

Why it's time to humanise the workplace



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How often do you have meaningful conversations with colleagues at work? If the answer is 'rarely', then find out why it's time to make a positive, conscious change in the way you approach workplace relationships.

Mental health seems to be top of the HR agenda at the moment. This is thanks in part to the efforts of Prince William and others who have opened up about their own battles with mental health and launched initiatives to tackle the issue.

Importantly, many of these initiatives focus on the nature of our interactions at work. For instance, the ['Time to Change' campaign](#) advised us on Mental Health Day to “ask twice”, giving people a chance to go deeper than the usual “fine, thanks” when asked “how are you?”.

At Consensio, we agree that the quality of workplace interactions plays a vital part in [mental health](#). In this article, we suggest three ways to have courageous conversations at work that are deeper, healthier and more humane.

The whole person

There is a tendency at work to focus on the rational, intellectual content of discussions. The person taking minutes at a meeting, for instance, typically picks out the logical arguments made in favour and against each issue, and records the practical decisions made.

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But there is so much more going on in every interaction. For instance, there are the emotions and moods of the people in the room, which undoubtedly influence the quality and outcome of the meeting. And there is the physical, corporeal dimension - as seen in the postures, gestures, actions and positioning of people in the room (all of which also give information about what is really going on).

The tendency to prioritise the intellectual dimension can have a damaging effect on the quality of our relationships. If we only acknowledge the rational in one another, we are missing out on so much that makes each person who they are. And this can pave the way for misunderstanding, loneliness and depression – the ingredients for mental ill-health.

But we can train ourselves to see one another as more complex beings, made up of intellect, emotion, body, intuition, imagination and more. In our conversations, we can pay more attention to the emotions expressed by others and ourselves. We can and should talk about our feelings, doubts and inner conflicts, without fear of appearing unprofessional.

We can allow our imaginations to roam, as we did when we were children. We can share our intuitions without feeling obliged to provide logical explanations. We can give ourselves permission to talk about things that appear unrelated to work. And we can pay more attention to body language: the speed of a gesture, which direction the body is facing, the way the head is inclined.

Just noticing these things can make a difference: consciously or not, we *know* whether someone is seeing us a human being, as opposed to a source of information or a means to some other end.

The present moment

We spend much of our time at work waiting for the future to begin. We start the day with a list of things to do and spend the rest of the day trying to tick things off the list so we can move onto the next.

We are trained to look for ways to change and fix and improve. Professional development rarely includes the art of observing how things currently are. Our whole mode of being at work is geared towards the future. This does not make for healthy interactions.

As an antidote, in your next conversation, pay attention to what is happening at each moment, without trying to achieve, decide or solve anything.

We pay less and less attention to the people sitting next to us and more and more to what's happening on our screens.

Notice not only what the other person says, but how they say it, through the pitch and tone of their voice. Notice the way they move, sit, react. Notice the contradictions between what they say and what they express through their voice, face or body.

Try reflecting your observations back to them. If you notice they have less energy than usual, mention it, or even ask them why. At the same time, pay attention to yourself. If you suddenly feel irritated or offended, include it in your awareness.

You may want to voice it and make room in the conversation to discuss it. Notice your own posture and physical behaviour. Notice if you are jiggling a leg, or drumming your fingers on the table, or if your body is turned away from the other person.

All of this information can unlock a deeper understanding of ourselves and others, and yield richer, more human experiences and interactions at work.

Openness to change

Sometimes our relationships suffer because we get too attached to the past. I may get so attached to an opinion that I'm unable to change my thinking even in the face of new evidence. Over time, the opinion hardens to a prejudice and I no longer want to spend time with people who think differently.

The concept of unconscious bias is now well documented in HR theory, but in practice we all still have work to do to gain awareness of our biases. Every conversation is an opportunity to expand our worldview.

In workplace mediation, we encourage parties in conflict to open themselves up to new perspectives. Of course, we are not obliged to agree with other people's opinions, but we can still take time to inquire into them, and gain understanding of what lies behind those opinions.

Set yourself a target of having a real conversation, of the kind described above, at least once a day.

If in a conversation someone expresses an opinion opposed to your own, resist the urge to agree or disagree. Instead, ask them why they think it. Ask them why it matters to them. Even if in the end you decide to stick with our original opinion, the quality of your interaction and the depth of your relationship will have benefited.

A conversation a day to keep the doctor at bay...

It is not surprising that we struggle to communicate in this way at work. We feel the pressure of time and the need to produce tangible results.

We also live in an age of digital communication, which can have the opposite effect on our interactions: we pay less and less attention to the people sitting next to us and more and more to what's happening on our screens; we seek out opinions on social media that reinforce our own. We need to train ourselves to overcome these influences and change our habits.

Here's one suggestion: set yourself a target of having a real conversation, of the kind described above, at least once a day. Allow yourself even ten minutes to be fully present.

Give attention to what is being expressed, emotionally, physically, intellectually and beyond. And use the conversation as an opportunity to open yourself up to new and unexpected ways of thinking, acting and being.

The more we can build these attitudes into our interactions at work, the healthier and more humane our relationships will be.