

# It's High Noon for Employee Engagement



*Tara Lilien, Chief Talent Officer, Peppercomm*

When the COVID-19 crisis hit and it became clear we'd need to vacate our New York, San Francisco and London offices, Peppercomm's senior management team quickly gathered for what would be our last in-person meeting.

We discussed how we could stay connected with everyone knowing they'd be leaving the office and heading to their various sheltering sites.

An idea was quickly born. We decided to meet virtually every workday at noon and spend 12 minutes connecting with one another via Teams. We christened our "new normal" staff meetings the 12@12. We figured it would be a short-term stopgap plan to carry us through what we thought would be a

two-week hiatus from the workplace.

Now, 18 weeks later, our 12@12s have become a precious part of our agency's culture. Our CEO commented that he has never felt more connected to our team, and our employees have asked that we continue these meetings when we return to the office.

Has the intent and design of the 12@12 evolved since those early days? Absolutely. What initially began as a way to touch base and share any urgent updates has now become a vehicle to reinforce many aspects of the employee experience during these 12 minutes each day. These include:

- *Shining the spotlight on employees* – We created “PepSpotlight” to encourage each employee to answer a series of questions ranging from what five people would they most like to be sheltering with to what they've been binge-watching or reading and where their first vacation destination will be when the all clear is finally given. The intent was to learn more about our colleagues and what makes them tick.
- *Sharing updates on our business* – Transparency and honesty have been critical during this period. We've shown our team our financials, shared business losses and wins, discussed reboarding and shared how we could collectively cover for colleagues as some weathered COVID-19 during this time. This authenticity led 100% of our employees to say they had confidence in our response to the pandemic and our business decisions, according to a recent pulse survey we conducted.
- *Launching new, of-the-moment, employee programs* – Our new “Gone Fishing” benefit was born and launched in 12 minutes one Monday during the pandemic. We now set aside 90 minutes each week for employees to focus on their personal self. There are zero questions asked, and we created a new billing code to input time.
- *Driving health and wellness* – We've had gratitude sessions with each of us sharing what we are most

grateful for during this period. One employee told me after feeling so isolated, this was exactly what she needed. We also offer “Stay Well with Kel” sessions – 12 minutes of virtual exercises led by our IT director who is also a krav maga instructor!

- *Giving accolades* – Shoutouts were formerly reserved for email or our Teams channel. Now we’ve brought them offline and into our 12@12 meetings to highlight and celebrate our people going above and beyond each week. Success breeds success, and people seem to really enjoy hearing about each other’s weekly wins.
- *Bringing the outside in* – We’ve offered our team the opportunity to hear from outside speakers addressing best practices for new business networking during the pandemic, media relations challenges in the political space. We’re also holding Q&A sessions with our clients to learn more about what business challenges have been keeping them up at night during the pandemic.

Overall, we’ve kept an agile approach to the 12@12s as the weeks of remote work have turned into months. We’ve cancelled them on Summer Fridays so we don’t have too many employees miss any announcements or content. In other instances, we’ve extended the 12@12s to an hour to offer training sessions to employees. We’ve also held “out to lunch” days as a break from the 12@12s to virtually meet for lunch (or breakfast or happy hour depending on an employee’s location) with a senior executive or peers. There’s no formal agenda, and Peppercomm pays for each person’s lunch that day.

Importantly, the 12@12 is not solely an HR initiative or a CEO dictate; it’s something each of us at Peppercomm owns. We’ve never made it mandatory, yet we almost always get perfect attendance. We’ve had employees step forward to lead a 12@12 who wouldn’t have otherwise been a “host” of a meeting with the entire staff. We cheered and clapped when one of our leaders popped up on video after a two-week battle with

COVID-19. We've learned a lot about each other and found common interests.

It has also been a great motivator to get dressed every day (which is often cited as a best practice to ensure remote work success) and be ready to "see" each other for our daily connect!

In one of our employee pulse survey, we were pleased to find that 95% of our staff have felt engaged during the pandemic. Based on what I've learned the past four-plus months, I encourage every senior HR and communications professional to *overcommunicate* with employees during these difficult times. Unfortunately, this is not happening as often as it should. A recent study we conducted with the Institute for Public Relations ([www.instituteforpr.org](http://www.instituteforpr.org)) revealed that 27% of HR and internal comms leaders were not using any metrics or monitoring tools and, believe it or not, only 28% had even surveyed their employees.

Alternatively, we're convinced that our special 12 minutes a day have made the past 18-plus weeks easier for everyone in our organization.



**About the Author:** *Tara leads all things people for Peppercomm, with responsibility for talent management, development, engagement and acquisition for the agency. This includes creating an employee experience that addresses the needs of both our business and team members with the goal of being a sought-after place to work where people can build and grow their careers. Tara is also a member of the executive team, which sets the overall business strategy at the agency.*

*Prior to Peppercomm, Tara was the U.S. Human Resources lead at Cohn & Wolfe, a WPP agency. There, she drove talent initiatives for the agency across five offices and successfully attracted strong talent in the industry to the firm. Earlier in her career, she spent 15 years at MSLGROUP, a Publicis agency, working across the North America region. Tara's focus there was to consistently drive HR and business through workforce planning, HR strategy development, employee policy and programs, mobility, diversity and inclusion and employee relations. Tara began her career as an employee programs specialist at Conde Nast.*

*Tara is proud to be a born and bred New Yorker (now residing in New Jersey) and a graduate of American University in Washington, DC where she received a BA in Public Relations.*