

Maintaining a Collaborative and Friendly Network Before and During COVID-19

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unfavorable impact on workplaces routines and relationships between workers (Seva et al., 2021). By government mandate and to reduce the spread of this virus, most employers required their employees to work remotely from home. According to Brynjolfsson et al. (2020) at least 35.2% of workers in the U.S. started to work remotely during the pandemic. Modifying the work environment and working from home, where most people have personal, home and family responsibilities, influenced the sense of isolation and affected the well-being of workers (Iqbal et al., 2020). To reduce this problem, cohesion between working groups is essential (Zheng, 2020). Cohesion is a valuable characteristic among workgroups in developing productivity and a sense of belonging (Ungar, n.d.) and occurs when there is a commitment to stay and work as a team (Salas et al., 2015; Ungar, n.d.). Cohesion not only contributes to effectiveness among groups but also to individual well-being (Estrada et al., 2015).

Notably, universities and departments across the nation have not been exempt from the disruptions of the pandemic (Smalley, 2021). Although a culture of cohesion and collaboration has always been necessary among working groups, today, it is more imperative than ever to foster a positive working culture (Ungar, n.d.). Therefore, given the complex structure of agricultural education departments in colleges of agriculture, with multiple faculty and foci (i.e., teacher preparation, leadership, communications, extension), building a culture of cohesion and collaboration is necessary.

In response, the Department of Agricultural Education at Oregon State University (OSU) has fostered a culture designed to maintain a network of collaboration, support, trust, and joy through various activities and initiatives before and during the pandemic. Not only have the members of our department benefited from this healthy environment, but also our pre-service teachers and students as teachers and advisors consistently served them in a welcoming and caring manner. We posit that face-to-face interactions and friendships in the work environment contribute to work effectiveness, while individuals are supported by joy, entertainment, and trust.

How it Works

The Department of Agricultural Education at OSU cares about the physical and mental health and well-being of its professors, advisors, and graduate students. Therefore, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, activities have been carried out that keep everyone connected and offer opportunities to collaborate on projects and research or serve on committees.

The most common activities that keep us close as co-workers and friends before and during the pandemic include: 1) *Coffee, Collaboration, and Confidence Intervals*, an informal meeting with a humorous name where graduate students and faculty interact with each other and share experiences. These meetings are usually held on Friday mornings so that graduate students can discuss situations, questions, or concerns experienced during the week as a way to receive faculty support. This time is also an opportunity to discuss collaborations, research ideas, and

innovative ideas in a sociable atmosphere. 2) *Kudos and Shout-Outs*, is a section at the end of each department meeting (virtual or in-person). The goal is to recognize and celebrate our work and express gratitude as a group. The shout-outs (which include clever hashtags) are usually sent through the *Microsoft Teams* platform or via email. These are included in the meeting agenda, where they are shared with everyone present and read out loud by the department head.

3) *Flashback Fridays*, is a weekly email from a nominated individual. In these emails, we share old (and often embarrassing) pictures and talk about our childhood. *FBFs* are also an opportunity to connect on a more personal level. 4) *Friday Socials*, is an informal and optional *Zoom* lunch. During this time, our members have the opportunity to connect and talk about non-academic topics, favorite foods, or just to take energy to finish the workday. 5) *Party Planning Committee*, is a small group that helps organize department social events and activities. These activities include department bar-b-ques, department retreats, and Secret Santas, to name a few.

Results to Date

Some of these activities were already carried out prior to the pandemic and were enjoyed by everyone in the department. Unfortunately, the interruptions brought by the new public health situation forced us to make changes and adjust to a new reality (e.g., remote meetings and lunches). However, given the culture of trust and friendship that has always existed in our department, we adapted and continued to enjoy our company, collaborations, and teamwork with amusement.

Our interest and dedication in carrying out these activities have had very positive outcomes for the department. As a team, we have noticed an increase in research and teaching collaborations, enhanced professional relationships, and a desire to continue connecting as a department. We have also had more lively departmental interactions and entertaining departmental meetings.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

The Department of Agricultural Education at OSU plans continue to create and promote activities that strengthen the professional and personal relationships of the staff. With the return to face-to-face classes for the fall term, we are open to ideas from our department members as we create activities to help them address their needs and return to work in person. We encourage other departments at colleges of agriculture to adopt similar actions that build a happy, productive, and collaborative culture.

Costs/Resources Needed

There are no monetary expenses to carry out these activities. To have better organization, we recommend creating committees for activities that require reserving dates or places. If the teaching/work continues to be remote, it will also be necessary to use digital platforms (e.g., *Zoom*, *Microsoft Teams*, *Outlook*) to keep the team connected.

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