



Charles Vogl's Work with Google During the Pandemic

Author and researcher Dr. Jessica Grossmeier gained rare permission from Google to discuss some of Charles' work with the firm during the Covid pandemic. Below is an excerpt from her recent book.



Case Example: Fostering a Culture of Connection at Work

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With more than 90,000 employees across the United States, Google is well recognized as an “employer of choice” due to its rich array of innovative employee benefits and perks as well as strong ratings on external workforce surveys. Like many organizations in the technology sector, Google is known for its workplace environment features with innovative sustainable architecture, embedded exposure to nature across its sprawling campus, provision of free or subsidized nutritious food choices, and a wide array of spaces that are conducive to employee collaboration. The onsite dry cleaning, fitness services, restaurants, fresh juice bars, and nap rooms make it convenient and tempting for employees to spend a majority of their waking hours at work.

When the pandemic forced employers to shift to remote working arrangements, most employees lost access to the onsite amenities and face-to-face collaborative working styles they were accustomed to. Many Silicon Valley organizations, including Google, were aware of national trends related to loneliness and isolation prior to the pandemic, and they

designed their workplace environments to support more employee connections and collaboration at work. Though Google had programs and initiatives aimed at building community among Googlers prior to the pandemic, Google began working with thought leader Charles Vogl in 2019 to incorporate the seven principles for belonging, which he details in his book *The Art of Community*, into Google's culture of health and performance. (Vogl 2016) According to Vogl, genuine community includes a deeper sense of care and concern for one another, a sense of belonging, and a foundation for sustained friendship.

As the pandemic lingered and work-from-home mandates were extended, Vogl was asked to translate the principles for building community and belonging into a digitally mediated format. He encouraged Google to begin experimenting with an idea he called the Campfire Principle. The Campfire Principle teaches that workplace gatherings intended to connect participants must be hosted as small, intimate experiences with enough time for deep conversations and relationship building. The resulting program became known as "Community Campfires," which were initially launched within a collaborative network of national thought leaders working with Google to address human thriving.

The format of the weekly Community Campfires started with hour-long digital gatherings that relied on widely available interactive video conferencing technology. Initial gatherings established guidelines and boundaries for interaction that promoted authentic relating, psychological safety, and personal connection. Vogl facilitated the weekly groups, ensuring boundaries and norms were established to encourage vulnerability and personal storytelling. He also created a consistent structure for the gatherings. Each session opened with a review of guidelines to ensure confidentiality and promote a safe space for sharing. Once invited members were gathered, a one-minute period of silence was observed to ground attendees in the practice of bringing their attention to the present moment. It also helped punctuate the transition between "gathering time" (the time at the start of the meeting when people are logging onto the meeting platform and greeting one another) and "gathered time" (the remainder of the meeting when all who are expected to attend have arrived and are ready to engage). After the moment of silence, a discussion prompt was introduced, which encouraged individuals to set aside their professional personas and bring

their fullest, most authentic selves into the discussion. This segued into 30- minute to 45- minute digital breakout groups, which were comprised of three to four individuals and optimized to represent diverse perspectives. These groups were peer-moderated, meaning each member of the group held shared responsibility for facilitation of the discussion. After the breakout groups, members were invited to reconvene as a larger group and share themes (but not individually identified information) from their breakout groups.

Lisa Olson, former program manager with EXOS at Google, was an instrumental part of the initial Community Campfire experiment and remembers first-time participants referring to their experience as “magic” because people felt comfortable enough to bring the reality of their circumstances into the group. The Community Campfires were offered at a time when people felt most alone, scared, and isolated. They welcomed the opportunity to talk to others about what they were experiencing. **Laughter and tears were shared among strangers in these Community Campfires and people were often surprised at how comfortable it felt to bring their authentic selves into these conversations.** As a facilitator of some of the pilot Community Campfires, Lisa attributes this “magic” to the intentionality that went into the invitations, the opening welcoming remarks for each session, the careful review of guidelines that created a virtual container that felt welcoming, safe, caring, and trusting enough to encourage authenticity and vulnerability amongst participants. (Lisa Olson, personal communication)

The Community Campfires were initially created as a short-term experiment but due to their popularity, they continued for more than a year. Community Campfire participants began to connect (primarily virtually) outside of the weekly gatherings, and word began to spread within Google about the impact they were having on creating richer connections and a community of caring. **Several original participants extemporaneously used the description “family” to describe the relationships they developed within the experimental program. Surveys of initial Campfire participants indicated 100 percent of them felt the gatherings were a valuable use of their time. One person added, “This was truly one of the best experiences I have had while working from home during this pandemic! I’ve been having a hard time meeting new people**

where I live, and these campfire meetings helped improve my mental health a lot and gave me a sense of belonging.”

Based on the success of the pilot, Google decided to train members of the initial experiment to lead several series of Community Campfires with a broader group of employees within Google. As Google shared in communications about the initial pilot experiment, **“In testing thus far, Community Campfire experiments have led to the formation of mutual concern, shared goals and emerging activities for people to participate in together, as colleagues and genuine friends.”**

Employees were asked to commit to attending a six-week series of weekly gatherings, which were offered at many different days of the week and times of day to accommodate multiple time zones and work schedules. Employee response to the pilot series was positive, and **more than 100 Google employees were eventually trained to facilitate Community Campfires within the broader organization.**

Evaluation is ongoing, but initial participant response confirms the effectiveness of the format for enriching connections and promoting more authentic and personal conversations. Individual testimonials indicate how the relationships formed as part of these Community Campfires have become an enduring support for many members, with some reporting they were “a lifeline I clung to” through the pandemic. **According to Google Health and Performance Innovation Partnerships Manager, Michelle Railton, “Community Campfires have the potential to provide a safe, scalable format for people to feel heard, supported and connected to each other with technology as their medium and enabler (rather than an inhibitor). On a personal level, I’ve found them to be a transformational and moving experience to be part of.** The time together helps me build stronger connections, uncover new knowledge from others’ wisdom and quite unexpectedly, experience healing. I feel safe and supported to bring my most vulnerable and authentic self.” (Michelle Railton, personal communication)

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