Jessica LOVE: So, if you are one of the hundreds of millions of people worldwide who work remotely at least some of the time, how's that going for you?

Leigh THOMPSON: Most of us think that virtual communication, as compared to face-to-face communication, probably has a big minus sign in front of it.

LOVE: That's Leigh Thompson, a Professor of Management and Organizations at Kellogg. She's an acclaimed researcher, author and speaker whose work focuses on negotiation, creativity, and teamwork.

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And yeah, virtual communication – Zoom, Teams, WebEx – can often feel…uncomfortable. One person might inexplicably have their camera off while another has decided to surf Facebook on their phone with the camera ON. Screens strip out a lot of the cues that tell us to behave a certain way, leaving us with an experience that's not always so great.

Thompson took an informal audience poll at a recent Insightful Leader Live event about virtual communication. She asked people what they thought were the clear disadvantages to interacting with their colleagues virtually.

THOMPSON: Almost 50 percent of us said "oh my gosh, so awkward." 30 percent of us said "confusing." 7 percent of us said "conflict." 12 percent of us said "aggressive behavior." And 30 percent of us said "there's something else." And by the way, you're not going crazy—none of us are going crazy.

LOVE: This is the Insightful Leader, I'm your host Jess Love. Like it or not, virtual interactions are here to stay. Which means that leaders must find a way to make virtual teamwork…work. Today, we'll hear three tips from Thompson about how to leverage the virtual world to create a space where everyone can get their best work done. That's next.

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LOVE: Virtual meetings can be fraught. Because something happens to us online. We're just not as nice.

THOMPSON: Why am I not as nice? Because the one thing that I don't have is what we call "eye contact"…I'm looking into my Logitech camera, and I'm seeing a logo for Logitech.

LOVE: This thing we don't have is also "mutual gaze," wherein people engage in brief but meaningful eye contact, the kind that's so much easier to have in-person and can release bonding hormones in our brains. This kind of eye contact is also key for things like turn-taking that prevent us from talking over each other.

Even beyond eye contact, when we aren't physically present with other people, we can't read body language as easily. We can't read the room as easily.

All of this can contribute to virtual meetings with more snark and less collegiality than we might find in an in-person gathering.

And….this makes it all the more difficult to foster meaty, constructive conversations while keeping the nastiness at bay.

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THOMPSON: There are two types of conflict. One type of conflict is people focused.

LOVE: That's the unhealthy type.

THOMPSON: "I think that Bob has a personality disorder," "I think that George is a control freak," "I think that Miranda is trying to undermine me." Okay, I've just done three character assassinations.

LOVE: But there's another type of conflict, one with the potential to improve group performance.

THOMPSON: Task-focused conflict is where you don't attack the people…you're hard on the problem: "I don't agree with the point that is being made on the slide show shared by Eduardo. I'd like to talk about it some more."

LOVE: Because here's the thing: you want SOME conflict in your meetings. And the reason is kind of obvious, right? You can solve way more problems if you're allowed to disagree with others, without the fear of relationship conflict.

Unfortunately, people often think they're being hard on the problem…while folks on the receiving end perceive it otherwise…

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So…it's time to get virtual conflict right, once and for all. And for this, you're going to have to do some work to normalize the kind of conflict you want to see.

THOMPSON: One of the most effective leaders I know opened up a virtual meeting by saying, "for the next hour, we're going to discuss a matter that is of pivotal importance. We have mixed feelings about this. This is not going to be an easy discussion. There's going to be strength of emotion. There's going to be strength of spirit. And we're going to have to check in several times to see how we're doing." In other words, "yeah, we're talking about big important to stuff…this is not going to be easy."

LOVE: If task-focused conflict is still feeling difficult for your team, try practicing it. Ask your team to debate topics that are lower stakes. And if you have to, seek out a debate coach. Get people comfortable with responding to each other's arguments, and not their character, and you'll help fend off some of our worst virtual tendencies.

But navigating conflict is only one part of leading an effective virtual meeting. You also want your meeting to be productive. To generate creative solutions.

And here's some good news: remote work is surprisingly conducive to productivity and creativity–so long as you do it right.

Thompson points to a recent study that compared the ideas generated by two groups, one working together, and another group working on their own, independently. How many new ideas would each group generate? And whose ideas would be better? The results:

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THOMPSON: Whoa, the same number of people working independently, who are not interacting? They generate two-and-a-half times more ideas.

LOVE: Not only did they have more ideas…but their ideas were also rated as being of higher quality by independent judges who were blind to whose ideas they were evaluating.

Why? Large, in-person group brainstorms tend to be dominated by the very loudest voices, while everyone else is inclined to self-censor. And when someone of particularly high status suggests an idea, it can have a bandwagon effect. Thompson says in these situations, the group often doesn't get past the second or third idea. They just elaborate on them.

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So how can you design a gloriously uninhibited brainstorm in your next virtual meeting? Thompson has some ideas.

THOMPSON: If I'm running a brainstorming meeting on Zoom, I want to begin the meeting by saying, "I want everybody to express all of their ideas—the lawyers aren't here. So put out even outlandish ideas. Stop the blame and stop the judgment. Everybody think of eight ideas in the next minute." So, in other words, if you put the focus on quantity, in some sense it liberates people to get ideas out there.

LOVE: Give people the space to write down their ideas individually. Then, everyone shares them–anonymously if at all possible! This lets the most promising ideas–not the ideas from the most powerful people–rise to the top.

THOMPSON: What I have found is that there's a lot more diversity in terms of people's ability to influence, persuade and mobilize others. They don't have to fight to get to the floor. It really is more about substance than style. You know, I don't see people sitting in cliques, the way I might in a real face-to-face situation, which could be intimidating for me.

LOVE: Here's another benefit to virtual meetings: they're efficient. There's way less of that chit-chat about the weather, or who did what last weekend. People tend to just get to work.

But interestingly, Thompson doesn't think we should lean into this benefit of remote work, at least not always. That's because we do still need to connect with people on a human level. Which is why Thompson stresses the importance of small talk…which she refers to as virtual handshakes.

THOMPSON: A virtual handshake could be something as simple as, "we've got a big acquisition deal to talk about. Before we get into that, I thought it'd be great just to get to know each other."

LOVE: Thompson actually conducted an experiment that suggests that these kinds of "virtual handshakes" are actually a smart business practice.

THOMPSON: I had my Kellogg MBA students in a negotiation with Stanford MBA students, and they never met each other. They did this negotiation virtually. Well, I added a twist. They had one week to do this negotiation, and the twist was that, before they started, they would have a five-minute phone call with the opponent, only rule being that you can't discuss the business matter. It's just purely social, get-to-know-each-other. We called it "schmooze."

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LOVE: So some student teams schmoozed before their virtual negotiations and others did not. The teams that ended up crashing and burning in this experiment, Thompson said, were the ones who didn't schmooze beforehand. Schmoozing helped both sides of the negotiation table reach a deal.

The takeaway from this? If you're collaborating virtually…build in that schmoozey virtual handshake. That small talk. Throw in a few conversation starters, just to remind each other of your shared humanity. It could make all the difference.

There will always be benefits and drawbacks to any communication medium. And while remote work has its share of downsides…you CAN, with some effort, make it work for you and your team.

You can start by normalizing healthy conflict and fending off some of those less-cordial behaviors the internet always seems to evoke. You can also make group meetings more productive by giving people the space to think before they share. And finally, you'll want to give people an opportunity to chat with each other about non-work stuff…and connect on that human level. It might even help seal a few deals.

Do this, and you'll have a happier, more productive, more creative workforce. One that's ready to face our new semi-virtual reality.

[CREDITS]

Andrew MERIWETHER: This episode of The Insightful Leader was produced by Jessica Love, Emily Stone, Fred Schmalz, Maja Kos, Laura Pavin and Robbie Telfer (TELL-fur). It was written by Robbie Telfer, mixed by Andrew Meriwether, and edited by Laura Pavin. Special thanks to Leigh (LEE) Thompson. As a reminder, you can find us on iTunes, Google Play, Spotify, or our website. If you like this show, please leave us a review or rating. That helps listeners find us. And visit us at insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu. We'll be back in a couple weeks with another episode of The Insightful Leader podcast.