

## Empathy During a Pandemic, Part 1: Personality Differences Matter in a Virtual World

In this unprecedented time, many people are “acting out” at an alarming pace! Many of us are finding ourselves a little more grumpy than normal.

The articles and information in the first few weeks of the crisis have been about the tactical and technical; how to move things to virtual, increase your online presence or what to do if you are experiencing a financial dip.

What about the people? What about our work relationships? The ways we interact with and treat our colleagues in this season are of critical importance. These interactions can be gifts or scars – and either will last long after the stay-at-home edicts.

We seem to be forgetting the lessons we have learned - especially over the last decade - around the social sciences. And, some have taken what we know about basic human communication in a digital age and filed it away somewhere deep in their mental memory banks.

These moments of forgetfulness are rearing their ugly head right now in the midst of a crisis. Here are a few reminders to keep us all sane – because we may be in this new normal for a while:

**The stress is unprecedented.** Few of us have dealt with a multi-faceted attack on our collective sense of security. In a very short amount of time, almost everything we count as normal has a big question mark floating above it. Many of us are dealing with health and economic questions – all shining a spotlight on an uncertain future. Add to that the social and relational component with families in close proximity, rocky marriages can be even more strained, work relationships are still trying to find equilibrium, and much more. Some have concerns outside of the home with aging parents or under-resourced members of the family who do not live nearby. Unfortunately, many of us can put a check mark next to every single category mentioned above. The truth is that this collective level of stress is higher than many of us are prepared for.

**Under stress we default to the worst version of ourselves.** Each of us has a unique story, personality, and wiring. That wiring has unique strengths and some distinct weaknesses. Many of the social sciences (Enneagram, Myers Briggs, Gallup StrengthFinder, Disc, etc.) give us language for the highs and lows. The ability to understand that everyone has a natural tendency to act, respond, communicate, disagree, work, play and live in a certain way is paramount to connecting to people under stress. Your personal wiring can also show that you have a certain response to conflict or stress. There are the classics – overeating or drinking, amusing oneself with mindless games or hobbies, procrastinating, etc. But some of the “basement” versions of ourselves affect others in hurtful ways. Controlling behaviors, blame, anger, and more – all things that come out of us when we wish they would not. Not surprisingly, the ugly ones are coming to the surface by now. Understanding these tendencies and preferences while being

proactive is key to leading in this crisis.

**For now, dealing with conflict is digital.** Part of the challenge right now is that our culture went from in-person to virtual in a matter of days. Some of us are adept at living in a digital or virtual world with meetings and interactions – you’ve been Zooming or FaceTiming since those platforms existed. But most of us are not. Many had never heard of Zoom until a few weeks ago. Even if we had been trafficking in online meetings and interactions, it just went to warp speed and we don’t have all the ground rules for human interaction in the new mode. How do we address conflict in this space? What is the best way to deal with differences over video, phone and text? When you eliminate the 85% of non-verbal communication everything changes. Even phone calls aren’t ideal for conflict for the same reason. The fact is most of our communication still eliminates the non-verbal and the mediums that we are using right now can hurt us not help us. Learning to deal with conflict in an emotionally intelligent way is needed now more than ever.

In the “new normal” what are the ground rules? Can we even figure that out right now? It is a time that calls for great empathy and still a level of productivity. Here are a few recommendations:

- 1. We should presume everyone is stressed.** Everyone has a different definition of “being stressed” and some handle it better than others. But for now, we would do well to presume that everyone is off balance. A flight attendant explained to me once that whether it is the mother with a toddler or the frequent traveling businessperson who seems to have it all together, travel is stressful for everyone – flight attendants are trained to presume this and act accordingly.
  - 2. We can begin meetings with personal “check-ins.”** This is the virtual substitute for hallway or coffee room conversations that usually allow for the social lubricant to keep the organization engine moving. Without recognizing the humanness of our colleagues, the mechanics will start to produce friction. Some people may seem quiet or frustrated and do not know how to express that on a virtual call with multiple team members. It may be helpful to offer to a colleague, “Can I check in with you after this meeting just to make sure you and I are on the same page?” These gestures of care may seem obvious but happen with more ease in a physical space. Intentionality is needed more than ever with relationship management.
  - 3. We must agree on conflict resolution dynamics.** Even when we are together in a workspace, we tend to forget that opinions, emotions, and critique of someone (or even their idea) is not as well received on email or text. Still, we get a little lazy, and shoot off an email with the hopes that it was so well written we will solve the fuzziness or disagreement. It takes less time but may add to a breach in relationship with tiny little “cracks” that build up over time. Each organization needs to decide how this will be handled and then play by a set of rules, even if they are only for our pandemic wilderness. No one has “steady legs” right now, so practicing extra kindness and empathy will help us now and in the future.
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**Want to know more?** [Auxano Senior Lead Navigator Mike Gammill unpacks questions and concerns around your church staff team in a virtual setting.](#)