

How Peer Coaching Can Make Work Less Lonely

Norian Caporale-Berkowitz and Steward D. Friedman

A near-constant stream of [business](#) and [scientific](#) news reminds us that 50% of Americans are lonely. Former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy's [powerful HBR article](#) notes that half of CEOs suffer from loneliness. In addition to its personal toll, there is also an economic cost: workplace loneliness causes [burnout](#), affects job [satisfaction](#), and lowers both [performance](#) and [retention](#). It also increases [health care costs](#).

The Causes of Loneliness at Work

Loneliness is a [subjective feeling](#) of isolation. Number of coworker interactions and whether or not you work remotely are not causal factors. What matters is the [quality](#) and [meaningfulness](#) of relationships. It's common for employees to feel lonely while surrounded by colleagues with whom they don't genuinely connect. Indeed, do your colleagues see the real you or just a carefully managed, work-safe persona — [a brilliant disguise](#)? If the latter, then you're likely to suffering some degree of loneliness.

Loneliness isn't usually a failure of the employee but is, rather, a systemic cultural issue. Humans have a need to feel valued by the people around them at work, at home, and in the community. Yet many people keep work relationships at a distance because that's what they believe is expected. Unless employers demonstrate they value basic human connections at work, it is difficult to change the common gospel that who you are is not who you should be in the office. [Psychological safety](#) — the sense that we can be free to be ourselves without fear of retribution — doesn't exist when our managers don't model vulnerability, a generator of high-quality connections, because they worry it might undermine their authority. Cultural norms that discourage genuine relationships lead to loneliness.

How Peer Coaching Can Help

[Peer coaching](#) is about cultivating a network of allies that can provide mutual support in creating positive change to improve performance. In addition to its many [benefits for learning](#), these relationships address the roots of loneliness at work. On the surface, peer coaching might look like low-budget professional coaching. Employees gain new perspectives on their issues and opportunities, as well as accountability partners to improve follow-through on creating change, but without paying professional coaching fees. But it's much more than that. When organizations invest in peer coaching systems they signal a cultural shift that normalizes talking candidly about life with colleagues. Employees gain feelings of connection, trust increases, and individuals develop insights into their own problems through helping others. Peer coaching provides opportunities for one-on-one connection and demonstrates that our inner lives are welcome in the workplace. Let's explain a bit further three of the ways it helps:

- **Creates a culture that values connection.** People develop symptoms of loneliness when they [feel isolated](#), regardless of how much actual social support is available to them. Psychological problems increase when people have [little hope](#) for more connection in the future. An employer's commitment to increasing connections among employees can reduce loneliness even before any coaching begins simply through the signals such initiatives convey. This is especially relevant for younger employees; [71% of millennials](#) want their coworkers to be like a second family. When employers help employees build peer-to-peer coaching networks, it creates a culture of connection. Employees experience being vulnerable with coworkers and begin to view lowering their walls as an asset, not a liability. They see the workplace as a source of personal nourishment. Loneliness dissipates when we feel we are among people engaged in helping each other. As one of our clients said after a peer coaching exchange, "Just having someone who was truly interested in helping me was an incredibly powerful experience."
- **Replaces social snacking with meaningful dialogue.** Communicating mostly over email or chat and then turning to social media on breaks — that's [social snacking](#), which gives the illusion of connection without actual nourishment. What matters is not how often we interact, but whether our interactions are [meaningful](#). Peer coaching replaces snacking with satisfying meals of real talk. Those at the table are revealing themselves and accepting others as they are. The reciprocal nature of peer coaching relationships, in which employees take turns talking about work in the context of their whole lives, is a [catalyst for deep mutual understanding](#). By providing opportunities for individuals to talk — without pressure to deliver or impress — peer coaching can reduce loneliness more effectively than staged social events in which people might be laughing and drinking but still hiding behind a mask they'd rather remove.
- **Increases psychological safety.** [When researchers recently asked Americans "How many confidants do you have?"](#) the most common

response was “zero,” compared to a modal response of “three” just two decades earlier. Research shows that people who are lonely, compared to those who are not, are [less able to make new connections](#). Because peer coaching involves repeated conversations with consistent partners, it is an effective method of creating confidants that persist over time. One of our clients said, “I feel like I gained three new family members, people who are supportive and non-judgmental.” Coaching focuses on listening and asking questions. Because participants in peer-to-peer coaching exchanges see their coaches as focused first and foremost on gaining understanding of what’s on the inside, these relationships produce feelings of psychological safety.

Once you are comfortable with the idea of doing something to deepen relationships at work, set up a simple method for two people to try out a peer-to-peer coaching exchange following [these basic guidelines](#). Each pair can take turns coaching each other for 20 minutes each. In essence: Listen and don’t try to fix problems. Start with coaching sessions over lunch; eating together [increases trust](#) and is a natural way to schedule a one-on-one that isn’t focused on specific work tasks. Be sure to check in on what people learn about how to be effective as coaches and as clients in their dialogues and use that knowledge to make needed adjustments.

Peer coaching can be effective in fighting loneliness through opt-in one-on-one dialogues where the work of creating stronger human connections can happen.

[Norian Caporale-Berkowitz](#) is pursuing a PhD in Counseling Psychology at the University of Texas–Austin, where his research on scalable and preventive mental health programs is supported by the university’s top fellowship. Norian leads workshops for teams at [Authentic Revolution](#), and you can find him on [LinkedIn](#).

[Stewart D. Friedman](#) is the Practice Professor of Management at the Wharton School. The former head of Ford Motor’s Leadership Development Center, he is the author of [Leading the Life You Want: Skills for Integrating Work and Life](#), [Baby Bust: New Choices for Men and Women in Work and Family](#), and [Total Leadership: Be a Better Leader, Have a Richer Life](#). For more, visit www.totalleadership.org, find him on Twitter [@StewFriedman](#), or on [LinkedIn](#).

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