

12.1.8: Social Distance

Learning Objectives

1. Describe the causes of social distance

Tsedal Neeley, author of *The Language of Global Success*, defines social distance as, “the degree of emotional connection among team members.” Teams that work in the same office space typically experience low social distance as they have daily opportunities to interact with, and work alongside, their coworkers. However, when operating on an international scale, social distance will naturally increase. High social distance can complicate relationships and create challenges for interactions amongst coworkers. Global Human Resources Managers can help to alleviate the complications caused by social distance by understanding and addressing the root of the problem. Neeley created a SPLIT framework that addresses the five root causes of social distance. These root causes include the following five items:

1. Structure
2. Process
3. Language
4. Identity
5. Technology

PRACTICE QUESTION

Which of the following correctly defines social distance in the workplace?

- The degree of emotional connection among team members.
- The different social customs and traditions across the globe.
- The geographical distance between societies.
- A challenge associated with team-building on an international scale.

Answer

The degree of emotional connection among team members. Typically, social distance is low in office settings where employees work alongside each other on a daily basis. However, if a company works remotely, social distance may be higher since a virtual workspace may provide fewer opportunities for interactions amongst co-workers.

Structure

The structure of an organization can create social distance. If a majority of employees are stationed at one location, there may be a perceived power imbalance that the larger office has more authority. Smaller locations may feel as though their voices are not heard or that they are under-appreciated. The larger office may feel as though they carry the weight of the team and that the smaller teams do not contribute their fair share.

To help alleviate social distance in regards to structure, managers need to relay a unified message that all team members are working towards the same goals and objectives. Managers also need to implement a zero-tolerance policy for cultural insensitivity.

Process

Differences in processes can create tension and social distance. Creating a time to discuss processes and provide feedback, is important to address any tension points. There may be differences in cultural practices that impact company processes. For example, if one location only checks their emails once a day, they may be hindering the work of other locations that check their email frequently.

Language

Language is an obvious barrier to social distance. Even when a common language is spoken, the fluency in which team members can speak it may differ greatly. Providing enough time for everyone to speak and ensuring the fluent speakers do not dominate the conversation, is a way to alleviate some of the tension created through language barriers. Managers should also provide a time for everyone to contribute their ideas and ensure they are practicing active listening skills.

Identity

Understanding the identity and cultural differences of others, is important to building relationships with your coworkers. Strong relationships allow you to learn from your peers and effectively collaborate with them to complete important projects and job functions. Unstructured time to discuss informal topics such as family, hobbies, etc. is important in getting to know the team. Providing a time for employees to discuss these topics is a great way to foster team-building and camaraderie.

Technology

Technology can both help and hinder social distance. Platforms like video conferencing, audio conference calls, and email are all great ways to promote teamwork and collaboration. However, certain communication tools like email may make tone and inflection hard to decipher. We will discuss technology further in the next section.

PRACTICE QUESTION

Tianna uses her company's internal chat feature as her primary method of communication with her colleagues. She sends messages throughout her workday, and often sends multiple messages if colleagues don't respond in what she thinks is a timely manner. This frustrates her international coworker Álvaro because it makes it extremely challenging for him to parse through her messages and determine which are resolved and which still need answers. The overload of communication hinders the team's productivity and increases social distance. Which of the following is the root cause of the social distance?

- Technology
- Process
- Structure
- Language

Answer

Process. In this case, there are differing opinions about proper chat procedures. Tianna and Álvaro should discuss the process and find a way to change it to better meet their needs.

Although social distance can complicate a global working environment, it is a manageable challenge. It is important for teams to be aware of social distance and identify problem areas that need to be addressed. Being considerate of the cultures and preferences of others on the team is the first step in creating an inclusive team with low social distance.

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