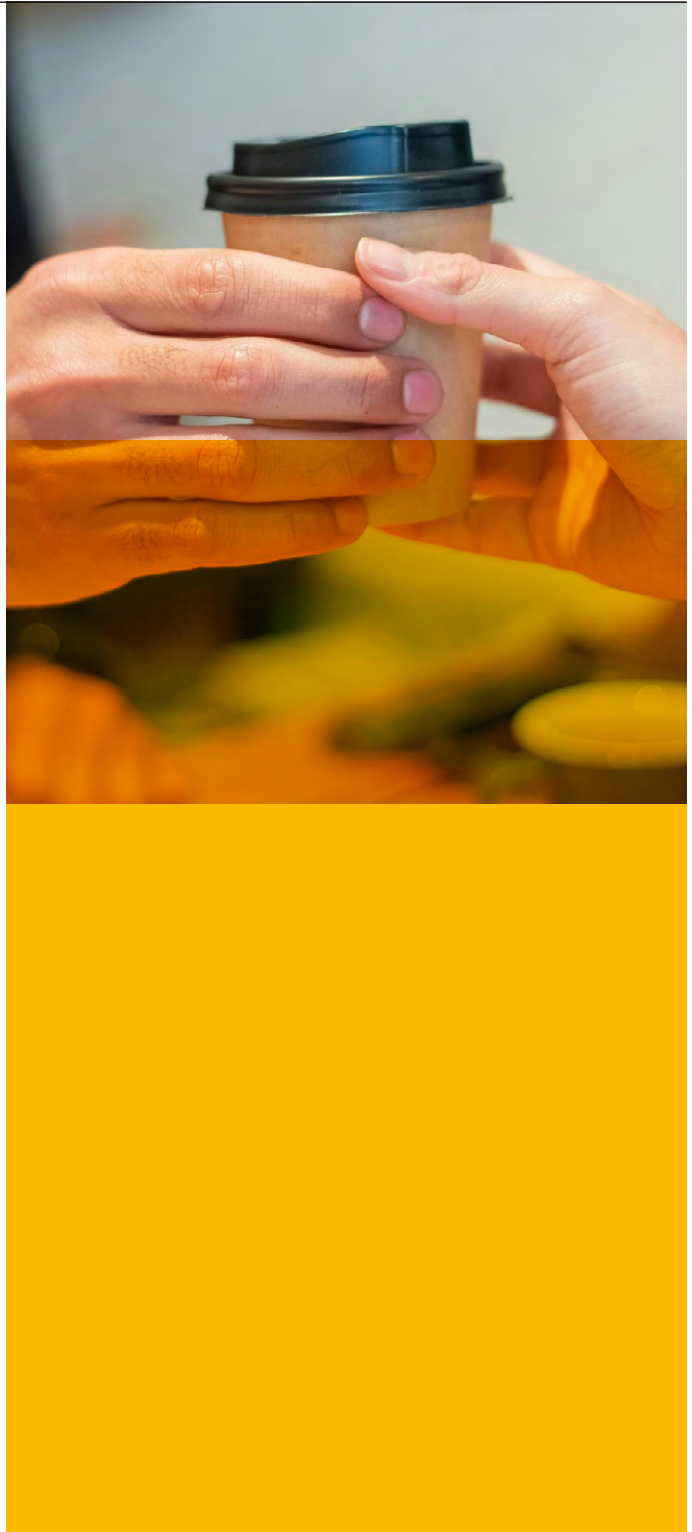

the g-spot

The deeper purpose of frontline teams: creating connection where it's needed most

By Gillian James

In his newsletter this week, Scott Galloway brings up the essential subject of loneliness. Of course, being Scott, he provocatively talks about the commercial opportunity for businesses such as OnlyFans. If that's what you're hoping this article is about, not today my friend, not today. But it did prompt me to explore the reality of loneliness, and the role leaders of customer-facing businesses have.

Loneliness is largely non-discriminatory. It affects young and old, rich and poor, introverts and extroverts. We often picture an older person living alone, but the reality is more complex. Younger generations are reporting record levels of loneliness, a trend worsened by Covid and amplified by social media. In many ways, our most connected generations are also our loneliest. The American social psychologist and author Jonathan Haidt wrote a book called 'The Anxious Generation'.



He cites research done by Pew research that showed that in 2015, one in four teenagers said they were online "almost constantly", by 2022 that number had nearly doubled to 46%.

The World Health Organization has compared chronic loneliness to smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. It contributes to premature death, poor mental health, and reduced productivity. In an article published in July this year, WHO cites that nearly one in six people globally report feeling lonely. It goes on to say that between 2014 and 2019, loneliness was associated with more than 871 000 deaths annually – equivalent to 100 deaths per hour. WHO reminds us that there is irrefutable evidence that social health – our ability to form and maintain meaningful human connections – is just as essential to our well-being as physical and mental health.

If we just look through our own more parochial lens, in the UK alone, the cost of loneliness runs into billions each year. Too often it is treated as a private struggle. In truth, it is a public and systemic issue.

Welcome to the glee club right?! It is heavy stuff, but here's the good news... whilst this is a significant and sobering issue, I do also think we are at least part of the solution.

Encounters in "other spaces"

For years, sociologists have talked about "third places" – a term made famous by Starbucks. Not work, not home but that "third place" that we spend time in – pubs, cafés, gyms and, less so now, churches. But this language risks narrowing the idea.

The real truth is that loneliness is shaped in all the "other spaces" outside home and work. A train platform. The corner shop. A bus. The cinema. The check-in queue at an airport.

Micro-connectors at work

This is why frontline staff matter so much. These are the places where we encounter strangers, neighbours and colleagues. They can be fleeting moments, but they carry disproportionate weight. A gateline assistant who makes eye contact and says good morning, a shop assistant who notices you rather than the barcode, the barista who hands you over your coffee whilst mouthing "have a great day" are giving "micro-acts" that either compound our isolation or ease it. These team members are acting as what we might call micro-connectors. Their gestures are often small and unplanned, but they can have a profound effect. For some customers, they may be the only moment of recognition in an entire day.

Technology has made everyday life faster and more convenient. Whilst this is all tantalisingly easy, after all, we often favour ordering on an app, self-service tills, scanning through barriers, yet every time a human interaction is replaced, an opportunity for connection is lost.

But evidence supports the fact that small moments really matter. Research in the Journal of Positive Psychology shows that even brief interactions with strangers reduce loneliness and improve wellbeing. A study in Hong Kong found that the friendliness of retail and hospitality staff measurably eased older customers' sense of isolation. In other words, the micro-connectors we often overlook are performing a vital social function.

Loneliness can cut both ways

The reality is that we might very well be surrounded by lonely colleagues as well. Many people know that Gallup's research on employee engagement includes the question: "Do you have a best friend at work?" It is one of the strongest predictors of whether employees are engaged and productive. (Gallup's most recent data indicates this factor is even more important than before the pandemic.) Having close connections at work not only improves performance, it also makes people less likely to leave. So, loneliness is not just a customer issue. It is a colleague issue too.

And here is the important thing: customer and colleague loneliness aren't two separate problems, but part of the same ecosystem. When team members are empowered to connect with customers, both sides benefit. When employees are supported to create genuine moments with customers, they tend to feel more engaged, more valued, and less lonely themselves. That reciprocity is what makes it powerful. It works both ways.

It is a virtuous circle. Customers feel less invisible, team members feel more purposeful, and organisations reap the benefits in loyalty and performance.

Our choices as leaders

Customer experience leaders have a choice. Are we creating services that leave people more connected, or less? Leaders of teams face the same choice inside their organisations. Are we creating workplaces where colleagues form bonds, or where they drift apart?

The business case for belonging

Loneliness is costly. It drives higher turnover, increases absenteeism, and lowers productivity. It adds pressure to health systems and weakens communities.

Conversely, organisations that create belonging see the benefits in loyalty, repeat visits, and employee retention. Research from EY shows that companies with strong emotional connections to customers outperform competitors' sales growth by 85%. In other words, the economics of connection are every bit as compelling as the ethics.

Closing thought

Psychologists talk a lot about loneliness as an epidemic of disconnection. But what struck me most in our work was how rarely loneliness announces itself. It hides in plain sight. It sits behind competence. It sits behind humour. It sits behind the colleague who is always fine.

Scott Galloway once said that modern life is full of "thin interactions" and that what people crave is depth. I think he is right. Front-line teams create depth every day without noticing. They create belonging in the places

where people least expect it. They offer a kind of quiet human anchoring that makes the world feel less sharp around the edges.

If anything in this paper has reminded you of someone you work with, someone you serve, or even something you recognise in yourself, then the piece has done its job. Belonging is not built by extraordinary moments. It is built by ordinary moments that someone cares enough to make matter.

Take action by

- Recognising the value of "other spaces" and designing moments that bring people together.
- Supporting the people who naturally act as connectors in your teams.
- Creating small nudges and rituals that make connection easier.
- Measuring more than speed or satisfaction — include whether people felt seen.
- Treating belonging as something you build for colleagues as well as customers.

That'll be all!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Gillian". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the start and a long, sweeping underline.