Collaboration at a Distance

Since publication of my book "Human Interactions" in 2005, I haven't changed my ideas on human processes at a fundamental level. I've stopped using the graphical notation set out in that book (too clunky on a large scale) and extended the five principles of Human Interaction Management into new areas of theory such as organisational change, learning, wellness, community, and finance, but I haven't found any reason to update the principles themselves. So, it was a surprise when one of my longest held beliefs about human interactions was overturned recently.

Like other consultants, writers, and speakers, I've worked from a home office for much of my life, generally venturing out for specific meetings rather than to sit in a client's office all day. This might sound antithetical to collaboration but, in my experience, it has been a great enabler. When I meet with people, it is for a purpose, which can be either to achieve a business outcome or spend social time together – evenings out are as important as business meetings in building effective working relationships – and the knowledge that we are all choosing to be in the same place at the same time seems to be conducive both to long-lasting, productive collaboration and to good personal interactions with colleagues.

However, I've always adhered to the belief that it's important to meet people in person, and spend quality time together, near the start of a project. This establishes trust and gives you the informal knowledge of each other that allows subsequent calls and video conferences to run more smoothly. Coronavirus has challenged this approach, of course, so on starting a new project recently, in which many different people who had never met before needed to work together closely, I wondered how well it would work.

I wasn't the only one. Early on, a major workshop was planned to bring us all together for exactly this reason. Initially I was enthusiastic about the idea, feeling that the risk justified the reward when we would all be collaborating only via video call for months afterward. Then, not only did the area in which the workshop was to be held go into partial lockdown, but the area in which many project staff lived was

declared high risk. Workshop planners were forced to limit the number allowed to attend in person, which turned out not to be a problem since the emerging situation led many of us to change our assessment of the risk / reward balance anyway. The workshop went ahead with a few people there in person, and some (including me) on a video call.

Effectively, we conducted a social experiment. People who had attended the workshop in person said afterwards how much they valued meeting other colleagues face to face. So, did it make a difference to how they collaborated in subsequent video calls? Was my long-held belief correct, that those who had met each other in real life would be able to work together more easily and effectively?

I have to say that, so far, I have not observed any noticeable difference at all. You can't tell who has met each other and who hasn't. What I have noticed is that, since coronavirus, people are making more of an effort to make video calls social. There is usually informal chat and banter for the first few minutes that replicates the kind of social interaction one would generally have in an office corridor or kitchen. People often join a call a few minutes early and I wonder if, consciously or not, they are setting aside time to make the kind of personal connections that they would normally shape outside a meeting room.

In other words, I may have been wrong all along about the need for initial face to face contact in order to establish a good working relationship. Humans adapt - if we can't make a coffee or get a beer together, we will find a way around it, and still form the human relationships that we need in order to work together well. In the end, reducing the amount we all need to travel – and thereby polluting the planet less, using our precious time better, and gaining quality time with our families - may be one of the most positive things to emerge from coronavirus.

AUTHOR

Keith Harrison-Broninski is a writer, researcher, consultant, and software designer. His book "Human Interactions" (2005) was described by reviewers as "the overarching framework for 21st century business technology" and "a must read for Process Professionals and Systems Analysts alike". Keith founded the social enterprise Role Modellers, a Gartner BPM Cool Vendor that provided the UK National Health Service with NHS GATHER, an award-winning cloud service for large-scale collaborative innovation in healthcare. With Royal Society of Arts, NHS, and council sponsorship, Role Modellers went on to provide the Web platform Town Digital Hub where communities (geographic or thematic) can manage their resources and help people use them to improve their wellness. Keith's new social enterprise

[Stakeitback](#) provides tech where communities can fund projects by selling stakes and buy stakes for rewards at risk.