



## Empathy in a Remote Working World

### Key Points

- The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated a reinvention of business.
- Team building as we knew it is challenged and will need to be replaced by a new set of binding and driving principles.
- Empathy is needed to check on employees' mental health.
- No how-to manual is readily available to best bring needed empathy to this remote working environment.
- The hierarchy of needs for tomorrow's remote worker must be met with a virtual interpretation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.
- We need to recognize the important differences between 100 percent office-based teams, 100 percent remote teams, and blended office and remote teams.
- The opportunity to create truly inclusive cultures, blind to age, gender, and race, has never been greater.

### Introduction

Empathy is defined as "being aware of and sensitive to the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of another without explicitly experiencing them" or "a capacity to relate to what another is feeling." It is the ability to connect emotionally with others, showing one understands another's feelings, concerns, and the problems they are facing. In effect, empathy is our "social glue."

The current COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated a reinvention of business, creating a home-based reality. The social contract with employees is being modified as well as the economic model of business. The view of organizational purpose will need to be re-examined and the interaction between the social contract and economics will be called into a much closer examination than it has in decades.

Changes in the social contract with employees will emphasize not only the importance of personal health, but more broadly societal health in all its dimensions. Society includes coworkers, customers, stakeholders, and broader slices of all humankind, but now with a likely strengthened environmental, social, and governance focus. This represents a shift to a much more empathetic organization, one challenged by reduced levels of face-to-face contact, an inability to readily read the body language of remote workers, and a multiplicity of work environments subject to the homebound circumstances of each remote worker and their own daily schedules and interruptions.

## **Team Building**

Team building principles, driven by common purpose, peer pressure, and the energy (positive or negative) of ever present supervision, are challenged and will need to be replaced by a new set of binding and driving principles. These new principles must engage at the emotional, not just the intellectual, level. A new genre of tribal stories and rituals must emerge. These new, powerful “stories” must weave fact and emotion together. They must be compelling, hold attention, and trigger a sense of caring. Importantly, they may be more visual than auditory, substituting in part for the reduced face-to-face communication the remote worker will now experience.

## **Remote Working Environment**

The acceleration into a remote working environment will be further amplified by two other accelerated and interlinked trends: the shift to an (almost) fully digital work environment and the growing expansion of artificial intelligence (AI) into all aspects of both work and personal environments.

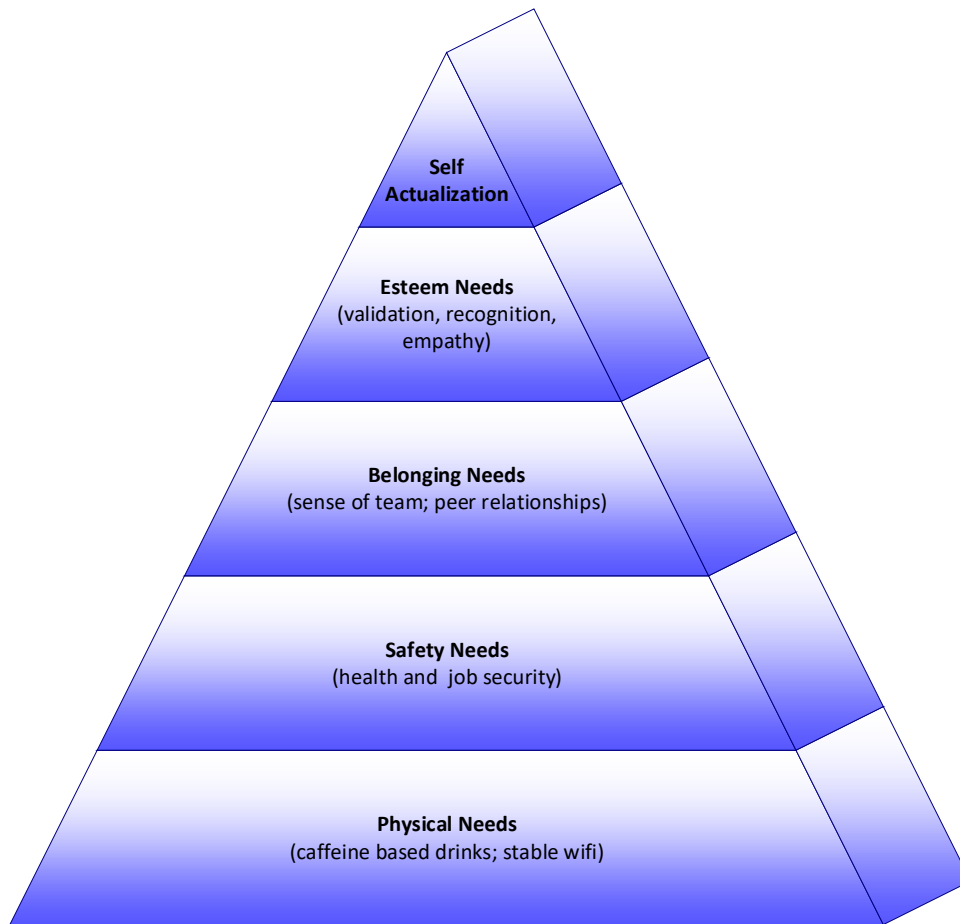
*Mercer’s 2020 Global Talent Trends* sees a far greater role for contingent workers in the future (77 percent of executives surveyed), adding yet another change factor into the nature of the social contract with employees.

Empathy is needed to check on employee’s mental health. This goes beyond the validation and positive feedback that all individuals require. Working remotely in a purely virtual setting eliminates the opportunity for that passing nod from a co-worker or boss or even the “How is it going?” platitude we have come to expect. The needs that this level of validation once satisfied now needs to be met in the remote and virtual environment in new ways.

People and teams are a company’s real assets. The need for empathy is especially important now during periods of high anxiety, such as during this pandemic period, and even more difficult “at distance.” One-on-one engagement may never have been so important, in addition to regular team meetings, where the initial focus is on bonding and sharing. People and teams now must be nurtured more and engaged emotionally to perform at high levels.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was already a growing need for “virtual water coolers” to allow for relationship building, spontaneous exchanges of ideas, and innovation. This need has grown and accelerated. Evolving solutions such as daily or weekly tea times; short Instagram stories with personal snippets; and hackathons, both work and non-work focused, must be embraced and left to evolve in natural ways. The hierarchy of needs of tomorrow’s remote worker must be met with a virtual interpretation of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (see the virtual interpretation pyramid based on Maslow’s theory next page).

A readily available how-to manual on how to best bring needed empathy to this remote working environment does not exist, but some items stand out as important, including:



**Trust**—always an essential element of engagement and in some ways the must-have precondition. In a remote working environment, the nature of building trust and sustaining it changes. In many instances trust will be initially assumed and then verified. The strategies discussed above on engagement, team building, and empathy become all important. Trust must be a two-way street.

**Communication**—again always essential, but also now changed in several ways. A good portion of the 90 percent of communication which is non-verbal is lost. Ad-hoc spontaneous interactions are challenged or challenging at best. Some techniques for addressing communication at distance have been described, but a more important point needs to be made. That is, much of the transactional communications that have been previously required will happen asynchronously. What that means is a request now may not be seen for hours by someone who is already in “heads down” mode. We know that remote workers enjoy large blocks of uninterrupted time, contributing to higher productivity. A final point: be respectful of time zones or at least adjust the timing of those global calls.

**Human element**—Barbra Streisand’s famous Jule Styne-Bob Merrill 1964 song, “People,” helps even now in understanding the human element. The lyrics include “People who need people are the luckiest

people in the world.” Tea times, virtual lunches, and maybe even multi-player gaming help build human connections. Help others build empathy as you build your own. Challenge yourself and others. Get out of the box, literally, change up your work location where possible, but certainly get your thinking out of the box by working a stretch challenge. Solicit and give feedback. Provide 360° reviews, appropriately focused, which can be helpful. Create opportunities for everyone to get to know the person, not just the worker.

**Walk in another’s shoes**—Job rotation, challenging assignments, and opportunities to explore curiosities are all essential for engagement at an emotional as well as an intellectual level. Going digital is not synonymous with the automation of the work force. People are not automatons. Adopting different perspectives helps in raising awareness of biases and in asking better questions. It helps build empathy towards others.

**Stay physically connected**—Not to support breaking any quarantine that may persist, but tangible physical connections will remain essential. Send a physical package, something different in a virtual world. Personalize it. Celebrate not just team accomplishments, but personal ones as well. A story I heard many years ago involves an employee who comes excitedly into the boss’s office to tell him about an incredibly successful accomplishment. The boss congratulates him and reaches into his desk drawer, looking for some tangible way to recognize the individual. All he sees is a banana he plans to have with lunch. He hands it to the employee in recognition. In later years the boss, aware of the positive effects the spontaneous recognition had, keeps several “golden” bananas in his desk drawer to reward outstanding achievements.

As remote working becomes more of our new normal, we need to recognize important differences exist between 100 percent office-based teams, 100 percent remote teams, and blended office and remote teams. In blended environments, remote workers may fear being passed over for promotions or challenging assignments. This reflects an empathy gap and suggests that engagement with remote workers are not at the levels required.

The opportunity to create truly inclusive cultures, blind to age, gender, and race, never have been greater than the present. We will capture this opportunity only if we can improve our understanding and capability towards empathy.

## **About the Author**

Bob Prieto was elected to the National Academy of Construction in 2011. He is a senior executive who is effective in shaping and executing business strategy and a recognized leader within the infrastructure, engineering, and construction industries.

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