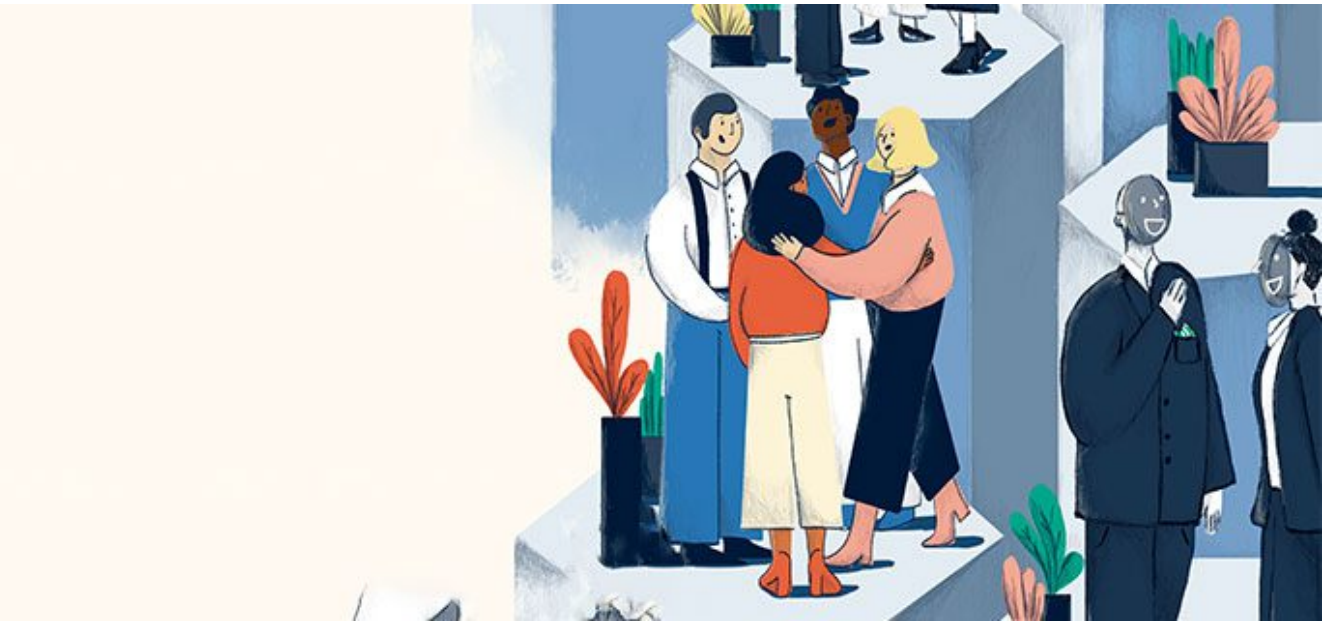
How authentic business relationships create better networks, even remotely

Establishing a sense of shared reality can go a long way toward bridging the digital gap in an age of siloed reality.



May 1, 2024

By Maya Rossignac-Milon

Politics, social media and a fragmented information landscape — all seem designed to divide us. Once, we huddled in front of the TV or gathered round the water cooler to discuss the latest cultural phenomenon or news story depicting a recognizably common version of events. Now, gone are those days when we could confidently expect our colleagues, friends and family to have broadly the same opinions or cultural reference points as us.

Although a greater diversity of viewpoints can be beneficial, it can also leave people feeling

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“alone together” — individually isolated on different devices, different channels and different platforms, filtered according to the whims of their billionaire owners, each with their own particular political, social and economic agendas.

Yet, as bad as things may currently feel, sharing a common conception of reality is about to get a whole lot harder. New virtual reality headsets by Apple, Meta and others portend taking the phenomenon of siloed reality to new extremes, distorting the physical world into yet another space dominated by algorithmically personalized content, with chillingly *Black Mirror*-esque ramifications. Reviewing Apple Vision Pro, a *Guardian* columnist stated: “The cameras through which you see the world can edit your environment — you can walk to the shops wearing it, for example, and it might delete all the homeless people from your view and make the sky brighter.”

The Virtual Human Interaction Lab at Stanford, studying such tech, noted how VR “can inspire awe” but also “interfere with social connection,” essentially rewiring our brains. *Business Insider* quotes this stark warning from lead researcher Jeremy Bailenson: “What we’re about to experience is, using these headsets in public, common ground disappears. People will be in the same physical place, experiencing simultaneous, visually different versions of the world. We’re going to lose common ground.”

How will this affect the way we work together? Will it even be possible to work together? A shared conception of reality is a make-or-break for teamwork and interpersonal relations. The good news is, according to my research, it’s possible to develop shared reality, even in these times of change.

Rebuilding common ground

Human beings have two fundamental needs above and beyond basic survival:

- **Relational needs:** to develop and maintain social relationships with others.
- **Epistemic needs:** to establish the sense of knowing what is real and true in the world.

Both needs are dependent on other people. While we can, of course, have our own version of the truth, feeling alone in our opinions can undermine the extent to which those opinions feel real and true. When our opinions are shared with others, they come to feel more real, more factual — as though they reflect the objective truth. As a concrete example, a marketing director will feel more certain that she is making the right decision about when to launch a

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new campaign if her team agrees that it’s the best course of action.

Having our own version of reality, beyond undermining our feeling of being “right” about things, can socially isolate us from other people. When we feel on the same wavelength as others, we feel connected to them — we feel that we belong. Humans are fundamentally social creatures, and threatening this sense of social connection can rattle us at our core.

As a result, it can often be difficult to move forward as a team without that sense of shared reality. Agreeing on the fundamental facts of a situation forms the basis for a sense of shared competency. Making effective decisions about production, supply chains, marketing and even the target customer requires members of the team to trust each other to be on the same page. This becomes especially important when the team is virtual, where you cannot rely on in-person social cues to smooth over differences of opinion or correct misunderstandings.

My research finds that shared reality contributes greatly to team cohesion and, ultimately, performance. On days when employees experience greater shared reality with their teammates, they find their work more meaningful, they act more kindly and they perform better.

It also contributes to healthy interactions between leaders and their teams. Employees show higher job engagement and lower rates of burnout when they see themselves on the same page as their line manager.

And shared reality matters beyond just the context of ongoing relationships with coworkers. It also matters from the get-go, right when we first meet: while networking.

Network connections

Networking is a form of establishing shared reality. In trying to initiate a relationship with a professional contact, you’re seeking to make an interpersonal connection. And when two people make a connection in one area, it’s easier to extend that connection to other areas, and the relationship is more likely to progress further. Having meaningful network connections is key for career advancement. Yet, this practice can often make people feel uneasy.

Reaching out to a stranger for the sole purpose of self-advancement can feel unpleasantly instrumental. The goal of networking is supposedly to build a long-lasting professional bond, yet the transactional nature of the exchange can feel more like making a quick sale. Recent

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research has shown that this is at odds with people's natural desire for real or authentic connection, giving rise to feelings of dissatisfaction or even immorality — of feeling "dirty."

So how do you combat the "ick" factor of networking? If establishing shared reality through networking is important for personal and professional development, is the answer simply to put on a happy face, get over your reservations and "fake it till you make it"?

Absolutely not. My research underscores the advice to "be yourself" in initial professional interactions. In fact, speaking up and expressing your true thoughts and opinions, even if it feels a little out of place, can help you better connect with others.

You often hear business coaches recommending "impression management" as the means of forging interpersonal connections. In other words, we are advised to moderate the way we present ourselves — through the way we talk, dress and act — in order to shape the way others perceive us. This can mean we conform or withhold certain information if it boosts positive perceptions of the personal brand we are seeking to craft for ourselves.

I would suggest, however, that individuals be wary of adhering too closely to such strategies because, according to my research, the perception of being genuine appears to be a key driver of relationships in the initial stages. And in networking contexts, where instrumental motives are already suspected, people are especially attuned to signs of authenticity — or the lack thereof ("Does this person genuinely agree with me, or do they just want me to like them?").

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