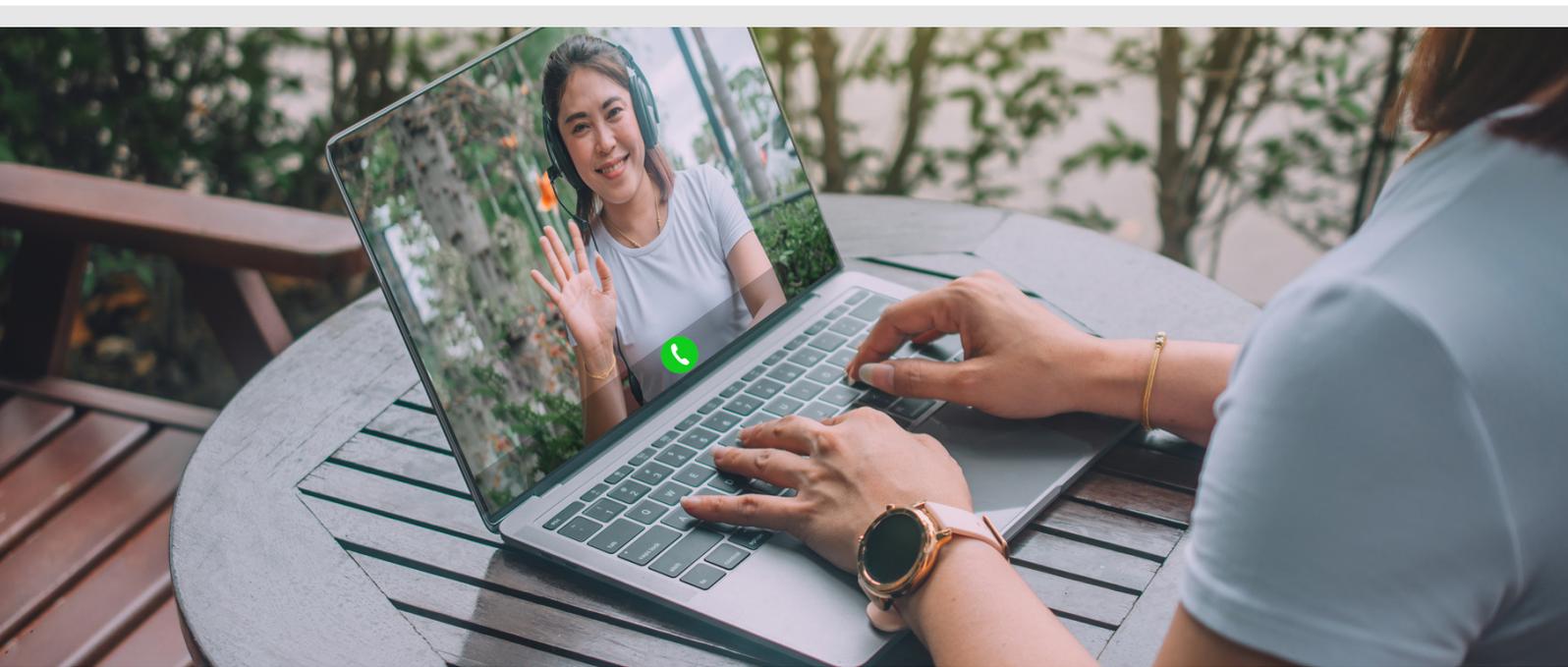
The act of communicating with people not in the room has been with us for quite a while; for some of us in a post-pandemic world, it is the only way we work. This is not new. We act as if we are in a new technological age, but the invention of writing, and then printing, and then the telephone put virtual work and communication well underway. People have been talking to people not in the room for a long time. Smoke signals and drums work well.

What is new is how the virtual way of being has entered every corner of our lives. We now email people sitting next to us. We find love, companionship, and conversation on the internet. We work on a regular basis with people we will never meet. We receive coaching and webinars from around the globe. PowerPoint and screen sharing is second nature. For both consultants and leaders, we not only want to have influence with people over whom we have no control, we now may not even get to meet them. Today's technology and the virtual world it creates are amazing, but it is just what it is. It is technology. It is not a substitute for relatedness, authenticity, meaning, or being of service in the world. It may not even help.

IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

No matter how virtual our world becomes, having an impact rests on a simple belief: relationships are decisive. If you have the expertise, if you know something, and run something, and you want the world to act on what you know, a trusting relationship is vital; building trusting relations is not about convenience or comfort or feeling good about working together. Your ability to engage in honest, trusting relationships is the determinant of business performance and making a difference. You need to do it because you have something to offer this world in your organization or community, so you must build that trust so that you can have an impact.

Tools, techniques, and methods just take us so far. But if you are focusing on relationships and their nuances and believe that matters, your work is always engaging. It keeps you active and energized. It makes you powerful. Especially in a virtual world where so many of our senses have been removed from the table.



Being relationship-minded is too simple. It is easy to take for granted. If you just stop to ask yourself, *"What is going on between me and them? What is going on among them?"* you become powerful because of what you have put into words. If things go awry, you don't have to figure out what's wrong; all you have to do is say *"things are going awry."*

In this series, based on the work that we have done in consulting, community conversations, empowerment, and stewardship, we want to give you access to a range of high-engagement and trust-building language and practices. These practices do not so much require skill as much as they require a shift in thinking, a touch of awareness, and courage. You mostly need to be a little courageous. You already know how to organize work, make lists, and what conditions will make a project work. This conversational domain, called trust, is about honest, truthful conversations. It is about evoking feedback and feelings about what's working and what's not. You want support for the work that you're doing or what your team is doing so that people know that it is okay to tell you the truth. These are the things that most of us want so that we can be of the best service to people.

We want to spell out ways to engage people, so their best thinking, best selves, and most authentic selves show up. We use the word 'flawless' to mean that if you bring this way of being, whether in-person or virtually, you have consulted, led, or convened flawlessly, whether you got the outcome you have in mind or not. Really good consulting and leadership help partners and stakeholders each get what they want. It is not so much about getting what we want. It is about helping others live out their intentions and helping them be together in a way that depends on their connection, even in hard times in front of a screen.

STRUCTURES FOR ENGAGEMENT

We begin by using a simple structure for what we call **contracting**. Projects flounder from incomplete contracting. Good contracting serves to build relationships with any stakeholder very simply. We don't have to analyze people, know their history, or ask general questions about well-being. Impact engagement begins with the question: *"how do you feel about working with me?"* This is a question of presence and connection.

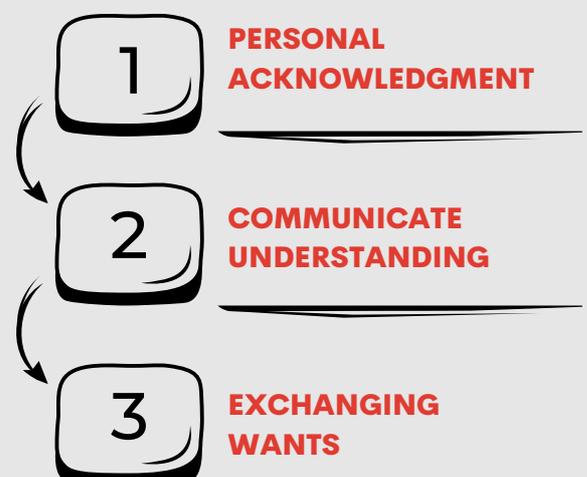
This does not always get the response that you are looking for. They might say, *"I'm fine."* "Fine" is not an answer. "Fine" means "I am not answering." If this is the case, you say, *"If you had any doubts about working with me, what would they be?"* If the answer is "I don't have any doubts," then you keep at it. Ask, *"If you did have any doubts, what would they be?"*

Try this three times, and then let it be.

In those few minutes, you begin to make contact and start building trust in a way that is disarming and powerful. That little structure, 30 seconds, is easy to remember. If you decide to use it, it declares to the world at that moment that our relationship is critical to implementation.

We are connected so much now through technology that conversations have to be more than efficient and convenient. For an engagement process to be impactful, we need to build trusting working relationships right from the start, whether we are in the room together or in cyberspace. It is a process where structures such as this offer the possibility that maybe something will change in this world, and this is always more likely when people are getting connected in a different way as fast as possible.

To expand this idea, let's take the opening steps of a meeting. Examples of three steps that make a deeper connection possible are personal acknowledgment (our example above), communicating that you understand the problem, and exchanging wants.





PERSONAL ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In virtual meetings these days, so many people are showing compassion for each other, asking one another, *"How are you doing? What's going on? How are your kids? How are your pets? How are your parents? How are your loved ones?"* There's a lot of this kind of conversation going on, and it cuts across every function, every boundary, and every work situation.

Personal acknowledgment is a step beyond the social exchange of how we are doing.

Personal acknowledgment is about the work itself. About us. About what we came to this moment for. Now it's more important than ever because the world has changed, and some projects might be completely unimportant even if they were really important two weeks ago. They might have a totally different context. And the opportunity here to develop trust through a personal acknowledgment can surface quickly by asking about what is shifting in work or people's intentions. Asking, *"How do you feel about working with me?"* might evoke, *"Our history working with your team has not been great."* Or *"Unfortunately, I do not have the energy for this project right now."* Or *"I'm just not going to be able to dedicate resources to this project right now."*

Take Kelly's case as a hypothetical example. Kelly had a business partner say on a scheduled call, *"I haven't had a chance to dedicate a single bit of time for this since we last spoke."*

Kelly's colleague could've said, *"All right, let me get my notes together,"* as they were thinking, *"Where are we again on this project?"* But instead came out simply and said, *"I haven't had time,"* so they could start their work there, with the partner's acknowledgment about how they felt about being on the call with Kelly that day. Maybe not the response Kelly would have preferred, but the trust in the relationship held together, even at this moment.



COMMUNICATE UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEM

The second element of contracting and engagement is “communicating an understanding of the problem or challenge.” At its core, it is laying on the table the challenges and opportunities we think we are working on. It’s asking, *“What are we here to focus on?”* Our job in this part of the contracting process is to listen. To understand the purpose or essence of why we’re doing what we’re doing and why we’re having the conversation that we’re having. We are confirming that this relationship is important right now, especially at a time when so much is changing. We keep coming back to the question: *“Why are we here? What is the main point that we need to be focused on so that it gives us clarity about purpose and outcomes?”*

Another thing we can offer in this step to foster trust is to say, *“Here’s what it sounds like you’re struggling with.”* Or *“Here’s what it sounds like you need from me right now.”* Or *“Here’s what I think we’re here to do. Even though we met a week ago, the world was different a week ago. Here’s what we’re working on now. Is that right?”* The key is to withhold advice, even if that is what you thought you came for.



EXCHANGING WANTS

The client’s answer to your question, *“What do you want from me?”* is the heart of the engagement and contracting process. This begins what we call the exchange of wants.

You ask, *“What do you want from me right now in this meeting, in this work? Has anything changed? And what else do you want from me?”* What we’re talking about when we get into the exchange of wants is primarily concerned with the relationship.



The intention of engagement with impact is to have people decide whether they care about something—and if they care about it, what's the commitment they are willing to make?

All the questions that thread through this process are designed to build trust and create connections between us and other stakeholders and partners. What helped an IT department's people to have more impact many years ago was the moment they decided that the relationship and how it went with their client was as powerful as the accuracy of their recommendations.

WORKING VIRTUALLY TOGETHER

In our virtual world, we need more than ever to be connected and ask how the other feels about working together. We also need to tell them our feelings about working together. And do it quickly because the competition for attention has escalated. Teams still have to work together, and we have to be willing to speak to that issue.

Here are some issues to pay attention to in the virtual world:

- All that we do electronically requires more care and attention than if we were in the room together. We hold to the structure and questions of engagement, three of which we have begun with here. We keep checking whether each party is getting what they came for.
- The virtual world compresses time. Keep in mind the likelihood that our expertise will be valued rides with the engagement. It has little to do with the correctness of our recommendations. It has everything to do with the credibility (read: trust) you have built with your client or stakeholder, or partner.
- The virtual world has eliminated predictability. If we're honest, for half the things we do, we don't know what the outcome is going to be, but we do it anyway. If you only do things that are predictable and you never risk a leap of faith, you'll never make a difference.
- We can be together virtually and still actually intensify our relatedness and our authenticity. We can ask, *"Why did you show up today?"* We can still say things like, *"It looks like things are hectic around there. I hope this is a good time to get together."*
- The virtual world has contempt for silence. When there is no sound, our first thought is the technology: *"Is anybody out there?"* This makes thinking obsolete. We must learn how to consciously create space for silence. For thought. The questions we ask halfway through a meeting — *"How are we doing?"* or *"Are you getting what you want from this?"* — are even more essential in the virtual world since we know we are missing so much that is unspoken.

All of this means we accept the conditions of long-distance and sometimes frozen and blurry faces or voices. We need to neither romanticize it nor resist what is virtual or digital. Technology is a useful and entertaining tool. It can also be a defense against engagement, and seeing the distinction is essential to the difference we are going to make.

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