



# Restarting the Water Cooler Conversation

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Senior Managing Director Thomas R. Evrard of FTI Consulting's Strategic Communications answers a critical question for the hybrid workforce.

## In Brief:

For years, the informal “water cooler” conversation has been an essential component of office life. While it may have evaporated during the pandemic, there are ways to encourage and support a new, hybrid model as members of your workforce return to the office.

While we might be comfortable with remote work, video chats, and communicating with our teams via message apps, this virtual and isolating environment misses a critical element in the life force of the workforce — spontaneous conversations.

Commonly known as the “water cooler conversation,” the spontaneity of these in-office encounters sparks the personal connections that grow careers. It's where we exchange valuable company information informally and discover new opportunities while building corporate morale and culture.

Some employees may be in the office already as the trickle-back starts. But the reality is that many are still full-time remote. Internal Communications should look for ways to engage each group and bridge the gap to facilitate connections while being sensitive and empathetic to the mental and physical challenges employees are facing. The more we can strengthen a sense of team, the more we begin to move toward the return to normalcy.

## Create “Virtual” Water Cooler Moments

As much as we may be experiencing virtual meeting fatigue, it’s still important for organizations to maintain a variety of internal engagement strategies. You don’t want to let employees slip off the radar screen due to lack of proximity.

### Refilling the tank

#### Encouraging spontaneous conversations

- Maintain virtual meetings to keep employees engaged
- Celebrate successes and progress during meetings
- Use informal communications platforms to chat
- Reciprocate — actively listen and solicit employee opinions
- Establish peer-to-peer “work buddy” programs to support camaraderie
- Meet offline for informal coffees
- Chat with in-office colleagues when possible
- Share spontaneous moments on company social media/blogs

Regular rituals like recurring team meetings, standing department video calls, and the company-wide interactive town hall — keep us engaged. These meetings are for providing updates, but also offer the opportunity to celebrate successes and progress. “Often the only person who knows about a virtual employee’s success is an immediate supervisor,” says Maria Luedeke, a Singapore-based psychotherapist. “You can boost morale by letting peers know about achievements.”

It’s important to take these conversations as a listening opportunity — just like they would be at the water cooler. Solicit feedback from your workforce on topics and updates they want to hear most about rather than leadership making these decisions in a vacuum. You may discover that getting together to chat is more important to people than the topic being discussed.

Try surveying your employees about hobbies and personal interests to strengthen connections. Take it to the next phase by setting up groups to allow people to discuss and interact around these points of commonality.

## Plan for Serendipity

When using video conferencing, take advantage of all its functionality. Chat rooms are a great way to promote interaction. Try setting up “booths” at your Town Hall for different topics in the chat rooms. Let employees bounce from one room to another depending on their interest. Resist over-scheduling these sessions; allow them to unfold almost as if employees were walking from booth-to-booth at a company information fair.

You can encourage personal connections by using more informal chat platforms like Slack, or Teams and Facebook Live. It often leads to a different type of conversation than over email or video that opens people up.

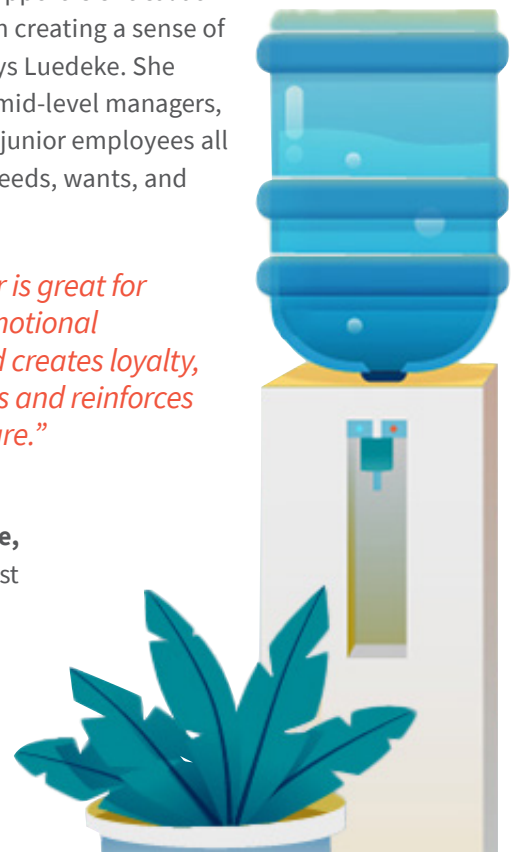
## Support the Newbies, Don’t Forget Veterans

One advantage for established employees in the remote setting is that they already know each other and may have greater comfort connecting online than younger, recently onboarded colleagues. This latter group is finding the environment very challenging. Hopefully, their supervisors are already checking in and mentoring them virtually.

But it’s important that connections aren’t all hierarchical. Consider setting up a “work buddy” program, where new or more junior employees have a peer to check in with. “Peer-to-peer support is critical at every level when creating a sense of community,” says Luedeke. She points out that mid-level managers, senior staff, and junior employees all have different needs, wants, and aspirations.

*“Having a peer is great for mental and emotional well-being and creates loyalty, stronger teams and reinforces company culture.”*

— Maria Luedeke,  
psychotherapist



## Meet Up Offline

One thing we've heard from employees back in the office is how much they missed face-to-face connection. Take that as a cue to book more in-person lunches and coffees with people both inside and outside your team (depending on comfort levels). Try scrolling through your contacts for a person you haven't spoken to in a while. Ask them to meet up for an hour. The unexpected contact can have a surprisingly positive effect on both of you — and might lead to a breakthrough or new project path.

## Meet Up in the Office

Multiple studies show that many employees want to hold on to the remote working option, at least part time. But it could very well be that once a few workers venture into the office, they will rediscover the joys and benefits of the human connection and change their minds or their plans.

For those who do appear, try to make personal contact if possible. Engage them about their lives, their wellbeing, their work. Rebuild in-person rapport and consider sharing moments on a social channel or company blog if you can. You may even want to plan a short social outing like drinks after work a few weeks in advance.

## Flexibility is Key

Navigating communications right now is challenging. We're all learning on the fly, discovering new methods, and making some missteps along the way. No matter what you try, the most important thing is to remain flexible. Try new things. See what sticks, and if it's not working, pull the plug and try something else.

As long as people feel engaged, and companies continue to build community and ensure employee wellness even though you're physically apart, you will stay connected.

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