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## What Happened to Personal Touch?

By Dr. Woody

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Over the last decade human contact has had a diminishing role in our interpersonal interactions. Sure, digital technology has enabled us to build and maintain far more contacts than in previous decades, but at what cost?

We have become so plugged into cyberspace that we have forgotten how to function in the actual physical space we live in.

In light of this, I thought I'd share a couple of experiences from over the years that highlight the diminishing role of human contact in our society and why it worries me.



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### Relationships are about People, Not Transactions

I'll never forget my first job at regional HMO in Massachusetts. E-mail, in the way we know it today, was fairly new and most of the company was already hooked. Every day it seemed as if the employees were becoming more and more engrossed with this new form of communication. It even got to the point where human contact started becoming secondary to e-mail. As the new guy, I found this an interesting impediment to building relationships.

A product of Catholic schooling and a Washington D.C., upbringing (not to mention my extroverted personality), I have always felt compelled to engage others. Naturally, I wanted to get to know as many people at my new place of employment as possible. So, when my boss asked me to get some input on a project from one of her counterparts, I saw this as a great opportunity to make another connection.

Upon getting my assignment, I promptly made my way to the manager's office. After a quick introduction, she gave me what I needed and I began to walk out of her office. Just before passing through the door, she stopped me and said, "by the way, you should have just e-mailed me, there was no need to come by my office." Interestingly, this was the first time we had ever met and the last time we ever spoke again in person. She spent 10 years stuck in middle management before retiring. Maybe a little more of the personal touch might have helped her climb the career ladder. At the end of the day, success starts with quality relationships and you can't build quality relationships by scolding people for reaching out!

### Don't Hide Behind the Curtain

One of the more fascinating revelations I had about the dangers of modern communication technology was when I worked for IBM.

The company recently started using a new Web meeting tool as a way of linking with remote employees. In an unfortunate misuse of this technology, the executive who ran my team decided to start holding our quarterly meetings in cyberspace. As I sat in my cube scanning the sign-on list, it occurred to me that nearly 90% of the participants were actually in the building. Some of them were even sitting in cubes next to me! This didn't surprise me as our team was mainly local. What surprised me was the fact that my boss was missing out on a fantastic opportunity. Instead of checking e-mails, texting friends, or making shopping lists during the meeting, the team members could have been interacting with each other, making connections and strengthening bonds.

From a leadership perspective, her lack of physical presence made her appear disengaged and even somewhat avoidant. If you want to energize a team, they need to feel your presence. Leaders can't be effective when they don't connect with their people. Remember, the Wizard of Oz was much more likable when he came out from behind the curtain.

I will concede that I am a naturally social person. However, I firmly believe that regardless of where you fall on the introversion/extraversion scale, we all have an innate need for human contact. Research has shown that the vast majority of human communication is actually nonverbal. This means that we need to be physically present in order to get the most from any conversation. The next time you have a choice, think about taking a quick walk down the hall before firing off that e-mail.

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