DESA
GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

12 Connection Exercises to Boost Happiness & Productivity

Connection is at the heart of a successful and fulfilling workplace. When colleagues build strong bonds, it fosters collaboration, enhances trust, and creates an environment where everyone feels valued.

These exercises are designed to help teams engage meaningfully, develop communication skills, and deepen their understanding of one another.

Incorporating these activities into the office doesn't require a major time investment - they can be part of team-building offsites, weekly meetings, or even casual lunchtime sessions. If you are looking to build a more innovative and aligned team this year, try out these exercises.

1 Back-to-Back Drawing

Communication is more than just words - it's about how well we can share and understand ideas. According to research, poor communication contributes to 72% of all workplace failures and employees who feel included in more detailed workplace communication are almost 5x more likely to report increased productivity.

HOW IT WORKS:

Divide everyone into pairs and have them sit back-to-back. No peeking allowed! One person becomes the Speaker and the other the Listener. Give the Speaker a simple image or design (think shapes, patterns, or symbols) and provide the Listener with a blank sheet of paper and a pen. The Speaker describes the image in detail without naming the specific objects (e.g., instead of "circle," say "a round shape in the center of the page"). The Listener draws based on the Speaker's instructions. Once the drawing is complete, let the pairs compare the original image with the Listener's drawing. Laughs and insights are guaranteed!

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

For the Speaker:

- What strategies did you use to ensure your instructions were clear?
- Were there moments you felt your instructions might have been misunderstood? How did you adapt?
- How can this experience help you communicate more effectively in work scenarios?

For the Listener:

- How did it feel to rely solely on verbal instructions without visual guidance?
- Were there moments of confusion, and how did you handle them?
- What can you do in the future to clarify questions and reduce misunderstandings during conversations?

2 What's on My Desk?

Sharing personal stories is a powerful way to foster connection and build trust within a team. Research shows that employees who feel connected to their colleagues are 7x times more likely to be engaged in their work. Additionally, it was found that storytelling in teams increases trust by 25% and encourages stronger interpersonal relationships.

HOW IT WORKS:

Ask each participant to pick an item from their desk or nearby that holds special meaning to them. It could be anything - a photo, a keepsake, a piece of art, or even something quirky with a fun backstory. Give everyone a minute to reflect on why they chose their item. What's the story behind it? Why is it meaningful to them?
In a virtual or in-person setting, take turns sharing. Each person has 2-3 minutes to show their item and explain its significance. They might talk about where it came from, a memorable experience it's tied to, or why it holds a special place in their heart.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- What's one word to describe how you felt hearing your colleagues share the stories behind their items?
- How did sharing your own item feel, and what did you notice in the reactions of your colleagues?
- What's something you learned about a teammate that surprised you or deepened your understanding of them?

3 The Blindfold Lego Challenge

Teamwork thrives on trust, communication, and creativity - and this fun, hands-on activity brings all three to life. Research shows that teams who communicate effectively are 25% more likely to meet project deadlines and perform well in high-stakes situations. This exercise builds on those findings by strengthening verbal communication and trust between team members.

HOW IT WORKS:

Gather Lego pieces (or similar building blocks) and create a simple structure as the goal. Keep this design hidden from the participants and divide the group into teams of 3-5 people. Within each team, assign one person as the Builder who will wear a blindfold, while the others take on the role of Guides.

The Builder, wearing a blindfold, attempts to recreate the hidden design using the blocks. The Guides give verbal instructions to help, but here's the catch:
The Guides can't touch the blocks and the Builder can't ask questions - they must rely entirely on what they hear. Once the structure is built (or the time runs out), remove the blindfold and compare the team's creation to the original design.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

For the Builder:

- What was the clearest guidance you received, and why did it stand out?
- How did it feel to rely entirely on verbal instructions?
- What strategies helped you interpret and act on the directions you were given

For the Guides:

- What challenges did you face in giving instructions without visual feedback?
- How did you adjust your communication to be more effective?
- Was there anything you could have done differently to ensure clarity?

Pro Tip: Add Variations: Introduce obstacles, like limiting the number of words Guides can use or having one person act as a "decoy" with conflicting instructions to simulate workplace challenges.

4 The Appreciation Circle

Expressing genuine appreciation creates stronger bonds and boosts team morale. According to research, employees who feel appreciated are 17% more productive and 20% more likely to stay with their current employer. Moreover, research found that teams that engage in regular expressions of gratitude report higher levels of collaboration, trust, and job satisfaction.

HOW IT WORKS:

Gather the team in a circle - this could be in-person or virtually. Set a friendly and encouraging tone, emphasizing that the goal is to focus on sincerity and celebrate each other's unique contributions. Start with one person. They'll turn to the person next to them and share something they genuinely appreciate about them. For example:
"I really admire how you always bring creative solutions to our meetings." Instead of general compliments, encourage everyone to be specific. For instance: "Your ability to stay calm under pressure during last week's project deadline really inspired me."

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- How did it feel to receive appreciation from a colleague?
- Was it easier or harder to give appreciation? Why?
- What impact do you think this kind of acknowledgment could have on our team culture?
- What small steps can we take as a team to integrate more appreciation into our daily interactions?

SUGGESTIONS FOR CONTINUED PRACTICE:

- **Start Meetings with Gratitude:** Begin team check-ins by having one or two people share quick appreciations.
- **Set Up a "Gratitude Wall":** Create a space (physical or digital) where team members can leave notes of thanks or acknowledgment for one another.
- **Integrate into Reviews:** Include a time for peer-to-peer recognition in regular performance or project reviews.

5 Office Scavenger Hunt

Workplaces are full of hidden treasures and quirky moments waiting to be uncovered. According to research, employees who are engaged in team-building activities are 21% more productive, and companies that prioritize employee engagement report 4.5x higher employee retention.

HOW IT WORKS:

Create a list of fun items to find or tasks to complete specific to your office or virtual workspace. These might include:

- "Find a mug with a funny quote."
- "Take a team selfie in front of the break room whiteboard."
- "Discover someone who has been at the company for more than five years and learn one fun fact about them."

Add clues or riddles to make the tasks more engaging, such as, "Find the spot where ideas flow and markers go dry." Divide participants into small groups of 3-5 people. Smaller teams ensure that everyone gets involved and has a role in the adventure. Teams should focus on effective communication, sharing ideas, and making sure everyone participates. Set a time limit to maintain energy and momentum - 30-60 minutes is ideal.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- What 3 factors contributed most to your team's success during the scavenger hunt? (e.g., clear communication, creativity, or delegating tasks effectively).
- How did teamwork influence the way your group approached challenges?
- What did you learn about your colleagues that you didn't know before?

PRO TIPS:

- **Mix Physical and Digital Tasks:** Incorporate a mix of physical challenges and digital tasks, such as sending a thank-you email to a colleague or finding a specific file on the shared drive.
- **Involve Leadership:** If possible, have a senior leader participate or play a role, such as handing out a clue or serving as a "mystery item" to find. This helps bridge gaps between leadership and staff.

6 Group Storytelling

Stories have a way of bringing people together, sparking creativity, and encouraging teamwork. Research shows that storytelling in teams enhances communication and emotional connection, which directly boosts engagement and productivity. Storytelling also creates a 34% increase in team cohesion, making it a powerful tool for strengthening workplace bonds.

HOW IT WORKS:

Gather everyone in a circle, whether in-person or virtually, so each participant feels included and can see or hear others. Kick off the activity with a fun and neutral opening line to set the tone, such as:

- "It was a rainy Monday when the office goldfish went missing..."
- "In the middle of a team meeting, the lights flickered, and suddenly..."

Going around the circle, each participant adds a sentence to build on the story. Encourage creativity and humor while reminding everyone to keep the story inclusive and respectful.

VARIATIONS:

Themes: Give the group a specific theme to center the story around, such as teamwork, overcoming challenges, or a workplace mystery.

Constraints: Add twists like "Each sentence must include a color" or "Every contribution must be a question."

IDEAS FOR CONTINUED PRACTICE:

- **Department Themes:** Tailor the story themes to align with specific team or departmental goals, such as "our next product launch" or "a day in the life of our customers."
- **Virtual Adaptations:** For remote teams, use collaboration tools like Google Docs or Slack threads to create the story asynchronously, with each person contributing over a set period.

7 Find the Common Ground

Finding shared experiences and interests is a powerful way to foster relationships and build a sense of camaraderie. Research shows that finding common ground creates an environment where employees feel they belong, and belonging was linked to a 56% increase in job performance, a 50% drop in turnover, and a 75% reduction in sick days.

HOW IT WORKS:

Partner participants with someone they haven't worked closely with before. For larger groups, use random methods like drawing names or assigning numbers to form pairs.
Give each pair three minutes to discover as many things as they have in common. After time's up, invite pairs to share a few of their discoveries with the group. This can help spark new connections and insights across the team.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- What did you learn about your colleague that you didn't expect?
- Were there any interests or experiences that deepened your understanding of who they are?
- How can finding common ground contribute to building stronger team relationships?
- What steps can you take to foster these connections in daily work interactions?

8 Office Bingo

Building stronger connections doesn't have to be all business - it can be a game! Office Bingo is a lively and engaging activity that helps teams bond, share fun facts, and learn more about each other and the workplace. Building relationships and understanding among team members leads to improved collaboration. Research found that when employees have friends at work, they are 7x more likely to be engaged and 3x more likely to be productive.

HOW IT WORKS:

Create a grid filled with prompts that reflect your team's unique culture, interests, and experiences. Examples might include:

- "Has worked here for more than five years"
- "Can name three people's favorite hobbies"
- "Loves spicy food"
- "Has met the CEO in person"

Include a mix of work-related and personal prompts to keep the activity engaging. Encourage participants to move around, chat with their teammates, and get someone to sign the relevant square when a match is found. Allow 10-15 minutes for the activity. This keeps the energy high and ensures conversations stay focused.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- What was the most surprising or fun fact you learned about your colleagues?
- How did this activity help you connect with someone new or deepen an existing relationship?

IDEAS FOR CONTINUED PRACTICE:

- **Team-Specific Boards:** Create Bingo sheets tailored to specific departments or functions to deepen understanding within smaller groups.
- **Icebreaker Version:** Use Office Bingo as a warm-up activity for new team members or during onboarding to help them integrate quickly.

9 Random Acts of Kindness

Kindness has the power to bring teams closer and foster a culture of positivity. Research shows that 78% of employees who experience workplace kindness report feeling more connected to their team and their organization. Additionally, organizations fostering a culture of kindness and appreciation report 60% higher employee retention rates and 50% higher performance levels.

HOW IT WORKS:

Share the concept of a Kindness Challenge and explain its purpose: to build stronger relationships, boost morale, and create a supportive team environment. Ask each participant to commit to performing at least two acts of kindness for their colleagues during the week. Share examples to inspire creativity, such as:

- Writing a note of encouragement.
- Bringing someone their favorite coffee or snack.
- Offering extra help to meet a deadline.
- Giving a sincere compliment on someone's recent work

Add a Creative Twist:

- Set up a Kindness Board or Kindness Jar in a shared space. Participants can leave anonymous notes of appreciation, small tokens, or shoutouts for colleagues to discover throughout the week.
- For remote teams, create a virtual space – such as a dedicated Slack channel or email thread – for sharing acts of kindness and expressing gratitude.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- How did performing random acts of kindness impact your own mood and outlook at work?
- Did you notice any changes in the way you interacted with or perceived your colleagues?
- How did it feel to receive an unexpected kind gesture?

IDEAS FOR CONTINUED PRACTICE:

- **Kindness Calendar:** Create a monthly calendar with suggested acts of kindness for employees to try out regularly.
- **Peer Nomination:** Implement a system where employees can nominate colleagues for a "Kindness Spotlight," sharing their thoughtful actions with the team.

10 Fail Fest

Mistakes are inevitable, but how we approach them shapes our growth. Research shows that teams that embrace failure as a learning tool see a 25% increase in overall team performance. Furthermore, 72% of employees report feeling more engaged and motivated when they feel that their workplace is supportive of mistakes and learning from them.

HOW IT WORKS:

Fail Fest is an opportunity to normalize mistakes as part of the learning process. Ask each team member to think about a mistake or failure they experienced over the past year. On a post-it note (or digital equivalent for remote teams), they'll write down the mistake and one sentence describing the lesson they learned from it.

Set up a Fail Fest board or wall, either in person or virtually, where participants can post their notes. For virtual teams, a shared document, whiteboard, or Slack channel can serve as the platform. Once everyone has posted their notes, take time to celebrate the courage it took for each person to share their failure and the valuable lessons they gained.

Highlight that failure isn't the end - it's part of the journey toward innovation and success.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- How did sharing your mistake and reflecting on it feel?
- What's one takeaway from another colleague's experience that resonated with you?
- How can we create an environment where it feels safe to fail and learn?
- What processes or habits could we implement to turn failures into opportunities for growth?

PRO TIPS:

- **Lead with Vulnerability:** Encourage leaders and managers to share their own failures first to set the tone and build trust.
- **Emphasize Psychological Safety:** Reinforce that this exercise is a judgment-free zone focused on learning and growth, not assigning blame.
- **Normalize Reflection:** Suggest making reflection on mistakes a regular part of team culture, such as incorporating it into retrospectives or debriefs.

11 Coffee Roulette

We all know how easy it is to stick to familiar faces at work. But what if we had a way to spark spontaneous, meaningful conversations across the team? By randomly pairing people for coffee chats (in-person or virtual), this activity helps break down silos and creates opportunities for new relationships to blossom, all while making the workplace feel a little more connected and friendly.

Statistics show that workplace friendships can increase employee satisfaction by up to 50%, and employees with close friends at work are 7x more likely to be engaged in their jobs.

HOW IT WORKS:

Randomly pair team members for a coffee chat - in-person or virtually. If virtual, set up a video call for each pair. Use a tool or app to make the pairings easy and fair. Each chat should last about 20-30 minutes. There's no pressure to follow a script, but you can suggest light, engaging topics like hobbies, weekend plans, or ongoing projects.

Make it a regular ritual. Whether weekly or monthly, keep the pairings fresh to ensure everyone has the chance to connect with different colleagues. Over time, these small, casual conversations can build bridges, foster collaboration, and make the workplace feel a little more connected.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- What did you learn about your colleague that you didn't know before?
- How did the conversation change your perspective or understanding of your teammate?
- How can we continue to build relationships outside of formal work settings?
- What impact do informal connections like these have on our workplace culture?

PRO TIPS:

- **Mix It Up:** Pair different people each time to ensure a variety of connections.
- **Keep It Light and Fun:** Emphasize that this is a relaxed activity, and the goal is to connect, not to discuss work.
- **Encourage Participation:** Make it voluntary but encourage everyone to join in to get the most out of the experience.

12 Team-Building Retreat

Taking time away from the office can do wonders for team connection and creativity. By immersing the team in fun, collaborative activities, you'll foster stronger relationships and develop key skills that enhance teamwork. Research shows that employees who feel connected to their teams are 25% more likely to perform at their highest potential. Organizing a team-building retreat can help your organization tap into these proven benefits.

HOW IT WORKS:

Start by setting the tone: Let everyone know this is a chance to step back, have fun, and strengthen trust within the team. Plan a mix of activities, from team-building exercises to skill building workshops and informal discussions, focusing on collaboration and communication without the pressure of daily work tasks.

Incorporate activities that push boundaries and build teamwork in unexpected ways - outdoor problem-solving challenges or creative group projects. These shared experiences can help colleagues bond in ways that traditional settings don't allow.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- What was your favorite activity and why?
- How did this retreat help you see your coworkers in a new light?
- What did you learn about collaboration and communication during the retreat?
- How can we bring the energy and insights from the retreat back to the office?

PRO TIPS:

- **Encourage Open Communication:** Be sure to create an environment where everyone feels comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences, fostering openness and trust.
- **Make It Ongoing:** Consider using the retreat as a jumping-off point for ongoing team-building efforts, whether through regular follow-up activities or team check-ins.
- **Book an Interactive Keynote or Workshop:** Tania is a regular at team-building and leadership retreats and has a 98% approval rating from participants. If you're looking to take your event from good to great, learn more here.