

Connecting in a time of Covid: Redefining the human experience

It can be argued that the success of any organisation is based on the strength of its connection to its stakeholders and the extent to which it can sustain that connection. Yet even before the Covid-19 pandemic, consumers were becoming increasingly jaded, with research from PwC revealing that almost 60% of global respondents felt that organisations had lost touch with the human element in their relationships with their customers.



Source: www.pexels.com

And while the digital transformation, accelerated by Covid, has brought with it many benefits in the form of increasing access to a multitude of services - from education (e-learning) to healthcare (telemedicine) - the flip side of this is that the disconnect felt by consumers has deepened, says Dhruv Pandit, former YPO Africa regional chair and chief executive officer of the Fedha Group.

Dhruv says that for an organisation like YPO - a global network with a core part of its offering rooted in providing exceptional experiences to its members - a crisis of Coronavirus' magnitude had the potential to derail it entirely. After all, what is an organisation built on human connection, in a time when people are told to stay apart?

Yet despite this, the organisation's membership continued to grow across Africa at the same rate as pre-Covid times. Why?

Connection doesn't always require face time

An article by global research agency McKinsley has highlighted that in a time of crisis, organisations need laser-like focus on creating a sense of care and connection. "Now more than ever, people need extra information, guidance, and support to navigate a novel set of challenges...They want a resource they can trust, that can make them feel safe when everything seems uncertain, and that offers support when so much seems to be overwhelming."

YPO Africa regional specialist Debbie Masson agrees, and feels the pandemic revealed that establishing and sustaining a human connection doesn't necessarily need to involve in-person interaction.

"Members were experiencing a wide range of events and emotions, and having the opportunity to connect with others in a virtual space and later, small forums, helped to lighten the load"; while Sarah Sonnenberg, YPO Africa regional chair and MD at Synchron Markings, says that "moving into a virtual space and navigating the levels of uncertainty that our members - who are all business leaders - have seen across the globe, made the role of a trusted network critical."

Pandit admits that while virtual forums did not create those "oxytocin moments," it did allow members to widen their networks, and says that "there is a wonderful opportunity that being vulnerable presents to us.

"It also allowed us to facilitate new connections across borders and continents like never before, and we also saw our first 'hybrid' board meeting, where members gathered in intimate hubs across the African continent."

Sonnenberg believes that the key is to "engage with your full being in whatever forum you find yourself - be it virtual or otherwise. Being plugged into a network of innovation, proved to be invaluable when it was crunch time."

Innovation filtration

Yet Pandit highlights that on occasion, having too much innovation at the table can present unique challenges.

"YPO is a very creative organisation with a rich diversity of members, who bring an enormous amount of ideas to table. The challenge is not a shortage of ideas, but rather a matter of curation and selection - filtering through these to find something that will move the needle."

Double down on your values

While Masson believes that a sense of agility allows one to retain relevance and respond to the real-time needs of stakeholders, it should never entail a change in values.

"In fact, a crisis is when you need to double down on your values. Be clear in what you stand for, and how you can retain and reinforce that in different contexts."

Pandit explains that YPO, for example, is a global organisation of leaders. "Thus everything we do, needs to be world-class and requires flawless execution."

He admits that when lockdown was announced and member forums shifted to virtual channels, the organisation soon realised that a new skill-set was needed to deliver the same experience it was known for.

"We are not in the business of production, and we decided that if we were going to do this, we needed to do it properly, and in line with our values," says Pandit.

He concludes by saying that periods of discomfort often lead to growth, and present an opportunity to build organisational resilience.

“Our advice to other business leaders is to be authentic. Be vulnerable. Be deliberate and intentional. Look for new ways to establish and sustain connections. Despite what is happening around you, lean into opportunities,” he concludes.

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