Philosophy at Work.



# The Virtues of Virtual

A philosophy of how dispersed organizations succeed

# think better. do better.

**We help businesses think at their best**

## Philosophy at Work.

**At Philosophy at Work,** we believe that the pursuit of wisdom is a crucial, and increasingly practical driver of professional success. In a world of work, so often characterised by complexity, uncertainty and change, an understanding of what is good and true provides a much-needed foundation. Philosophy literally means 'the love of wisdom'.

Through our virtual and in-person training workshops, facilitated team sessions and keynote talks, we help businesses pursue wisdom in ways that are uplifting and authentic to them. In real terms: our work produces more self-aware people who have greater cognitive confidence and are better able to make strategic decisions, navigate uncertainty, and ask the right questions at the right time. While we are academically trained philosophers skilled in the art of reflection and logic, we are also highly experienced facilitators known for creating a safe space for groups to tackle real professional challenges.

All of our sessions are highly interactive, involve sharp insight and are always designed with professional application in mind. We love connecting philosophical ways of thinking with professionals from all walks of life because we know the pursuit of wisdom can make a real and practical difference in their day-to-day work.

We hope that this report resonates with you. Get in touch if you would like to digest it together.

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# How do we work well together, when we're not together?

**Whatever else is true about going virtual, one thing can be said with reasonable confidence: virtual working means navigating new landscapes, and new landscapes make people behave in strange ways. With the trappings of the traditional office disrupted, previously well-adjusted bosses may revert to micro-management, confident colleagues can become people-pleasers, and the well-organised among us are liable to go into overdrive.**

**How do we work well together, when we're not together. That is the focus of this report.**
The insight shared here found it's spark in the philosophy of Aristotle, that ancient Greek master of ideas. Specifically, we have found Aristotle's approach to the 'good life' to provide an incredibly helpful lens through which to see organisational success in the virtual context more clearly.

Aristotle's guidance on how to live well, boiled down to trading extreme reactions for balanced, thoughtful responses. In his words, "virtue is the golden mean between two vices, the one of excess and the other of deficiency". Put simply: if you want to live well, practice living in the balance between extremes.



Today, as organisations grapple with virtual working, it is understandable for them to react in ways that are, to Aristotle's point, either excessive or deficient. In this report, we've tried to explain those understandable, but less than ideal, ways of working with a good dose of empathy, but shine a light on the more balanced approaches we've found some organizations taking. Those balanced approaches are what we call the virtues of virtual. To our modern ears, 'virtues' might sound moralistic. But for Aristotle, and for us, virtues are less about toeing the line and more about reaching our full potential.

Throughout this report, we have identified 5 virtues of virtual. They are: Democracy, Accountability, Clarity, Collegiality and Understanding. Each virtue is introduced in the context of a major area of organisational life that is commonly beset by over (and under) reactions to virtual work. For example, we unpack the virtue of accountability in response to learnings that emerge from the excessive and deficient reactions that 'leadership and management' often portray when moving to remote ways of working. Each virtue is introduced in a particular context, but each one can provide value throughout organisations more broadly.

For Aristotle, virtues are context sensitive. The same goes for the virtues we've identified. To help you and your organisation get the most out of this report, each section ends with 3 questions that you and your team can use as you digest what a given virtue means in your particular context.

As we researched best practice in virtual organisations, we met some brilliant people, many of which you will meet throughout the report. You'll find moments to pause from the main report and digest alternative perspectives from the International Human Rights Lawyer, Susie Alegre, and our friends at Nexthink and Henley Business School. Throughout we'll share perspectives from the following interviewees we were lucky enough to speak with for this report: Bruce Daisley (ex-Twitter VP and author of Eat, Sleep, Work Repeat), Michelle Davies (People VP at Phrasee), Jon Barnes (founder, speaker and author of Democracy Squared), and Samantha Clarke (happiness consultant, changemaker and author of Love it or Leave it).

**We hope what you find here helps your organisation succeed in whatever form of virtual working you navigate.**




## Virtue 1: Democracy

**The office has changed.** No longer limited to a physical address, the place of work is now characterised less by bricks and mortar and more by Zoom calls and the ability to work from bed if you so desire. If where you lay your head counts as 'home', the ability to access wifi now makes 'offices' materialise out of thin air. There are of course upsides and downsides to the virtual office. Gone is your frustrating commute, smelly shared refrigerator, and need for smart trousers (or any trousers at all). But less ideal, though not without its benefits as well, is the fact that also gone are your previous tools, processes, and norms for project management. There are no physical conference rooms for large group meetings, quiet places for one-on-one meetings, or whiteboards and easels filled with post-it notes and to-dos to track your team's progress.

**The excessive reaction is total technological proliferation.** This occurs when greater freedom is given to an organisation's employees to choose which technologies work best for them. This had already begun happening when the physical office reigned supreme. Documents were shared via Dropbox, video calls with colleagues in other offices happened on Zoom, and short written communication was typed into Slack. Now that we've gone completely virtual, organisations are getting even more scrappy when it comes to deploying new tech. One of your team members has found that she tracks her work best in Trello, and a few others working on projects with her have jumped onboard. Another group of colleagues has discovered PukkaTeam, a video-conferencing app where you can call anyone who has set his status as available (taking the extra steps out of sending him a Slack message to see if he wants to hop onto Zoom). Perhaps a different crew have migrated from Dropbox because they've found they tend to collaborate better in Google Drive, while another team has done the reverse.

**While the excess is undeniably chaotic, with it comes a few essential lessons.** Teams and individual contributors will gravitate towards technology that makes their work more productive and their lives easier. The right tools have the potential to save time and prevent a host of frustrations, and giving people the freedom to seek out these tools is beneficial from two angles. First, team members can identify otherwise unknown technology that can prove game-changing for their colleagues. Second, the process of finding and successfully rolling out a new tool to the team can be an enormously empowering experience for an employee.

**The deficient reaction is total control.** If the aforementioned proliferation of Trello, Dropbox, Google Drive, Slack, PukkaTeam, and Zoom (oh my!) amounted to an excessive reaction, the deficient response is a strict adherence to tools as decided on high. Proliferation is, in theory, controllable if managers clamp down on which systems employees can use. An executive in one such organisation might decide that everyone should migrate to Microsoft Teams, for example, to calm the waters of digital chaos. However, the threats to worker autonomy implicit in such a reaction, and the linked detrimental impact on employee well-being and company culture, can make this robust control and real organisational flourishing unlikely bed-fellows.

**While the deficiency is despotic, it can still be instructive.** Our executive's reaction, though excessive, is not without cause. With each new technology introduced ad hoc by individual team members, communication becomes more complex and information possibly siloed. Moreover, a tool that two team members find intuitive and beneficial for their work might be totally ill-suited to a third collaborator, which is hardly fair and absolutely sub-optimal for remote teamwork. In fact, team members having to adopt by default the tools their colleagues have decided work best for themselves is decidedly disempowering.

**The virtue is democracy.** "What we need to do with tech is figure out how to help it serve us instead of us serving it," says Love It or Leave It author and happiness consultant Samantha Clarke. If individuals know what tools truly serve them and if leaders know that letting everyone make these decisions independently is a recipe for collaborative disaster, then the happy middle lies in the creation of a structure and process that lets employees nominate new pieces of technology to be reviewed by other members of the organisation before rolling them out. Does the three-part process of "nominate, review, adopt" sound familiar?

Democracy in choosing technological tools is widely accepted best practice among software engineers, who historically have been some of the greatest adopters of collaborative tools. In 2017, the firm DevOps Research and Assessment found that developer teams were both most productive and happiest when they were empowered by management to choose the tools that suited them best. According to Google Cloud's handbook on DevOps, an effective organisational technology democracy in practice involves iterative and deep consideration in the following steps: constantly seeking out potential new technologies, regularly reviewing current tech and soliciting extensive feedback from the team, scheduling specific periods for employees to experiment with new tools in a controlled fashion to measure impact and inform broader decisions, empowering these employees to make the go/no-go decision on the tested tools, and holding formal meetings and presentations where the employees - not managers - introduce their team to the tools they've decided to implement.

Organisational change consultant Jon Barnes is a major advocate of democracy in the workplace and giving employees the opportunity to own organisational decisions around tech. "When I talk about democracy, I'm talking about systems self-organizing, and I frame self-organizing in technology as much as I do in politics or sociology," he explains. However, he specifies that delegating the selection of tools does not involve completely losing oversight over an organisation. "There's a very popular irony that an autocrat dictates democracy, where a CEO says 'OK, now we're democratic,'" Barnes jokes. "Weirdly, this has happened very successfully, albeit in the early stages, it sucks a little." In other words, organisational leaders are responsible for authoritatively creating the protocols and processes necessary for employees to work democratically. And, as in all democracies, there are necessary frictions throughout. Although this report draws primarily on the philosophy of Aristotle, we will echo Barnes here and heavily paraphrase that other great thinker, Marcus Aurelius, who said that the mind can adapt to any challenge so that "an obstacle in a given path becomes an advance". Our take? Embrace the stage where virtual sucks a little, because



**FRICTIONS AMONG LEADERS, their teams, and their tech mean that the raw materials to build solutions are being mined**



# 3 questions to help you design Democracy

Aristotle reminds us that virtues are context sensitive. In the changing virtual landscape, this means that in order to really flourish, your technology needs to be rolled out in ways that are appropriate to your organisation, your people and the relevant cultures therein.

The following prompts can help you work out how best to navigate this landscape and cultivate the virtue of democracy.

## 1

**What are the specific problems I am observing in my team, and what are the tools and technologies that address those problems directly?**

When challenges seem overwhelming, we tend to make blanket statements about everything that's wrong with our current processes. For example, we might say, "important feedback from customers gets missed" or "it's not clear who is supposed to be doing what on deliverables". With this in mind, when answering this question, try to be as specific as possible.

## 2

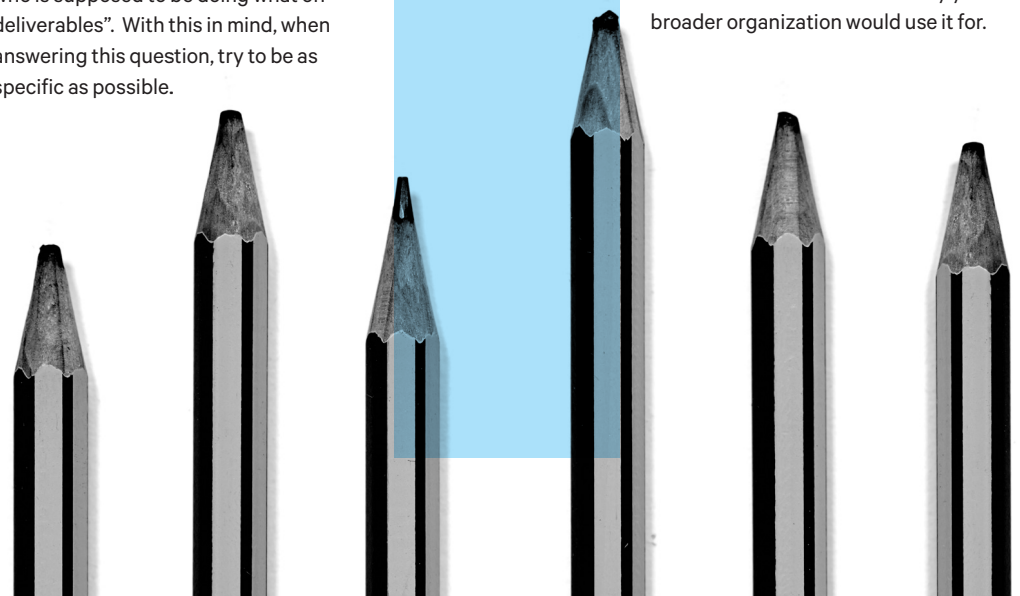
**Are we excited about this technology because it is new and "advanced," or do we actually think that it will seriously benefit our team?**

Blame our hunter-gatherer origins, but we are predisposed to get excited about shiny new stimuli when they enter our field of vision (or email inbox). When learning about a new technology, try to ignore appealing graphic design and punchy marketing materials. Instead, work to understand what exactly your broader organization would use it for.

## 3

**If I choose this tool, will I be able to turn at least a few members of my team into evangelists to ensure its broad adoption?**

The fastest way for a tool to fail is for no one to use it. If you know that there are members of your team who are excited about a tool and willing (even raring!) to share its benefits with everyone else, you are likely to see enthusiastic uptake.



Feature Author: Nexthink

# Making tech human




**For some time, the core factors in the traditional 'workplace' have been people, place (the office, HQ, etc.) and technology (the office, HQ, etc.).** Today, however, aspects connected to 'the office' (from hot desking to the crammed commute) are looking increasingly, and perhaps permanently, outmoded. In many instances, technology is being expected to make up a larger share of what counts as the 'workplace'. As we are forced to engage with every aspect of professional life through the intermediary of a screen, it's vital that our IT services in no way resemble the recorded message on a help centre helpline, thanking us for our patience, while being insensitive to our feelings and frustrations.

This may require a mindset shift among those we depend on to manage the virtual workplace. **IT has long been forced to focus on the provision, rather than the consumption, of IT services: users' experiences and emotions were considered out of its reach, remit or both.**

Today, an employee must be convinced that IT understands them, and not only cares if they're knocking their head against the kitchen table 'home office', but can more often than not be depended upon to already be in front of the problem. If organizations need to be moderate in the manner in which they adapt to the virtual workplace, the virtual workplace must also learn to moderate itself, to be as human and human-centric as possible.

This could prove challenging. In many instances, IT teams are being expected to transition from managing one or two or a handful of traditional workplaces, to managing hundreds, or even thousands of virtual ones. The technological complications involved are significant. As offices become dispersed, opportunities for IT to glean insight about the success and user experience of their tech are reduced. There are no more knocks on the door of the IT office, and the absence of watercooler insights into what's working and what isn't heightens this difficulty.

To redress the imbalance, IT needs to become better at thinking about its users, and at finding ways to engage and communicate with them – to access hard data in some moments, and to cut through bits and bytes altogether at others, just as easily able to take the temperature of all the human emotion bubbling or boiling away across its user base.

IT has long been forced to focus on the provision, rather than the consumption, of IT services

**In many organizations, this will bring IT closer to HR than ever before, not only because IT will have so much more responsibility for the wellbeing and productivity of employees, but because it will be the main source of all those human insights HR needs and wants.**

The stereotypes around IT usually rely on the idea that they are a little more comfortable with technology than people. If there's truth in it, it's an instinct that requires its own kind of moderation in the virtual workplace.

# Virtue 2: Accountability

**In a brick-and-mortar office, conversations can grow organically to include necessary parties by virtue of the fact that everyone is in close proximity.** "Communication in an office of 40 people is easy. You can tap someone's shoulder to ask them a question, and it's simple to involve anyone else," explains seasoned People and Culture leader and current Phrasee VP of People Michelle Davies. "But how do you repeat messages to the people who aren't in the room?" In the virtual office, verbal communication migrates to various other forms of digital communication, from the official (Slack, email, and Zoom chats) to the more casual (text, WhatsApp, and ad hoc phone calls), and scaling the transfer of information becomes much more difficult.

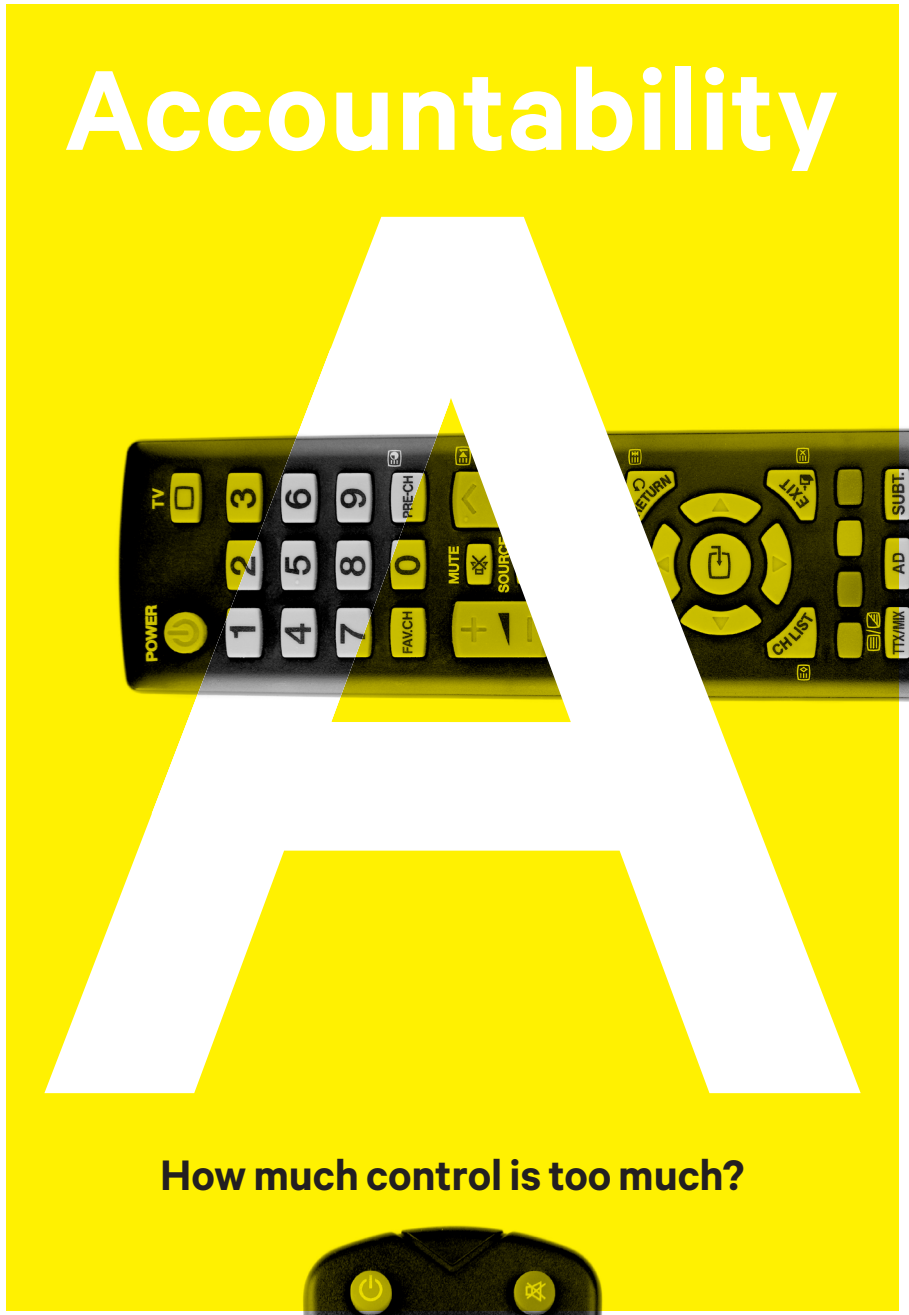
**The excessive reaction is strong-armed transparency.** Bruce Daisley, the author of Eat Sleep Work Repeat and host of the leading business podcast by the same name, told us a gruesome tale of a manager, in navigating his team's transition to remote work, asking one of his direct reports to WhatsApp him in advance of restroom breaks. To be fair to that manager, this excess has been emerging in workplaces for some time. Many companies have experimented with opening the conversations on their workplaces' digital platforms, occasionally with disastrous results. In December 2019, The Verge published a story on luggage e-commerce startup Away. The article details how co-founder and CEO Steph Korey would deliver direct feedback and occasionally brutal dressings-down to her employees on Slack channels that were deliberately left public to the entire company.

**While the excess is invasive, it remains instructive.** Korey did not set out to use Slack as a public humiliation tool. In fact, her choices stemmed from a fundamentally admirable desire to solve serious workplace problems with inclusion. In a statement made to The Verge, Korey explained that "over the course of our careers, [Away cofounder Jen Rubio] and I observed situations where women and underrepresented groups were often excluded from key emails or meetings," noting that "with email, the original author gets to pick who is included in the conversation and whose voices won't be heard".

Furthermore, back-channeled communication can be detrimental to our work. If a conversation between two colleagues that might have taken place in the open office now occurs via phone call, anyone who previously might have been able to chime in with valuable input is excluded. Communication, if not constructed intentionally, can inadvertently cut off huge swaths of the organisation from pertinent conversations and decisions.

Finally, let's not discount the need for authority over what is shared via digital channels when it comes to privacy and consumer data protection guidelines like GDPR.

**The deficient reaction is loss of oversight.** If the excess is mandating that all conversations occur centrally, then the deficient reaction is allowing conversations to take place whenever and wherever. A team collaborating on a project might find it effective to have a side-conversation via WhatsApp during a wider-team Zoom call to strategize around presenting their agenda. Rather than iterating






back and forth on a document in a cascade of comments, collaborators might find it best to set up a recurring Google hangout to directly talk through higher-level ideas. Perhaps frustrated with email back-and-forth, one team member might throw up his hands and pick up the phone.

**While the deficient reaction is rife with potential mishaps, it highlights what we lose in Slack channels and long email threads.** On a human level, communicating only in writing is strange. "It's weird that a bot uses the same format - short text - that a colleague does," says Barnes. "I don't attribute feelings to the bot, and I don't think I attribute feelings to a human who has written to me."

Moreover, an irony of written communication is that its brevity can actually create inefficiencies. Scott Berkun writes about this in his book The Year Without Pants, which details his tenure as a manager at Automattic, the company behind Wordpress that has been entirely virtual with a globally distributed workforce for over a decade. During Berkun's time at Automattic, the preferred channel for internal communication was a private blogging platform. While totally transparent and generally very effective, it was not without limits. Specifically, Berkun noted that it failed to capture nuanced signifiers like cadence and tone, easily creating opportunities for confusion and misunderstanding. "A 20 post [blog] thread can sometimes be replaced by a 3 minute Skype call" he writes. "Voice has more data."

Finally, well-designed loss of oversight can actually drive superior results. While studying operations in a large Chinese mobile phone factory, Harvard Business School professor Ethan Bernstein noticed that line workers were actually working to conceal process improvements to avoid the hassle of having to explain the changes to management. Bernstein and his team of researchers found that putting up a hospital-style curtain to fully enclose lines from the rest of the factory floor improved the productivity of those lines 10-15%. Bernstein noted that the bump in productivity, the result of the lines' privacy, had wider positive organisational impact. "Within the curtains, work became much more transparent. Partly for that reason, defects remained extremely low, even as throughput rose. And over time the camaraderie within boundaries made the workers more likely to share - as a group - their privately worked-out solutions with other lines."

**The virtue is accountability.** Try identifying where a lack of oversight can be applied strategically. You would not be relinquishing control entirely; in fact, you would be bestowing the greater responsibilities of self-regulation and self-assessment to teams that get the opportunity to work unsupervised. Thinking back to the Chinese factory, consider projects that might warrant "accountability curtains," behind which teams are free to communicate and operate in any manner they wish knowing that their work is shielded from prying eyes until it is ready and up to the standards established by leadership.

Many incredible projects have been successfully completed in this way, including the creation of the Linux operating system in a broadly unsupervised open-source environment. In his essay "The Cathedral and the Bazaar", software developer Eric Raymond describes the method in the madness behind Linux creator Linus Torvalds's approach. The cathedral is the top-down, traditional approach to operating system development, whereas the bazaar is a bottom-up, more ad hoc paradigm. While Raymond once believed that "there was a certain critical complexity

# 3 questions to help you activate Accountability

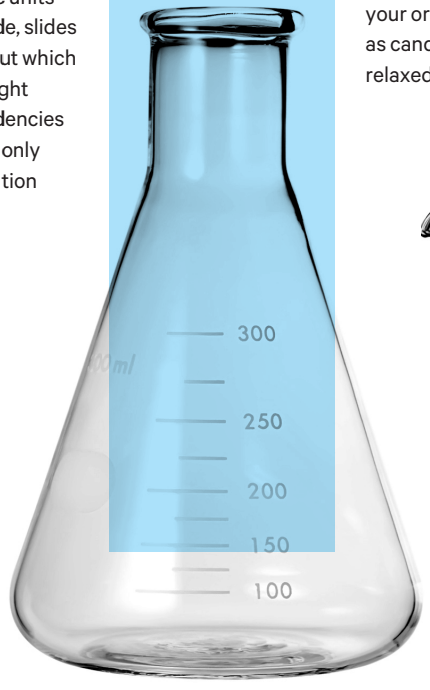
If you would like tohave a controlled experiment in relinquished control, think through the following questions as guidance to identifying and carrying out these projects.



## 1

**Do you have a clear idea of exactly which tasks you will relinquish control over? And if something goes awry, will there be major negative externalities?**

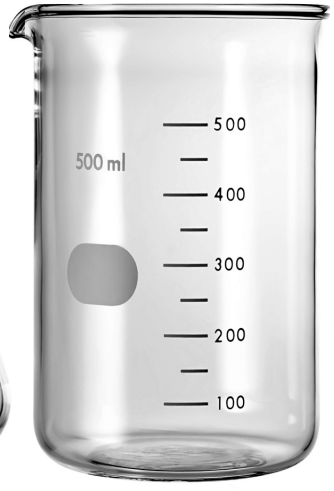
Before letting a project loose to be completed with minimal oversight, make sure you understand how the work breaks down into its atomic units (chapters of a report, lines of code, slides in a presentation), and think about which of those units might need oversight because of complex interdependencies or context that, for good reason, only certain members of the organization can access.




## 2

**Are you focused solely on execution, or would you like to have a little more experimentation?**

Think about the right to creativity coming with the responsibility to share the fruits of intellectual labour, a tenet upheld by Linus Torvalds's bazaar participants. If you are looking for new innovation within specific aspects of your organization, consider those areas as candidates for accountable but relaxed control.




## 3

**Do you have willing and self-starting participants?**

Whoever is making the decision to open a bazaar must also be in the business of building a community. As Raymond noted, a bazaar is only as productive as its least motivated participants, so whatever more decentralised project you undertake, make sure that your team is as bought into it as you are (if not more!).



# Clarity

**Get comfortable with boundaries**



## Virtue 3: Clarity

**When you're sitting in an office, "you can show in person that your cab light is on and you're ready to be hailed,"** Daisley explains. It's easy to identify our "on" colleagues. They're the ones engaging in conversation with those around them or sitting in the canteen with a cup of coffee in between meetings. Similarly, it's incredibly obvious who is unavailable. They're the colleagues who have sequestered themselves in a windowless phone room or have armed themselves with noise-cancelling headphones. When we see these signs, we know we should save our non-urgent questions for an email or that day's afternoon stand-up. In a virtual environment, however, these cues tend to be reduced to little green icons that tell us whether someone is online or not.

**The excessive reaction is constant digital communication.** When our status of being "at work" is judged not by our physical presence but by the speed with which we respond to pings and emails, we necessarily feel the need to be hyper-connected and prove to our colleagues, direct reports, and supervisors that we are not slacking off (pun intended). Being constantly accessible via digital channels means that we lower the barriers to interruption, and interruptions are one of productivity's most formidable opponents.

**While the excess is a weapon of mass distraction, it reveals some of our core communicative needs.** Tactically, constant communication means that urgent matters are resolved quickly and seamlessly. Bottlenecks evaporate, and the organization is able to hum along smoothly.

More broadly, we gravitate towards instant messages for reasons deeper than wanting to seem like we're working. We actually crave these quick conversations because they make us feel like part of a team. "There's some really nice work showing that when teams agree to turn on rapid or transactional discussion it can make people feel much more connected," Daisley noted. In addition, the speed with which we get responses from colleagues affects both how we value them and our perception of how they value us. According to Daisley, "whether it's us with our bosses or bosses with their reports, we value people who respond more rapidly." Lightning responses, while distracting, have the power to make individual team members feel more valued as their inputs, questions, and comments receive immediate recognition from other group members.

**The deficient reaction is a total retreat into one's own world.** In recent years, due in part to best-sellers like Georgetown professor Cal Newport's Deep Work and Digital Minimalism, the idea of going offline for extended periods of time to be productive has gained traction. While taking a month-long hiatus from anything digital is absolutely infeasible for the vast majority of knowledge workers, even less radical solutions to pare down your digital distractions can still be potentially problematic. For instance, in Deep Work, Newport provides a set of criteria he's observed academics deploy when it comes to inbox management. Per these rules, you can absolve yourself of responding to email that falls into any of the following categories: if it is "ambiguous or otherwise makes it hard for you to generate a reasonable response," if it fails to contain "a question or proposal that interests you," or if "nothing really good would happen if you did respond and nothing really bad would happen if you didn't." The idea

is provocative and would certainly provoke ire in the vast majority of our workplaces. Put bluntly, choosing not to respond to requests because you decide that writing a response is a poor use of your time could be detrimental to the long-term health of your work relationships.

**While the deficient can alienate, it is deeply insightful.** Newport's approach is motivated by a hard-to-swallow truth about our digitally-connected lives: attention and cognition are limited resources, and every time we direct our attention away from a task to a minor distraction, we accelerate the depletion of these reserves. Focused, cognitively-demanding work is often our most valuable, and we do ourselves and our teams a disservice when we can't do enough of it.

A 2016 study done at the Catholic University of Korea confirmed that smartphone notifications distract and impair cognitive function. Researchers Seul-Kee Kim, So-Yeong Kim, and Hang-Bong Kang found that brain wave amplitudes were significantly lowered in subjects asked to complete a task while receiving smartphone notifications. The participants also took longer to complete the task and made more mistakes than their distraction-free counterparts. In short, increasing the number of digital touchpoints between you and your team - whether in the office or remotely - can hamper rather than enhance productivity.

**The virtue is clarity.** When it comes to productivity, both the excess and deficient suffer from the fact that they both make one person's time and efforts more important than another's. A bombardment of Slack notifications from one coworker to another while the latter is trying to focus implies that the former's priorities take precedence over the latter's. Conversely, the choice of the latter to completely ignore the former's has the same implication: her work is more important than his. There is a solution here, and we can find ways to have those rapid-fire digital conversations we find helpful for eliminating bottlenecks and building team rapport while also finding time for focused, undistracted work. The virtue lies in making our expectations around communication eminently clear to our colleagues.

Newport suggests dividing time into periods of deep (writing articles, preparing important presentations, coming up with innovative frameworks, et.c) and shallow (answering emails, responding to simple requests, handling logistics for an upcoming meeting, etc.) work. To apply this approach to a team setting, each participant must be able to articulate their needs freely. "Boundaries are really important, not only for yourself as an individual, but for you as a team member," says Clarke. "You need to ask, 'Where am I being pushed to a remit or a place where I'm not performing my best?'"

Doing so, of course, is no easy task, in large part because of how our culture has raised us. "We've not been brought up to set our own boundaries and make them explicit," Barnes explains. "In school, we were told where to go at what time, and most people still can't self-manage now because the office creates a routine for them." Creating such a routine takes experimentation, but it also takes a significant degree of empowerment. As Clarke says, "it takes a lot of strength to teach others how you want to be treated." Consider leading by example and encouraging team members to share their boundaries without fear of judgment and then honouring them without compromise.

14 words under quae volo officat odic tem que exeriostrum fugias eatur, solupta repre.







Brain wave amplitudes **ARE LOWERED WHILE** receiving smartphone notifications



# 3 questions to help you create Clarity

Despite some of our cultural inclinations to always be available, your organisation may benefit from carving out times when colleagues are expected to be unavailable.

Take these words of wisdom from Barnes as you think about how you cultivate the virtue of clarity in your organization: "I think someone said that the 21st century is the worst time to be a control freak, and this is especially true for virtual work. First, let go of control and two, heighten clarity." You may find success by approaching it from the following angles:

1

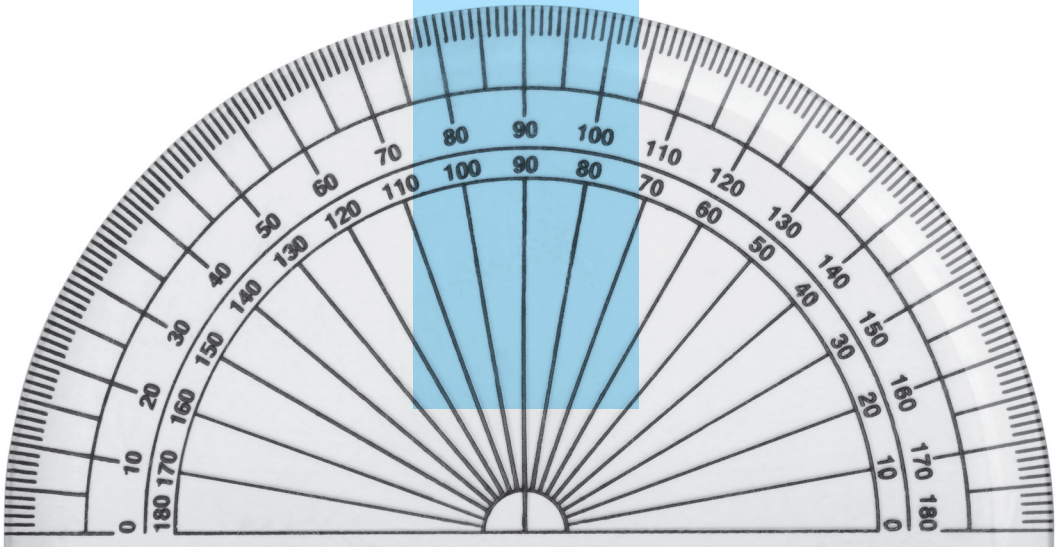
**Can we clearly assign communication channels specific types of messages?**

Little red circles with the number of new messages catch our attention because they've been engineered to do so. To keep the anxiety at bay, consider making rules for each channel you use (e.g., keep Slack for non-urgent messages and make phone calls for the most important matters).

2

**If employees need to have more time offline, how should they go about communicating this to the wider team?**

For example, find a cab light (blocking time on calendars, signing out Slack) your team can turn off to indicate that they are now engaging in deep work. Then, develop norms that empower employees to say, with enough notice, that they will be offline, for example, this Wednesday apart from 1PM-2PM, to push a project over the finish line.



3

**Can we clearly assign communication channels specific types of messages?**

Little red circles with the number of new messages catch our attention because they've been engineered to do so. To keep the anxiety at bay, consider making rules for each channel you use (e.g., keep Slack for non-urgent messages and make phone calls for the most important matters).

Feature Dr. Naeema Pasha, Henley Business School

# The value(s) of flexibility



**Virtual ways of working are characterised by increased flexibility.** Research at Henley Business School in the Summer of 2019 found that flexible working patterns - specifically the 4-Day Week - correlate with improvements in productivity gains from efficiency and quality. In our research, we found that half of UK businesses we surveyed say they have enabled a four-day working week for either some or all of their staff and are reaping rewards as a result. For example, employee satisfaction has improved, employee sickness has been reduced, and, as a result, **savings of almost £92 billion are being made each year to the UK economy.**

We found that flexibility is actually good for business. Those employers who already offer a four-day working week told us it has several clear benefits. For example, almost two-thirds **(64%) of employers report an increase in productivity as well as a 63% improvement in the quality of work being produced.** Part of the increase in productivity may lie in the fact that staff sickness has decreased in these businesses. In fact, 62% of businesses who offer the four-day working week say that sickness absence has been reduced. There is also a positive impact on wellbeing, with **70% of employers saying their employees feel less stressed at work and 78% say their people are happier as a result.**

There are, however, reasons to adopt the 4-Day Week that reach beyond the value of having highly productive workers. The extra-day not in work gives employees a chance to do some of the other things they want to do. This is just as important as organisational productivity. **In my view, the debate should be about what it is to be a worker now.** Therefore, thinking more deeply about how work fits into life in our modern age is key. It's not just business needs we should be considering either. We should also be mindful of what the extra day not in work means to us as people, and what it means to society.

**Fundamentally, we need to consider the wider value of non-work as an essential part of our lives.** The, arguably, radical thinking around a 4-Day week could offer us valuable alternatives for wellbeing, society, community, and even for the planet in its positive impact on climate change.

Fundamentally, we need to consider the wider value of non-work as an essential part of our lives.

Even though we are a modern society; we are still structuring the day job around the last century of work which was required for an industrial age – where you needed to be in a workplace to do the work. Indeed, the 5-Day Week and the 9-5 workday was developed around an early 20th century model of working. The creation of the 'weekend', initially pushed for by worker unions in the USA around 100 years ago, was a way of then giving employees a better life. Having a better life is something researchers, governments and industry should look at together now both for matters of productivity and because of broader social well-being.

# Virtue 4: Collegiality

**The physical office is a wonderful incubator.** Even though it can be full of annoyances and distractions, being co-located does help us be more creative. Chatting with a colleague on another team about her work while waiting in the Nespresso queue might lead to a fantastic collaboration opportunity between two clients. In the dispersed office, these unexpected collisions are rendered non-existent - or at least much harder to come by.

**The excessive reaction is hyper-collaboration.** We tend to fall victim to this particular excess once we see how opportunities for collaboration increase when we enter the virtual world. Although we no longer have serendipitous run-ins, Zoom meetings mean that we can work with anyone around the world who might bring new perspectives and value to our projects. However, those of us who have been on Zoom calls with more than a dozen participants are familiar with the attendant chaos. It can be difficult to get a word in edgewise, and once discussion moves to the chat panel, participants can easily become distracted (and good luck to the presenter trying to compete with a lively side-discussion in the chat).

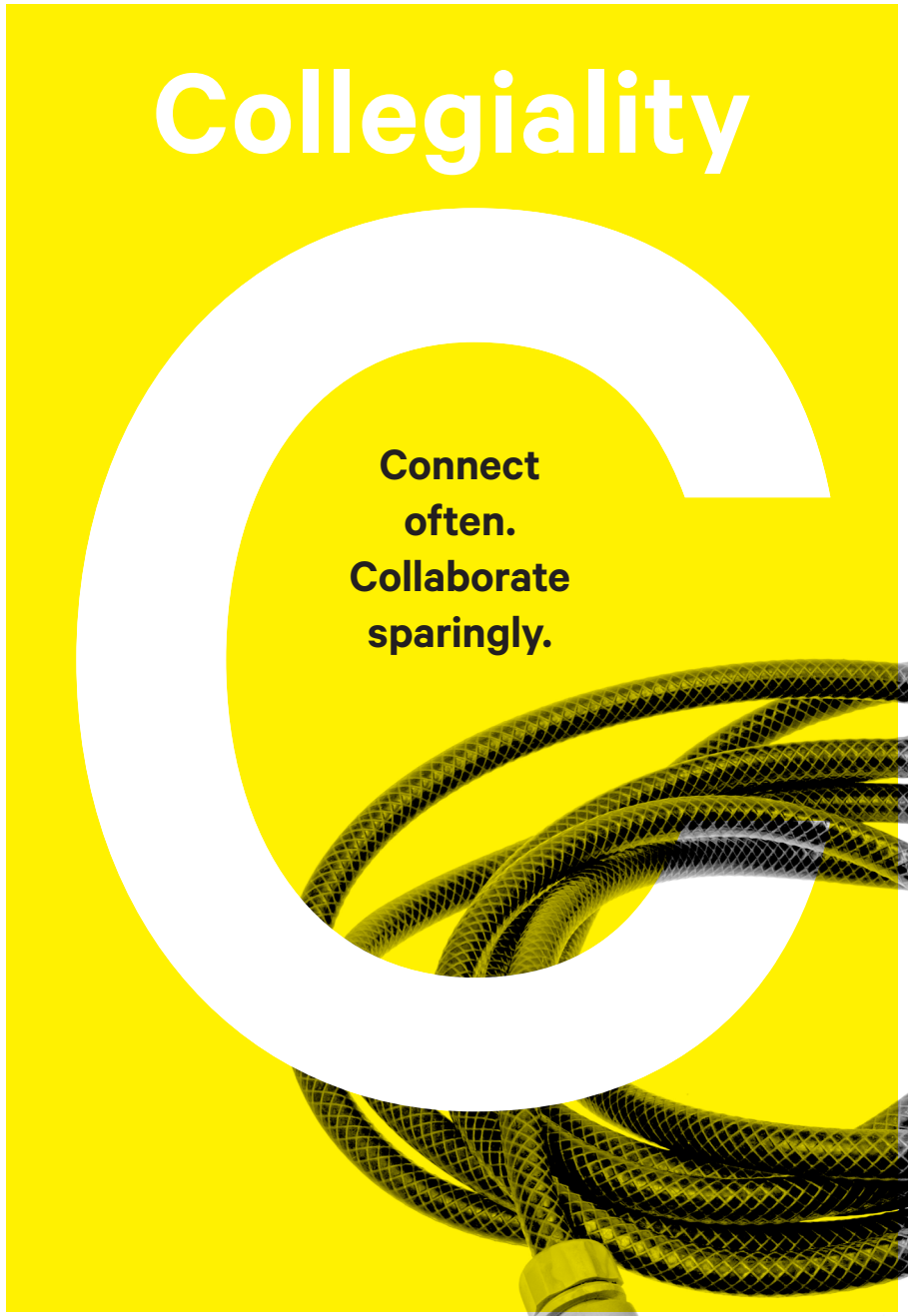
**Though excessive collaboration can be frustrating, we still stand to gain from it.** When done right, collaboration produces superior results. A 2011 Harvard Medical School study found that scientific papers authored by scientists whose labs and/or offices are physically located in the same building receive 45% more citations than papers whose authors are not co-located. According to Kyungjoon Lee, one of the research assistants involved in the study, "if you put people who have the potential [our emphasis added] to collaborate close together it might lead to better results." While we cannot afford this luxury in our virtual workplace, we can use the digital tools at our disposal to generate that same potential for fruitful collaborations.

For example, the skill development workshops that Philosophy at Work delivers can be joined by dispersed teams situated around the globe. Technological advancement has meant that during those sessions a greater diversity of perspectives is attained, and the learning benefits. Or, similarly, take London yoga studio Indaba, known around the city for bringing together some of the most talented teachers for classes and workshops. Now that the studio is offering all of their usual classes via Zoom, they are now introducing weekly live classes offered by outstanding teachers from New York to Athens.

**The deficient reaction is under-collaboration.** Undeniably, collaboration can generate significant administrative overhead. There are more schedules to reconcile, more voices in an email thread, and more bottlenecks. As such, an individual contributor or a team may make the decision to keep collaboration at bay and remain laser-focused.

**While isolationist, deficient collaboration offers important lessons.** Depending on the context, efficiency is admirable. If introducing new collaborators to a project would overstretch an already busy team, then it may be the most appropriate decision to avoid involving anyone else.

Moreover, just because one can collaborate with someone else does not mean that





# Just because you can collaborate DOESN'T mean you should

he should. In research detailed in Morten Hansen's 2018 book Great at Work, Hansen and Martine Haas studied a consulting firm that had recently placed huge emphasis on cross-office collaboration to fully "bust their silos." Hansen and Haas found that, for sales teams trying to win new clients, collaborating with colleagues from different offices actually had, in aggregate, zero impact. Further analysis found that teams with the most experience in a client's industry were actually less likely to win a client bid when they collaborated. For these teams, collaborating for collaboration's sake with teams with less industry experience led them to incorporate feedback that wasn't helpful. In these circumstances, under-collaboration would have much served these teams and the firm as a whole.

**The virtue is collegiality.** This virtue is about friendly discernment. A collegial approach recognizes that collaboration is a balancing act and that each potential collaboration has pros and cons that are unequally distributed across collaborators. Bluntly, not everyone who can be involved stands to gain the same amount once we factor in all of the additional effort that goes into making a collaboration a success. Collegiality is a shared understanding that choosing not to involve a colleague in a project is not a professional slight nor a failure to value that person's input. It also gives permission to say "I think that, for this particular matter, I might not be the right person, but have you thought of asking XI? She is the expert."

Going back to the consulting firm, Hansen and Haas found that while teams with significant industry expertise were hurt by collaborating with colleagues with less expertise, those teams with little expertise benefited hugely from collaboration. This is obvious to us - of course getting expert input helps - but the dichotomy here illustrates the need for collegiality and the way it lets us graciously say no to collaboration without irreparably breaking trust or damaging work relationships. Many members of the firm interviewed by Hansen and Haas revealed that they felt undue pressure to collaborate, as not doing so was seen not as being discerning but rather as failing to be a team player. Hansen, one of the world's foremost thought-leaders in professional collaboration, warns against other major pitfalls that could be avoided through collegiality: collaboration without a specific goal in mind, designing a collaboration without thinking through how you would measure the relative impact of the new inputs, and undertaking "expensive" collaborations where the costs (financial, opportunity, and organisational) outweigh the meaningful benefits.

Findings from that 2011 Harvard Medical School study also showed that not all collaboration is created equal in terms of impact on the quality of the work at hand. While the study found that co-location led to more citations, there was significant caveat. In scientific publications, the order of the authors' billing is significant. The "first author" is the scientist who did the most legwork in terms of both research and manuscript drafting. Typically this is a more junior member of the research team, such a graduate or postdoctoral student. The "last author" is a senior faculty member who assumes a more or less supervisory role for the first author. The "middle authors," all other collaborators, appear in the order that they contributed to the project. Unsurprisingly, the study found that the papers authored by co-located first and last authors were more likely to be cited than those authored by first and last authors sitting in different

# 3 questions to help you cultivate Collegiality

To develop collaborative collegiality in your virtual workplace, consider digesting the following questions:

1

### What might we be lacking?

Whenever you begin a project, be sure to invest early on into identifying important aspects of the project or technical needs where you and your team would benefit significantly from expertise that you don't currently have. Develop your shortlist from there, not just from a brainstorm of potentially relevant collaborators.




2

### What are our various expertises, and who are our experts?

A common refrain in organisations is "we don't know what we know." Consider creating an internal collaboration database--even a humble shared spreadsheet in Google Drive might suffice--where members of your team can list tools, industries, or capabilities that they consider themselves experts in, and encourage everyone to regularly update and check it as they launch new projects.

3

### What alternatives do we have to the elevator/water cooler/Nespresso machine?

Clarke has seen organisations effectively replicate organic ideation touchpoints virtually. "You can use Slack channels as a brain dump. There might be an opportunity for a standing Slack meeting at 3pm on Fridays to hack what you've been working on," she explains. "You can crowdsource or share ideas, and the emphasis is not on working but on thinking fluidly and creatively."

Feature Author: Susie Alegre

# Human rights & new ways of working



**Respect for human rights in the workplace is not just a question of legal compliance, it is a pre-requisite for a healthy and creative work environment, and ultimately for a happy and productive society.**

Eleanor Roosevelt famously said: "Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere...."

But **what do human rights mean in the new environment of remote working where the lines between home and office are increasingly blurred?** Remote working offers great opportunities for flexibility in the workplace which can be a great boost to diversity and equality of opportunity, but it also gives windows into people's private and family lives that they may not always welcome and can erode the clear lines between work and home life that allow for a healthy work-life balance. **Some people may be happy for their workmates to meet their children as they wander past the computer's camera or to share their newly decorated kitchen workspace. But for others, their home environment may be something they want to keep to themselves.**

As we increasingly live our lives through video platforms, aside from the cameras being brought into our homes, it is worth pausing to consider how video conferencing can impact us as individuals. The effort of concentration required and our perceptions of ourselves and each other in video chats can leave us feeling exhausted and confused. Concerns about our conversations being recorded or our data shared in ways that we don't completely understand erode confidence and can lead to people being more guarded in the way they communicate with colleagues than they might be in a face to face situation. **Brainstorming in a situation where your unformed, spontaneous ideas may be recorded for posterity and held against you is more likely to lead to brain-freeze.**

Winston Smith, the hero of Orwell's 1984learned to "set his features into the expression of quiet optimism which it was advisable to wear when facing the telescreen." But in his world, scientific and technological progress stalled because it "depended on the empirical habit of thought, which could not survive in a strictly regimented society."

Developments in technology make increasingly ambitious claims on the insights they can draw about our personalities, emotions and thoughts from facial recognition, virtual interviews and analysis of speech and text, and the ways they can promote and guarantee productivity. There is a temptation to use these tools for management and recruitment processes. But using our reliance on technology in the new workplace to monitor, screen and motivate the workforce runs the risk of undermining, not only privacy and freedom of expression, but freedom of thought itself. **Freedom of thought is essential to creativity and development, if we are to succeed in the new work environment, we must ensure that it is nurtured, not restrained by technology.**




## Virtue 5: Understanding

**Virtual fatigue is real.** Anyone whose work has migrated from in-person to video conference knows that, at a certain point, a kind of video fatigue begins to set in. It's not just that our eyes are tired. In virtual settings, the quality of attention that we give one another begins to degrade. Not only are home offices rife with non-work distractions, we also have to reckon with the laptop-camera paradox of only making pseudo-eye-contact with our interlocutors when we stare into a camera and not at their faces. Moreover, the absence of casual conversations, team lunches, and afternoon coffees can simply make us feel personally forgotten.

**The excessive reaction is social overcompensation.** With the shift to virtual working has come an increased sensitivity to wellness in the workplace. While this transformation is undeniably positive, its manifestations can sometimes miss the mark. According to Davies, moving from being in-office or partially virtual to fully remote puts us in the strange situation of scrambling to rapidly digitize in-person activities and norms. This has not always turned out well. "We've overcompensated for it in some places," she explains. Take, for instance, an extracurricular choir that met weekly in a conference room at Davies's physical office. After her organization transitioned to virtual, the choir continued weekly practices via video conference...with mixed results. "What worked in a conference room—singing together - just didn't feel the same in a room in a house that you're sharing with a partner or flatmate," she explains.

Furthermore, dedicating time to ensuring that teams are happy and well while working remotely can completely overwhelm one's schedule. "I was talking to a director who admitted he didn't know when he would actually get work done because he'd been on Zoom calls all day with his teams," Clarke told us. Finally, let's not forget to honour the fact that many employees are introverts. While extroverts might come away from pub trips and Zoom parties feeling energized, introverts may only want to meditate or take a nap.

**While the excess can overwhelm, lessons from it can still serve us.** Developing interpersonal relationships in the workplace can help cultivate psychological safety and improve team decision-making and performance. Google's aptly-named "Project Aristotle" aimed to identify the secret sauce for high-performing teams by synthesizing internal surveys and interviews with a rigorous scan of academic research, including a study on collective team intelligence done by scholars from Union College, MIT, and Carnegie Mellon. This study found that group intelligence - measured by performance on cognitive tasks - was positively correlated with something other than team members' individual intelligences. It boiled down to a group's average social sensitivity (i.e. the ability of group members to intuit their team's emotional states based on non-verbal cues), commitment to taking turns in discussions, and proportion of women participants.This research corroborated Project Aristotle's findings from within Google that employees are happiest and most productive when they know that their perspectives will be listened to and that their emotions will be valued on par with their work.

**The deficient reaction is being all business.** Many of us have had coworkers who, while

perfectly affable, took a pass on office social activities. Perhaps they had incredibly busy family lives that demanded they rush home, or maybe they simply preferred a separation of church and state when it came to work and play. In the virtual workplace, it is much simpler to dial back our workplace socializing: it's much easier to decline a calendar invitation for a Zoom pub quiz than it is to say no to our colleagues' faces before dashing off to catch the bus home.

**While the deficient can be isolating, it is still instructive.** The desire to build a wall between our professional and personal lives is not without cause, especially given how working from home erases the boundaries between our work and private lives. "My office is now my dining room table," explains Davies. "It's so much harder to 'turn off' when my work is always right there." When the day's work is done at the home office, it's actually important for us to disconnect entirely to cook dinner or spend time with loved ones, even if it means missing out on the chatter of a pre-scheduled 5pm Zoom social hour.

Moreover, Yale School of Management Professors Emma Seppälä and Marissa King point out that maintaining a bustling social network in the workplace can have drawbacks. They cite a 2016 article in Personnel Psychology in which researchers found that while positive supervisor assessments of employee job performance increased with the number of friendships an employee had in the workplace, self-reported emotional exhaustion and maintenance difficulty also increased. They also mention a 2017 study, published in the Journal of Business and Psychology, which found that workplace friendships can actually be detrimental to team performance when interpersonal conflict arises. By contrast, conflicts between non-friends actually improved team performance!

**The virtue is understanding.** We ensure that our teams feel seen and heard in a virtual office by paying attention to our colleagues and developing a nuanced and respectful understanding of their emotional needs. When we spoke to our workplace happiness experts for this report, they all emphasized the importance of just acknowledging feelings in work conversations. However, the degree to which we probe necessarily varies us to continuously recalibrate to make sure we respect our colleagues' social and emotional autonomy. "I always talk about open-sourcing data, and that includes my feelings," Barnes says. "I would encourage everyone to do that, but it has to be made their choice. If I'm forcing you to be transparent, I'm also invading your privacy."

We can begin, Barnes explains, by starting conversations with a simple "how are you?" Davies agrees. When building trust and understanding in the virtual workplace, "asking how people are doing just becomes part of the conversation," she says. Clarke agrees that now we need to bring questions about happiness and well-being to the front of our conversations. "The human-ness has to be brought more to life when we're online." Once we know how a colleague is doing, we also need to listen and tailor our communication accordingly. That is the kernel of understanding.

Outside of addressing emotions head-on, there are small changes we can make to foster a foundation of trust and understanding without being overbearing. "Don't underestimate the value of trivial social ties," Daisley explains. "Remote work is stressful because people won't see a boss smile at them on the lift or get to exchange hellos with the big boss by the coffee machine." Send a



# HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED to connect when we can only stare into a camera?

# 3 questions to help you unpack Understanding

Figuring out how to train yourself and your team to be understanding colleagues and communicators is enough of a tall order in person, and the virtual environment presents even more unique challenges in this regard.

Here are some thought (and action) provoking questions as you consider ways to foster understanding:

1

**What are our video conference behaviours, and how might they limit the degree to which we can pay attention to each other?**

Try to develop a small but mighty list of video conference norms to set the rules of virtual engagement. "I start meetings by creating small protocols and being clear about them," Barnes suggests. "I ask everyone to close other tabs and to move back from the screen slightly to show that they're not typing away."

2

**Where should my various conversations take place?**

While sending feedback on Slack may be efficient, it prevents the giver and the receiver alike from reading tone and facial expressions. Think about how much interpersonal understanding a conversation warrants and adjust your methods accordingly. If you are reviewing a major effort, consider a video chat to show that you are fully opening your ears and your heart.

3

**How do I give my colleagues the opportunity to be open without placing undue pressure on them?**

Some of our coworkers may love opening up about their personal lives, while others would sooner join the next Zoom stand-up naked. By that same token, some colleagues are fine with unannounced phone calls, while seeing a boss's name on Caller ID might send others into a panic. Ask your colleagues what they prefer and don't forget.

# Conclusion



## Take HEART

**The virtue that makes democracy, accountability, clarity, collegiality, and understanding all possible is courage.** Aristotle pointed out that courage is a core virtue because it enables all the rest. The same holds for the 5 virtues of virtual we introduced in this report. Without courage, it's hard to take the steps needed to bring democracy, accountability, clarity, collegiality and understanding into your organisation. Like the virtues we've shared throughout this report, courage is a balance between extremes, and it can be cultivated. For Aristotle, courage exists between the excessive reaction of rashness and the deficient reaction of cowardice. It is not devoid of fear, but rather a sober choice to do what we believe is right despite the realisation that we may fail.

These days, we seem to refer the label of 'courage' for big, bold gestures. Rushing into a burning building to save a child is courageous, as is putting yourself in harms way to nurse a contagious patient. Is it ok to apply this grand label to the seemingly less significant choices? We think so. Are you being courageous when, in the name of clarity, you communicate your personal preferences to a colleague? What about when a manager takes steps to cultivate democracy by involving others in decision making? Courage is not a competition. What may seem an easy part of navigating virtual ways of working for one person, team or organisation may be viewed as a deeply challenging threat by others. If you and your organisation are actively working out how best to work together in this brave new world, courage is relevant and appropriate.

More specifically, it takes courage to engage constructively with the excessive and deficient reactions to virtual working that we have outlined in this report. It takes an enormous amount of courage to see those excesses and the deficiencies not as problems to solve but as teachers who will make themselves known time and again as circumstances change (as they always do). The highs and the lows do not exist for us to avoid; rather, they exist for us to explore and learn from (and hopefully without too much lasting damage).

**We wish you all the best.**

# Contributors



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**loveitleaveit.co**



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*Supafrank*

**Supafrank** is a design studio that helps bring brands and stories to life. The team is really interested in connecting more deeply with the people around them, and they use questions such as 'How can we genuinely engage our customers?' and 'What makes us interesting?' to create truly meaningful brands. **supafrank.com**

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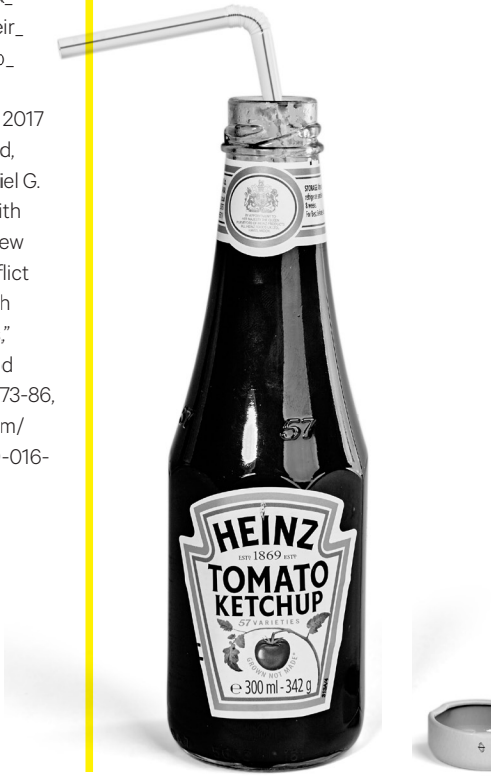
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## Notes space

We hope that this report resonates with you.
Get in touch if you would like to digest it together.

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