

# The Human Moment at Work

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E-mail and voice mail are efficient, but face-to-face contact is still essential to true communication.

**T**HE CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER of an international consulting firm holds a cell phone to his ear while waiting for the shuttle from New York to Boston. He listens to the messages that have piled up since he phoned in three hours earlier. After he flips the phone closed, he sits down to wait for his plane and starts to brood. A valued employee has asked for a transfer to another division. Questions begin to ricochet through his mind: What if the employee complains that the CFO is a lousy boss? What if the employee plans to take his team with him in the move? What if, what if...? The CFO becomes lost in a frightening tangle of improbable outcomes, a thicket that will ensnarl his mind the entire flight back to Boston. The minute he gets home he will dash off an e-mail to the employee and eagerly await a reply—which, when it comes the next day, will likely upset him further by its ambiguity. More brooding will ensue, making it difficult for him to focus on his work.

At an electronics company, a talented brand manager is growing increasingly alienated. The problem started when his division head didn't return a phone call for several days. She said she never got the message. Then the brand manager noticed that he hadn't been invited to an important meeting with a new advertising agency. What's wrong with my performance? he wonders. The man wants to raise the question with the division manager, but the opportunity never seems to arise. All their communication is by memo, e-mail, or voice mail, which they almost never meet. For one thing, their offices are 50 miles apart, and for another, both of them are frequently on the road. During the rare moments when they do see each other in person—on the run in a corridor or in the parking lot at corporate headquarters—it is usually inappropriate or impossible to discuss complex matters. And so the issues between them smolder.



In both scenarios, the executives' anxiety has a simple antidote: a face-to-face conversation. Both men are driving themselves crazy for no reason. But to learn that, they need to reconnect with their unwitting partners in (emotional) crime—and they need to do it in person. They need to experience what I call *the human moment*: an authentic psychological encounter that can happen only when two people share the same physical

space. I have given the human moment a name because I believe that it has started to disappear from modern life—and I sense that we all may be about to discover the destructive power of its absence.

The human moment has two prerequisites: people's physical presence and their emotional and intellectual attention. That's it. Physical presence alone isn't enough; you can ride shoulder-to-shoulder with someone for six



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hours in an airplane and not have a human moment the entire ride. And attention alone isn't enough either. You can pay attention to someone over the telephone, for instance, but somehow phone conversations lack the power of true human moments.

Human moments require energy. Often, that's what makes them easy to avoid. The human moment may be seen as yet another tax on our overextended lives. But a human moment doesn't have to be emotionally draining or personally revealing. In fact, the human moment can be brisk, businesslike, and brief. A five-minute conversation can be a perfectly meaningful human moment. To make the human moment work, you have to set aside what you're doing, put down the memo you were reading, disengage from your laptop, abandon your daydream, and focus on the person you're with. Usually when you do that, the other person will feel the energy and respond in kind. Together, you quickly create a force field of exceptional power.

The positive effects of a human moment can last long after the people

## The absence of the human moment in an organization can wreak havoc. Good people leave. Those who remain are unhappy.

involved have said goodbye and walked away. People begin to think in new and creative ways; mental activity is stimulated. But like exercise, which also has enduring effects, the benefits of a human moment do not last indefinitely. A ten-mile run on Monday is wonderful—but only if you also swim on Wednesday and play tennis on Saturday. In other words, you must engage in human moments on a regular basis for them to have a meaningful impact on your life. For most people, that's not a tall order.

I am concerned, however, that human moments are disappearing and that this trend will be accompanied by worrisome and widespread consequences. I say this not as an executive

but as a psychiatrist who has been treating patients with anxiety disorders for 20 years. Because of where I practice and the nature of my expertise, many of my patients are senior business executives who—to the outside world—are pictures of success. But I can tell you without a doubt that virtually everyone I see is experiencing some deficiency of human contact. Indeed, I am increasingly sought out because people feel lonely, isolated, or confused at work. The treatment I provide invariably involves replenishing the human moments in their lives.

### The Disappearing Human Moment

Human beings are remarkably resilient. They can deal with almost anything as long as they do not become too isolated. But my patients, as well as my acquaintances in the business world, tell me that as the tide of electronic hyperconnection rises, the landscape of work is in some ways changing for the worse. As Ray, a senior systems manager in a large investment company, told me:

"I don't talk to people as much as I used to. And sometimes the results are very damaging."

Ray wasn't complaining—overall, he likes his job quite a bit—but he was concerned. "I've found you can stumble into giant misunderstandings with

e-mail. People's feelings can get hurt and wrong information can get picked up."

As an example, he told the following story. "A guy sent me an e-mail that said, 'We were not able to access the following application, and we need to know why,' and he cc'd his supervisor, solely to show the supervisor that he was doing something about the problem. What bugged me was that line, 'and we need to know why.' If he had spoken to me face-to-face we could have solved the problem, but no, I get this e-mail with its peremptory tone, and he's cc'd it. My immediate response was, back at you. So I write an officious sounding e-mail, with a cc to a bunch of other people, including his supervisor,

explaining that I had submitted a change management ticket, and if he had gone to the meeting where that was discussed he would have known about it and wouldn't have even tried to access that application. I became that guy's adversary instead of solving the problem. But I felt goaded into it."

Ray's story illustrates how letting the human moment fall to the wayside leads to dysfunction in organizations. When human moments are few and far between, oversensitivity, self-doubt, and even boorishness and abrasive curtness can be observed in the best of people. Productive employees will begin to feel lousy and that, in turn, will lead them to underperform or to think of looking elsewhere for work. The irony is that this kind of alienation in the workplace derives not from lack of communication but from a surplus of the wrong kind. The remedy is not to get rid of electronics but to restore the human moment where it is needed.

The absence of the human moment—on an organizational scale—can wreak havoc. Coworkers slowly but surely lose their sense of cohesiveness. It starts with one person, but distrust, disrespect, and dissatisfaction on the job are like contagions. Soon enough there are five or ten people like Ray and his e-mail partner, and then more. Eventually, such people make up the majority. An organization's culture turns unfriendly and unforgiving. Good people leave. Those who remain are unhappy. Mental health concerns aside, such conditions are not good for business. Indeed, they can be downright corrosive.

To be sure, people have felt lonely or isolated at work in the past. Henry Ford's early factories were no love-ins. Nevertheless, from the 1950s onward, executives and middle managers came to expect that they would talk with one another in the office—for business or personal reasons—and would even play together at the end of the day. And when it came time to connect with distant clients or suppliers or colleagues, people got on planes. Meetings happened in person. Yes, they were time consuming and costly. But they fos-

tered trust. Not incidentally, people had more fun.

But in the last ten years or so, technological changes have made a lot of face-to-face interaction unnecessary. I'm talking about voice mail and e-mail mainly—modes of communication that are one-way and electronic. Face-to-face interaction has also fallen victim to "virtuality"—many people work at home or are otherwise off-site. I will certainly not try to make a case that these changes are bad. And indeed, no one planned on reducing face-to-face meetings; this is simply happening naturally, with the inevitability of water flowing downhill. We have the technology, so we are using it.

For the most part, it makes our lives much better. I enjoy the efficiency and freedom that voice mail and e-mail give me. I communicate with people when I want to, from any location. While I'm traveling, I keep up with my messages from patients and the office through voice mail, and I log on from hotel rooms to collect my e-mail every day. Like most people, I don't know how I ever managed without these tools.

But problems that develop when the human moment is lost cannot be ignored. People need human contact in order to survive. They need it to maintain their mental acuity and their emotional well-being. I make this assertion having listened to and counseled thousands of patients whose jobs have been sapped of human moments. And I make it based on strong evidence from the field of brain science. (See the insert "The Brain Chemistry of the Human Moment.")

### Toxic Worry

What happens to the psychology of the mind when the human moment vanishes—or at least fades—from our lives? In the worst case, paranoia fills the vacuum. In my practice, that has been rare. More often, the human moment is replaced by worry. That's because electronic communications remove many of the cues that typically mitigate worry. Those cues—body language, tone of voice, and facial expression—are especially important among sophisticated peo-

ple who are prone to using subtle language, irony, and wit.

Not all worry is bad, of course. Some of my patients tell me that in business, worry can be a great tool. It is an inner voice telling you that trouble—a new competitor or a new technology that will shake up your industry—is on the way. "Good worry" leads to constructive planning and corrective action; it is essential to success in any endeavor.

"Toxic worry" is another matter entirely. It is anxiety that has no basis in reality. It immobilizes the sufferer and leads to indecision or destructive action. It's like being in the dark, and we all feel paranoid in the dark. Try an experiment. Go into a room at night and turn off the lights. Your whole body will respond. Even if you know the room well, you will probably feel the hairs on the back of your neck rise up a little as you wonder who might be lurking in the corner. The human moment is like light in an otherwise dark room: it illuminates dark corners and dispels suspicions and fears. Without it, toxic worry grows.

Toxic worry is among the most debilitating consequences of vanishing human moments, but much more common are the little misunderstandings. An e-mail message is misconstrued. A voice-mail message gets forwarded to the wrong people. Someone takes offense because he is not included on a certain circulation list. Was it an accident? Such problems can be tolerated by most individuals from time to time—as I've said, people are resilient. But as the number of human moments decreases, the number of little misunderstandings is likely to increase. They compound one another until there is nothing little about them anymore. People begin to wonder if they can trust their organizations and, just as often, they begin to question their own motives, performance, and self-worth.

Consider Harry, a senior partner at a Boston law firm. Harry was representing a bank in a complicated real estate deal with the developer of a commercial property. Many of the details of the agreement were being worked out via e-mail between

Harry and the developer's counsel. At a key juncture, when a technical point about interest rates came up, the developer's counsel e-mailed Harry, "Of course your client won't grasp this, because he won't understand what we're talking about." When Harry's client read this message, which was mixed in with other documents, he became furious and nearly canceled the deal. Trying to patch things up, Harry met with the developer's lawyer, who was stunned to hear how his message had been misconstrued. "I was trying to be ironic!" the lawyer gasped in horror. "Your client is an expert in the field—saying he didn't know what we were talking about was just my way of being funny. I can't believe what a misunderstanding this is!"

When he came to me, Harry was second-guessing himself, asking me if he had some unconscious wish to fail because he had allowed the message to be seen by his client. But the real problem was in the mode of communication, not in Harry's unconscious.

Harry's deal was saved, but sometimes the misunderstandings wrought by the absence of the human moment do permanent damage. I recently treated a man—let's call him Charles—who came to see me because he was waking up in the middle of the night. He was worried about the company he had just sold for \$20 million.

"What's wrong?" I asked him.

"I had intended to stay on with the company for at least a couple of years, but I'm worried it's going to be impossible. I can't deal with the COO. He's in Texas, where the headquarters are, and I'm in Massachusetts, and he keeps sending me e-mails with lists of things he wants me to do. This may sound petty, but the way he phrases them just makes me crazy. When I sold the company I knew my role would change, but this is totally degrading."

"Can you give me an example?" I asked.

"Sure. I turned on my computer Monday and got an e-mail that simply said, 'Last communication unacceptable. Redo.' I replied, asking for specifics. He e-mailed me back,

'I don't have time to explain. Can't you figure it out?' Suddenly I'm feeling like a third-grader. But I tried to rise above it. The next day he e-mailed me, 'Your people up there have to do longer weekend hours.' Then I started to lose sleep."

"Is this their way of getting rid of you?" I asked.

"It looks like it, but the fact is that they need me. They know that. But I can't deal with this."

"Can you talk to the COO?" I asked.

"He's evasive. When we meet, he's polite but vague. He does all his damage through e-mail."

Although Charles was determined to make the transition and stay with the new company, his resolve broke down as he felt increasingly at odds with headquarters, particularly the COO. And he started to brood about the direction and purpose of the company, issues he had felt confident about when he made the deal. "I've become a worrier instead of a problem solver," Charles told me. "I never used to be this way."

When Charles submitted his letter of resignation, he was deluged with evidence that the company did indeed want him to stay. He received dozens of e-mail messages and phone calls from people pleading with him to reconsider. But by then the damage had been done. Charles's heart was not in it. He was getting interested in new ideas for other businesses, and venture capitalists had approached him the minute he leaked word of his dissatisfaction. The company's attempts to keep him proved to be too little, too late.

When we discussed his resignation, Charles told me how easy it would have been for the new company to have kept him, if only he had been treated with even minimal respect by the COO. "My problems really came down to those e-mail interactions," he said.

It sounded as if the COO couldn't handle his competitive feelings, but instead of dealing with Charles face-to-face, he took him on in e-mail. He used that approach as a weapon for his negative and angry emotions. In person, he would have had to submit to social convention. His dark

feelings would have been forced into the light.

The human moment, then, is a regulator: when you take it away, people's primitive instincts can get the better of them. Just as in the anonymity of an automobile, where stable people can behave like crazed maniacs, so too on a keyboard: courteous people can become rude and abrupt.

Less dramatic but more common are the instances when people come to see me because they feel worn out by all the nonhuman interactions that fill their days. "I feel like I'm going brain-dead," said Lynn, an executive at a health care company. She consulted me because she actually thought she was losing her memory. In meetings, words were not coming to her as quickly, and decisions that she once made in a snap were now taking her hours or

days. Lynn had long prided herself on her sharp mind. Now she felt as if her head were swallowed by fog. But she was still wise enough to realize that her problems might be connected to the changing texture of her work. "I do 30% to 40% of my work by leaving voice-mail messages, playing phone tag, or sending e-mail," she said. "It used to be just 10%. I see and talk to people less and less and less."

A few simple tests conducted in my office revealed that Lynn's brain itself was in fine shape. However, she was right. Her work habits were diminishing her brain's performance. Your psyche, just like your muscles, actually needs rest and variation to perform at its peak. Lynn acted as if she had run a marathon through the desert. No wonder her body ached and her mind was numb. Staying on-screen, on-line, or on the tele-

## The Brain Chemistry of the Human Moment

The anecdotal evidence compiled during my work as a psychiatrist and researcher over 20 years strongly suggests that a deficit of the human moment damages a person's emotional health. That finding is also supported by an ever growing body of scientific research.

Working as long ago as the 1940s, the French psychoanalyst Rene Spitz showed that infants who were not held, stroked, and cuddled—even if they had parents who fed and clothed them—suffered from retarded neurological development. In 1951, researchers at McGill University found that a lack of normal contact with the outside world played havoc with adults' sense of reality. In the study, 14 men and women were placed in sensory deprivation tanks; within hours, all of them reported an altered sense of reality, insomnia—even hallucinations.

More recent studies have examined less extreme situations with equally compelling results. Between 1965 and 1974, two epidemiologists studied the lifestyles and health of 4,725 residents of Alameda County, California. They found that death rates were three times as high for socially isolated people as for those with strong connections to others. A similar study of Seattle residents, published in 1997, found that married people with a strong social network had lower health care costs and fewer primary care visits than those who were more isolated. Still other studies have shown that supportive social relationships boost immune-system responsiveness and prolong life after heart attacks.

Consider also the decade-long MacArthur Foundation study on aging in the United States, which was recently completed by a team of eminent scientists from around the country. It showed that the top two predictors of well-being as people age are frequency of visits with friends and

phone for extended periods – just like any other long and monotonous activity – wears you out. The brain becomes starved for fuel: rest and human contact. That is why punishments like exile and solitary confinement are so painful. All the coffee in the world can't make up for the brain-dead state that many people in jobs like Lynn's feel at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

The antidote to Lynn's condition was straightforward. She needed some diversity in her work life. I suggested that she refresh her mind with a bit of exercise or, even better, that she regularly seek out conversations with real, live human beings. She did so and today reports that both her work and her brain's performance are much improved. But I am concerned about all the executives out there who have not sought help as Lynn did. Although most

executives attend enough meetings and social functions to prevent them from becoming zombies, the anonymity and monotony of technology can – and will – decrease their brain stamina. And for that, both individuals and organizations will pay a price.

### High Tech, High Touch

A patient of mine who was a CEO once told me, "High tech requires high touch." When I asked him what he meant, he explained to me that his company had run into a problem. Every time it made another part of its operations virtual – moving salespeople entirely into the field, for instance – the company's culture suffered. So he had developed a policy that required all "virtual" employees to come into the office at least once a month for unstructured face time.

"It's like what happened when banks introduced ATMs," the CEO said. "Once people didn't know Alice behind the counter anymore or any of the lending agents behind those glass walls, the whole loan process got tougher for both the banks and the customers. There was no familiarity, no trust."

"I love ATMs," I replied.

"So do I. So does everyone," said the CEO. "But the banks have been scrambling for years now to get their customers into a relationship again. You see, for business to do well, you can't have high tech without high touch. They have to work together."

The CEO was right. But combining high tech and high touch is easier said than done, according to my patients. Technology always seems to take precedence. Recently, however, I encountered two examples of human and "virtual" moments working in tandem and reinforcing each other to great effect.

Jack is a major real-estate developer based in Boston. In the last decade, his offices and interests have become worldwide. He runs his operation from a suite of offices located on the ground floor of a Back Bay brownstone that he calls the "bat cave." A former football player at Yale, Jack considers teamwork the key to his company's success. When I asked him how he dealt with the recent growth of his company, its increasing diversification, the expanding numbers of people working for him, his reply was: "Thursday pizza."

"About ten years ago, I realized I wasn't seeing people as often as before," Jack explained. "I was running around and so was everybody else. We never got a chance to sit down and talk." Jack worried about the impact of this disconnectedness on his business, in which sharing information is critical, so he started a Thursday ritual: a free pizza lunch in the office. "I know this is not an advanced management technique, but it does the job," Jack said. "On Thursdays, we sit around the big table in my office and we talk. There is no agenda. The group averages about 15 people and changes members every week, but there is a core

frequency of attendance at meetings of organizations. The study also discovered that, although those who have religious beliefs on average live longer than those who don't, people who actually *attend* religious services do better than those who believe but do not go to services.

Most recently, researchers from Carnegie Mellon University examined how people were affected by spending time on-line. Contrary to their expectations, they found higher levels of depression and loneliness in people who spend even a few hours per week connected to the Internet. Again, this suggests that the electronic world, while useful in many respects, is not an adequate substitute for the world of human contact.

What exactly is the chemistry at work in these studies of brain function? Scientists don't know the whole story yet, but they do know that positive human-to-human contact reduces the blood levels of the stress hormones epinephrine, norepinephrine, and cortisol.

Nature also equips us with hormones that promote trust and bonding: oxytocin and vasopressin. Most abundant in nursing mothers, these hormones are always present to some degree in all of us, but they rise when we feel empathy for another person – in particular when we are meeting with someone face-to-face. It has been shown that these bonding hormones are at suppressed levels when people are physically separate, which is one of the reasons that it is easier to deal harshly with someone via e-mail than in person. Furthermore, scientists hypothesize that in-person contact stimulates two important neurotransmitters: dopamine, which enhances attention and pleasure, and serotonin, which reduces fear and worry.

Science, in other words, tells the same story as my patients. The human moment is neglected at the brain's peril.

of 5 or 6 who provide continuity. They meet even when I'm not there. We all look forward to it not as a business meeting but as an opportunity for informal talk. People catch up with each other, they brainstorm, they bring up stuff that doesn't get discussed elsewhere, and it works." According to Jack, the pizza lunches are largely responsible for his organization's high morale and competitive strength.

Jack's pizza lunch is a simple way of maintaining the human moment

## Combining high tech and high touch is not easy. Technology always seems to take precedence.

at work. Sometimes, however, reinstating the human moment can be more complex. Consider the case of David, who runs a consulting firm that advises independent furniture stores. About a decade ago, he found that many of his clients were becoming increasingly isolated after an industry consolidation left only one or two independents in each city. Sales representatives from the major manufacturers wouldn't service them in person anymore. They were asked to order over the phone or through the Internet. "You used to learn what was going on in the marketplace from the sales reps who stopped by your store. And a lot of those relationships were very close," David explained. "With the sales reps gone, the independents felt completely cut off."

In response to this problem, David decided to start what he called "performance groups"—groups of independent retailers from different parts of the country who would get together three times a year to talk business and offer one another support. When he presented this idea to his colleagues at the consulting firm, they hesitated. They worried

that the project might fail, given the notoriously guarded, private nature of independent furniture retailers.

But the need for the human moment proved strong. Today, six groups of independent furniture dealers exist, with ten people in each. They meet in two-day sessions with retailers in noncompeting cities. "We've had people in our groups who say that their fathers would roll over in their graves if they knew they were sharing the financials of their company with other retailers," David told me. "But sharing those financials creates trust and a bond. These people share their best ideas, they benchmark performance, and they give one another the support they need."

The sessions can be very emotional, according to David. "We've had guys break down in tears when people in the group have looked at them and said, 'Fire your son.' But the groups put them in touch with people who know the business and can help work things out." They have provided a human moment.

It's important to note that the groups' face-to-face meetings are augmented by electronic communication. The performance groups use e-mail and other electronic means to support and expand what they do in the meetings. But David believes the in-person meetings are indispensable. "I think a sense of caring develops when you're dealing with somebody face-to-face. Over the Internet you tend to be very precise with questions and answers, and you can't register people's emotions. People don't open up over the Internet like they do in person. When you're chatting with somebody, you can see by his facial expression that you've hit on a very sensitive subject. It may be a signal to avoid that subject or it may be a

signal to go further. You can't tell that over the computer." But David feels strongly that the Internet is valuable. In fact, he is currently creating a chat room for each performance group. Using a code to enter, members will be able to "talk" between meetings, thereby sustaining, and even building on, the important relationships forged face-to-face.

The performance groups in the retail furniture business seem to me a brilliant example of using the human moment judiciously—even strategically. Obviously, we don't want to turn back the clock and dispense with the tremendous efficiencies afforded us by electronic communications, but we do need to learn how to deal with the hidden problems they can create.

Indeed, the strategic use of the human moment can help reduce the confusion and ambiguity of electronic communications, develop confidence and trust as only in-person meetings can, and reduce the toxic worry, mental fatigue, and disconnection associated with the excessive use of electronics.

Technology has created a magnificent new world, bursting with opportunity. It has opened up a global, knowledge-based economy and unchained people from their desks. We are all in its debt—and we're never going back. But we cannot move forward successfully without preserving the human moment. The price we pay for not doing that is too high, for individuals and organizations alike. The human moment provides the zest and color in the painting of our daily lives; it restores us, strengthens us, and makes us whole. Luckily, as long as we arrange our lives properly, the human moment should be easy enough to preserve. All we have to do is take heed—and make it happen.

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