Creating trust and intimacy in the virtual world

Christiane Cautel shares the results of her inquiry into how to create the best possible audio working environments for global businesses. Following two years of research about virtual work, this first article focuses on the audio environment as a key communication channel within the virtual working environment.

It is a basic assumption of life in today's global world of work that to create the best team, you must have the best team, regardless of geography. Whether it's because of budgetary constraints that prevent travel, the need to optimise the time of key staff, or 'just-in-time talent' policies, more and more people are working in teams that are enabled through technology. The army of virtual workers is growing and out of all the technological bells and whistles available to facilitate their connection, voice technology is proving the mainstay of communication between team members. Whilst individual members can send and receive information via the web, when it comes to finding a group solution, the all-important personal touch of emotional connection is built in small, vivid snapshots. For some, the audio environment can create a greater level of trust than face-to-face meetings. David, a consultant participating in a test group, described the quality of his relationship with Claire made it difficult for her to relate to. However, in the virtual environment, Barbara felt that she had an open relationship with Claire. Interestingly, the anonymity of virtual work often encourages more openness amongst team members. The lack of cultural and visual codes that might stop someone from letting their true opinions be known in a face-to-face meeting are not evident in an audio only conversation. This allows all team members to react authentically, focusing on the ideas and concepts under discussion rather than cultural issues.

For some, the audio environment can create a greater level of trust than face-to-face meetings. David, a consultant participating in a test group at Ashridge Consulting, described the quality of trust in an audio relationship as stronger than in a face-to-face relationship: "It's like whispering into someone's ear," he said. When asked how he knew when a dialogue was invested with trust he explained, "It's about honesty and I feel it because I am being truthful myself."

Analysis of behaviour in audio action-learning groups, that enable people to brainstorm business challenges and solutions with a group of peers, suggests that participants who developed trust quickly were those used to using the audio action-learning model, regardless of whether or not they have a previous relationship with their co-team members.

Following the second audio meeting in a series of five contracted with an FMCG client, Pierre, a regional sales director based in Dubai, said: "I felt more at ease working remotely than the first time because I knew what was going on. It was smoother than the first session. When you don't have visual stimulation – you listen more, you really listen."

Another participant, Carola, a marketing manager based in Italy, illustrated the power of situational trust by explaining that because she was at ease with the process she had been able to relax and open up to the point that she felt she could share a sorrow. Carola went on to say that she felt closer to her team members because she felt that they had emphasised with her feelings. It seems the more participants are involved in audio work in the course of their jobs, the more quickly they feel at ease with the situation and develop a relationship with their fellow team members.

Introducing a controlled element of informality to formal meetings can help people relax and consider issues at a deeper level. There is a real need in any kind of virtual team work to find a way to introduce "coffee machine" conversations to the group. Planning fifteen minutes of chat time before work begins or organising a virtual coffee break half-way through a meeting are two simple ways of letting people across the world build a mental picture of the person they are working with. What did they do over the weekend? What do they value in each other, can be very powerful. Some leaders have found a solution to this problem of technological-driven anonymity by holding introductory, face-to-face meetings to establish relationships and discuss best practice for a project. But what happens when it is not possible? Is it possible to develop trust in a team without everyone having met first?

Every team has to create its own unique way of working – a code of conduct and a set of connected personal relationships, in other words, an intimate relationship – to really connect. How can we encourage the development of intimacy in the virtual environment, when a team is working in different parts of the world with different cultural backgrounds? When it comes to formal meetings, when a team is working in different parts of the world, it is not possible in the virtual world. A new kind of team leadership

The anonymity and distance of virtual teamwork can also create a deeper connection, simply by dint of the fact that team members don't have to worry about local politics or hierarchical issues. A virtual colleague, for instance, is unlikely to report a politically inappropriate opinion to your boss. This freedom from the normal constraints of office life means that many people feel able to open up in a way they don't often do.

Equally, hierarchical relationships can be amplified in an unhelpful way by audio work.

Barbara, an HR manager in a FMCG business, worked for Claire. In a face-to-face environment, Barbara felt that she had had open relationship with Claire. However, in the virtual environment this seemed to change. The combination of the teleconference setting and Barbara's hierarchical relationship with Claire made it difficult for her to feel safe. She said: "In a sense it would be better if we knew the people at all and be completely unconnected with them. It doesn't matter if they judge you... you have nothing to lose." A new kind of team leadership

Whilst a leader can assess the attention and/or boredom levels of each participant in a face-to-face meeting, it is simply not possible in the virtual world. For this reason, virtual leadership requires more versatility than 'face-to-face' leadership. During the course of our meeting virtual leaders must often flex a wide and sometimes contradictory

 Freedoms of the virtual environment

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Minna, a Finnish team leader for a telecoms company, found the freedom of virtual teamwork to be a great resource that she was able to engage her in a completely different manner from face-to-face meetings. Rather than sitting formally at a desk she found herself pacing, jumping up when inspired by the conversation. "I was really involved physically in the conversation," she said. "If somebody had been watching me, they would have thought that I was mad! The Finnish culture really restricts face-to-face behaviour," she added. "Your body movements, to be honest, even your facial expressions, are somehow really restricted. Maybe [audio work] gives you the permission, the freedom to express your thoughts and feelings in a different way."
set of skills. For instance they may have to act as both coach and prescriber, they may be required to show authority and empathy, and they may have to faster on the task at hand and on the social connections between team members. Leaders must also be wary that the traditional rules of teleconference etiquette encourage a cultural view of advocacy rather than free flowing conversation, if a team leader becomes a debate monitor, asking questions by rote, the conversation can quickly disintegrate, with each team member taking up a defensive position on a topic. Not only is it very hard work for the team leader, but it does little to foster an environment of collaboration, curiosity and discovery, amongst the team.

While working with Sally, David and Sarah on the Ashridge test group, it became obvious that conversation was stilted and not free flowing. When asked why this was the case, Sally named the patterns of advocacy that she was noticing, explaining that David would tend to give an opposite view to hers on a specific aspect, instead of both of them inquiring together into the topic in question. She added that David would generally use an injury approach, but that the same communication was still required. The teleconference seemed to be encouraging advocacy patterns as with most of the other teleconferences they had experienced to cough or to talk when the question, the same is needed in an audio environment. More feedback is required with measuring and supporting interventions running alongside questioning. In that way the questions become less sharp when combined with reassuring statements such as "I understand", "I see", "OK", "I see", Virtual nodding, in the verbal form of "I see" and "ahh/nm" become critical in creating a dynamic conversation, where all members feel heard and understood.

Does silence speak louder than words?

In developing intimacy, the physical constraints of audio communication can be played to an advantage. The experience of virtual stimuli, have to slow down and focus loudly on the voice. The natural focus on words, within an audio environment is to facilitate an executive team workshop planned for Sarah's assistant to collect me. It feels like a

digression, which amounts to intensive listening, to offer ideas and direction, they are also good

speaking and thinking, people I'll be working with.

At Ashridge Consulting and specialises in the field of Virtual Leadership and Virtual Work. She has been exposing myself a lot, I didn't get any

It’s a new client for me today. No matter how many times I do this, I always feel a mixture of excitement and anxiety before a first meeting. I relax a little and soak up the atmosphere as I wait for Sarah’s assistant to collect me. It feels like a

and guarded. Might this have something to do with the relationship of the team by being curious about the nature of the silence rather than the content of the conversation. By letting silence exist, team members are given the space to reflect rather than just saying what pops into their head first. The brain tends to listen because the voice can become more flat when combined with visual clues, the connecting environment is more minimalist, making sense happen slower but better. The natural focus on words on the voice amplifies listening skills and allows the brain to fill in the gaps.Virtual nodding, pops into their head first. The brain tends to listen because the voice can become more flat when combined with visual clues, the connecting environment is more minimalist, making sense happen slower but better. The natural focus on words on the voice amplifies listening skills and allows the brain to fill in the gaps.

A new model of working

By building trust and intimacy into audio meetings, teams can do exactly the same kind of work or even more than their colleagues working in a face-to-face environment. More openness can be achieved quickly and to a deeper level than possible with visual cues, eye contact or even a simple nod, she

Her team process rather than singling people out. As a consultant, this is something painful, “a hole”, adding that on

Learning to work with the silence is a powerful
tool for leaders seeking to develop intimacy and reflection in virtual team work. Rather than jumping into the content of a discussion and asking what a team member is thinking now, leaders need to be trained to ask what the silence is about and how they can be a part of the relationship of the team by being curious about the nature of the silence rather than the content of the conversation. By letting silence exist, team members are given the space to reflect rather than just saying what pops into their head first. The brain tends to listen because the voice can become more flat when combined with visual clues, the connecting environment is more minimalist, making sense happen slower but better. The natural focus on words on the voice amplifies listening skills and allows the brain to fill in the gaps.

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