

Performex

THE HUMAN MOMENT AT WORK

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*E-mail and voice mail are efficient,
but face-to-face contact is still essential
to true communication.*

At an electronics company, a talented brand manager is growing increasingly alienated. The problem started when his division head didn't return a phone call for several days. She said she never got the messages. Then the brand manager noticed that he hadn't been invited to an important meeting with a new advertising agency. What's wrong with my performance? he wonders. The man wants to raise the question with the division manager, but the opportunity never seems to arise. All their communication is by memo, e-mail, or voice mail, which they exchange often. But they almost never meet. For one thing, their offices are 50 miles apart, and for another, both of them are frequently on the road. During the rare moments when they do see each other in person - on the run in a corridor or in the parking lot at corporate headquarters - it is usually inappropriate or impossible to discuss complex matters. And so the issues between them smolder.

In this scenario, this executive's anxiety has a simple antidote: a face-to-face conversation. This manager is driving himself crazy for no reason. But to learn that, he needs to reconnect with his unwitting partner in (emotional) crime - and they need to do it in person. They need to experience what I call *the human moment*: an

authentic psychological encounter that can happen only when two people share the same physical space. I have given the human moment a name because I believe that it has started to disappear from modern life - and I sense that we all may be about to discover the destructive power of its absence.

The human moment has two prerequisites: people's physical presence and their emotional and intellectual attention. That's it. Physical presence alone isn't enough; you can ride shoulder-to-shoulder with someone for six hours in an airplane and not have a human moment the entire ride. And attention alone isn't enough either. You can pay attention to someone over the telephone, for instance, but somehow phone conversations lack the power of true human moments.

Human moments require energy. Often, that's what makes them easy to avoid. The human moment may be seen as yet another tax on our overextended lives. But a human moment doesn't have to be emotionally draining or personally revealing. In fact, the human moment can be brisk, businesslike, and brief. A five-minute conversation can be a perfectly meaningful human moment. To make the human moment work, you have to set aside what you're doing, put down the memo you were reading, disengage from your laptop, abandon your daydream, and focus on the person you're with.

Usually when you do that, the other person will feel the energy and respond in kind. Together, you quickly create a force field of exceptional power.

The positive effects of a human moment can last long after the people involved have said goodbye and walked away. People begin to think in new and creative ways; mental activity is stimulated. But like exercise, which also has enduring effects, the benefits of a human moment do not last indefinitely. A ten-mile run on Monday is wonderful - but only if you also swim on Wednesday and play tennis on Saturday. In other words, you must engage in human moments on a regular basis for them to have a meaningful impact on your life. For most people, that's not a tall order.

I am concerned, however, that human moments are disappearing and that this trend will be accompanied by worrisome and widespread consequences.

THE DISAPPEARING HUMAN MOMENT

Human beings are remarkably resilient. They can deal with almost anything as long as they do not become too isolated. My acquaintances in the business world, tell me that as the tide of electronic hyperconnection rises, the landscape of work is in some ways changing for the worse.

As an example, a colleague told the following story. "A guy sent me an e-mail that said, 'We were not able to access the following application, and we need to know why,' and he cc'd his supervisor, solely to show the supervisor that he was doing something about the problem. What bugged me was that line, 'and we need to know why.' If he had spoken to me face-to-face we could have solved the problem, but no, I get this e-mail with its peremptory tone, and he's cc'd it. My immediate response was, back at you. So I

write an officious sounding e-mail, with a cc to a bunch of other people, including his supervisor, explaining that I had submitted a change management ticket, and that had he gone to the meeting where that was discussed he would have known about it and wouldn't have tried to access that application. I became that guy's adversary instead of solving the problem. But I felt goaded into it."

This story illustrates how letting the human moment fall to the wayside leads to dysfunction in organizations. When human moments are few and far between, oversensitivity, self-doubt, and even boorishness and abrasive curtness can be observed in the best of people. The irony is that this kind of alienation in the workplace derives not from lack of communication but from a surplus of the wrong kind. The remedy is not to get rid of electronics but to restore the human moment where it is needed.

To be sure, people have felt lonely or isolated at work in the past. Henry Ford's early factories were no love-ins. Nevertheless, from the 1950s onward, executives and middle managers came to expect that they would talk with one another in the office - for business or personal reasons - and would even play together at the end of the day. And when it came time to connect with distant clients or suppliers or colleagues, people got on planes. Meetings happened in person. Yes, they were time consuming and costly. But they fostered trust. Not incidentally, people had more fun.

But in the last ten years or so, technological changes have made a lot of face-to-face interaction unnecessary. I'm talking about voice mail and e-mail mainly - modes of communication that are one-way and electronic. Face-to-face interaction has also fallen victim to "virtuality" - many people work at home or are otherwise off-site. I will certainly not try to make a case that these changes are bad. And indeed, no one planned on reducing face-to-face meetings; this is simply happening naturally, with the inevitability of water flowing downhill. We have the technology, so we are using it.

For the most part, it makes our lives much better. But problems that develop when the human moment is lost cannot be ignored. People need human contact in order to survive. They need it to maintain their mental acuity and their emotional well-being.

TOXIC WORRY

What happens to the psychology of the mind when the human moment vanishes - or at least fades - from our lives? In the worst case, paranoia fills the vacuum. More often, the human moment is replaced by worry. That's because electronic communications remove many of the cues that typically mitigate worry. Those cues - body language, tone of voice, and facial expression - are especially important among sophisticated people who are prone to using subtle language, irony, and wit.

“Good worry” leads to constructive planning and corrective action; it is essential to success in any endeavor. “Toxic worry” is another matter entirely. It is anxiety that has no basis in reality. It immobilizes the sufferer and leads to indecision or destructive action. The human moment is like light in an otherwise dark room: it illuminates dark corners and dispels suspicions and fears. Without it, toxic worry grows.

Toxic worry is among the most debilitating consequences of vanishing human moments, but much more common are the little misunderstandings. An e-mail message is misconstrued. A voice-mail message gets forwarded to the wrong people. Someone takes offense because he is not included on a certain circulation list. Was it an accident? Such problems can be tolerated by most individuals from time to time - as I've said, people are resilient. But as the number of human moments decreases, the number of little misunderstandings is likely to increase. People begin to wonder if they can trust their

organizations and, just as often, they begin to question their own motives, performance, and self-worth.

The human moment, then, is a regulator: when you take it away, people's primitive instincts can get the better of them. Just as in the anonymity of an automobile, where stable people can behave like crazed maniacs, so too on a keyboard: courteous people can become rude and abrupt. Our high tech work habits can diminish our brains' performance. Your psyche, just like your muscles, actually needs rest and variation to perform at its peak. Staying on-screen, on-line, or on the telephone for extended periods - just like any other long and monotonous activity - wears you out. The brain becomes starved for fuel: rest and human contact. That is why punishments like exile and solitary confinement are so painful. All the coffee in the world can't make up for the brain-dead state that many people feel at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

The antidote to this condition is straightforward. We need some diversity in our work lives. Refreshing our minds with a bit of exercise or, even better, regularly seeking out conversations with real, live human beings. Although most executives attend enough meetings and social functions to prevent them from becoming zombies, the anonymity and monotony of technology can and will decrease their brain stamina. And for that, both individuals and organizations will pay a price.

HIGH TECH, HIGH TOUCH

A CEO once told me, “High tech requires high touch.” He explained to me that his company had run into a problem. Every time it made another part of its operations virtual the company's culture suffered. So he had developed a policy that required all “virtual” employees to come into the office at least once a month for unstructured face time. “It's like what happened when banks introduced ATMs,” the CEO said. “Once people didn't know Alice behind the counter anymore or

any of the lending agents behind those glass walls, the whole loan process got tougher for both the banks and the customers. There was no familiarity, no trust.” The banks have been scrambling for years now to get their customers into a relationship again. You see, for business to do well, you can’t have high tech without high touch. They have to work together.

But combining high tech and high touch is easier said than done. Technology always seems to take precedence. Following are two examples of human and “virtual” moments working in tandem and reinforcing each other to great effect.

To deal with the recent growth of a major real estate development company, its increasing diversification, the expanding numbers of people working for the company, the executive came up with: a “Thursday pizza” get together. He worried about the impact of this disconnectedness on his business, in which sharing information is critical, so he started a Thursday ritual: a free pizza lunch in the office. “There is no agenda. People catch up with each other, they brainstorm, they bring up stuff that doesn’t get discussed elsewhere, and it works.” The pizza lunches are largely responsible for his organization’s high morale and competitive strength.

The pizza lunches are a simple way of maintaining the human moment at work. Sometimes, however, reinstating the human moment can be more complex. A consultant in the furniture industry found that many of his clients were becoming increasingly isolated after an industry consolidation left only one or two independents in each city. Sales representatives from the major manufacturers wouldn’t service them in person anymore. They were asked to order over the phone or through the Internet. “You used to learn what was going on in the marketplace from the sales rep who stopped by your store. And a lot of those relationships were very close,” the

consultant explained. “With the sales reps gone, the independents felt completely cut off.”

In response to this problem, the independent stores created what they called “performance groups” - groups of independent retailers from different parts of the country who would get together three times a year to talk business and offer one another support. The need for the human moment proved strong. Today, six groups of independent furniture dealers exist, with ten people in each. They meet in two-day sessions with retailers in noncompeting cities. These people share their best ideas, they benchmark performance, and they give one another the support they need.”

It’s important to note that the groups’ face-to-face meetings are augmented by electronic communication. The performance groups use e-mail and other electronic means to support and expand what they do in the meetings. But all participants believe the in-person meetings are indispensable. “I think a sense of caring develops when you’re dealing with somebody face-to-face. Over the Internet you tend to be very precise with questions and answers, and you can’t register people’s emotions. People don’t open up over the Internet like they do in person. When you’re chatting with somebody, you can see by his facial expression that you’ve hit on a very sensitive subject. It may be a signal to avoid that subject or it may be a signal to go further. You can’t tell that over the computer.” But the industry consultant feels strongly that the Internet is valuable. In fact, he is currently creating a chat room for each performance group. Using a code to enter, members will be able to “talk” between meetings, thereby sustaining, and even building on, the important relationships forged face-to-face.

The performance groups in the retail furniture business seem to me a brilliant example of using the human moment judiciously - even strategically. Obviously, we don’t want to turn back the clock and dispense with the tremendous efficiencies afforded us by electronic communications, but we

do need to learn how to deal with the hidden problems they can create.

Indeed, the strategic use of the human moment can help reduce the confusion and ambiguity of electronic communications,

develop confidence and trust as only in-person meetings can, and reduce the toxic worry, mental fatigue, and disconnection associated with the excessive use of electronics.

Adapted from an article by Edward M. Hallowell, *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 1999

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