According to our study of more than 600 people, distance in the workplace does more harm than good. The research shows that 13 out of 14 common workplace relationship problems occur far more frequently within “virtual teams” (teams with members scattered across various geographies) than within teams located in the same building. In addition, problems with remote colleagues are significantly more difficult to solve and last longer than with on-site colleagues.

What’s worse, the most common means of coping with the effects of distance are not only destructive to working relationships, they are also destructive to overall productivity. When people face challenges with a colleague who works in a different location, they either resort to silence or other passive coping strategies, or they become “verbally violent” or attacking toward their colleague. When resorting to silence, common methods include screening phone calls from remote colleagues, not returning their calls and e-mails, leaving them out of the loop on important decisions, or avoiding working with them altogether.

The research shows that the solution isn’t co-location—it’s communication. The key is for leaders of virtual teams to invest in the skills required to raise emotionally and politically risky issues with virtual teammates in a candid but respectful way.

An innovator in corporate training and leadership development, VitalSmarts combines three decades of original research with 50 years of the best social science thinking to help leaders and organizations change human behavior and achieve new levels of performance. VitalSmarts has identified four high-leverage skill sets that, when used in combination, create healthy corporate cultures. These skills are taught in the Company’s award-winning training programs and New York Times bestselling books of the same titles: Crucial Conversations, Crucial Accountability, Influencer, and Change Anything. VitalSmarts has consulted with more than 300 of the Fortune 500 companies and trained more than one million people worldwide. www.vitalsmarts.com