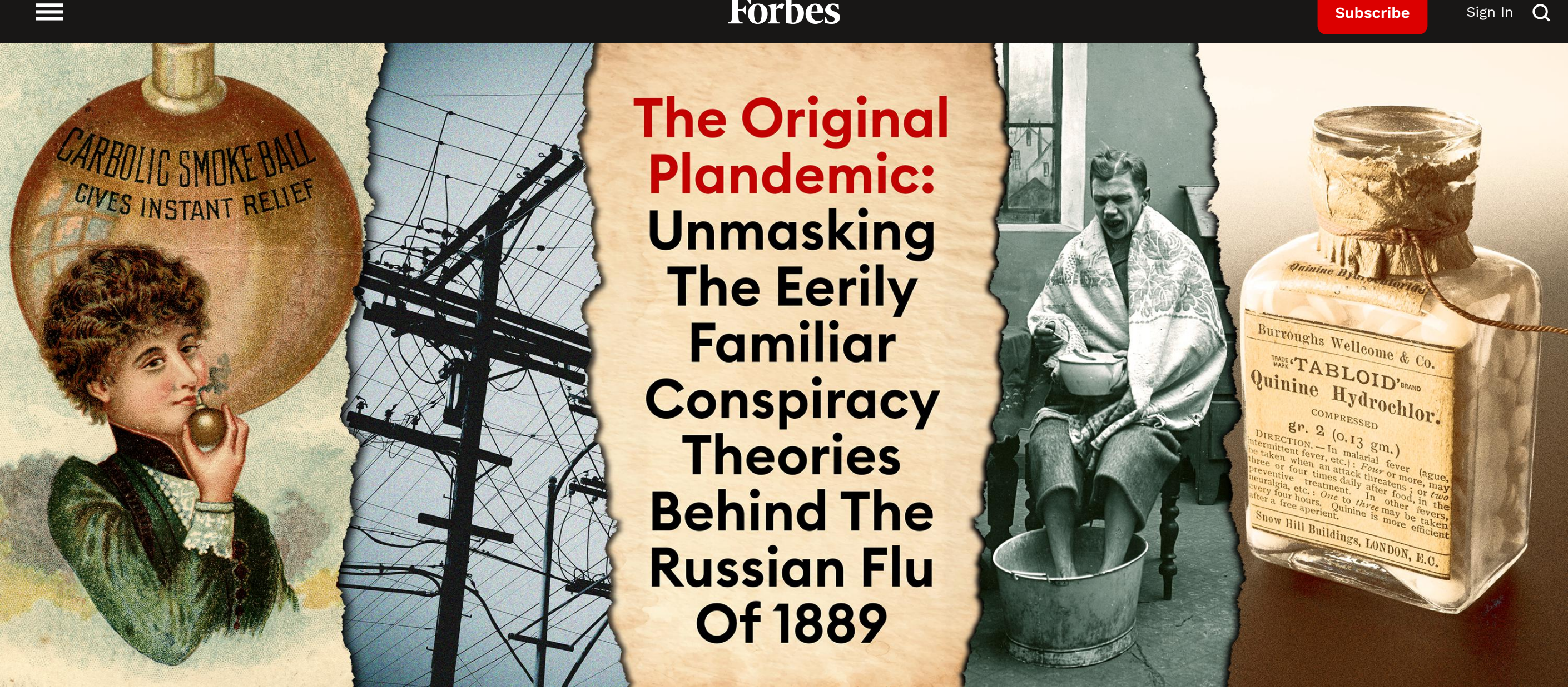


The Original Plandemic: Unmasking The Eerily Familiar Conspiracy Theories Behind The Russian Flu Of 1889

GETTY IMAGES

Alex Knapp Forbes Staff
Science
I write about the future of science, technology, and culture.

Covid-19 truthers believe that 5G technology is dialing up the disease. More than a century ago, telegraph poles and other mysterious causes were blamed for influenza. And each gave rise to dubious cures.

As the Covid-19 pandemic swept the globe in early 2020, a conspiracy theory about the disease went viral on social media: The genesis of the illness, proponents claim, was not the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2. Instead, this pandemic was actually caused by the introduction of 5G broadband, and radiation from cell towers equipped with the technology is the real culprit.

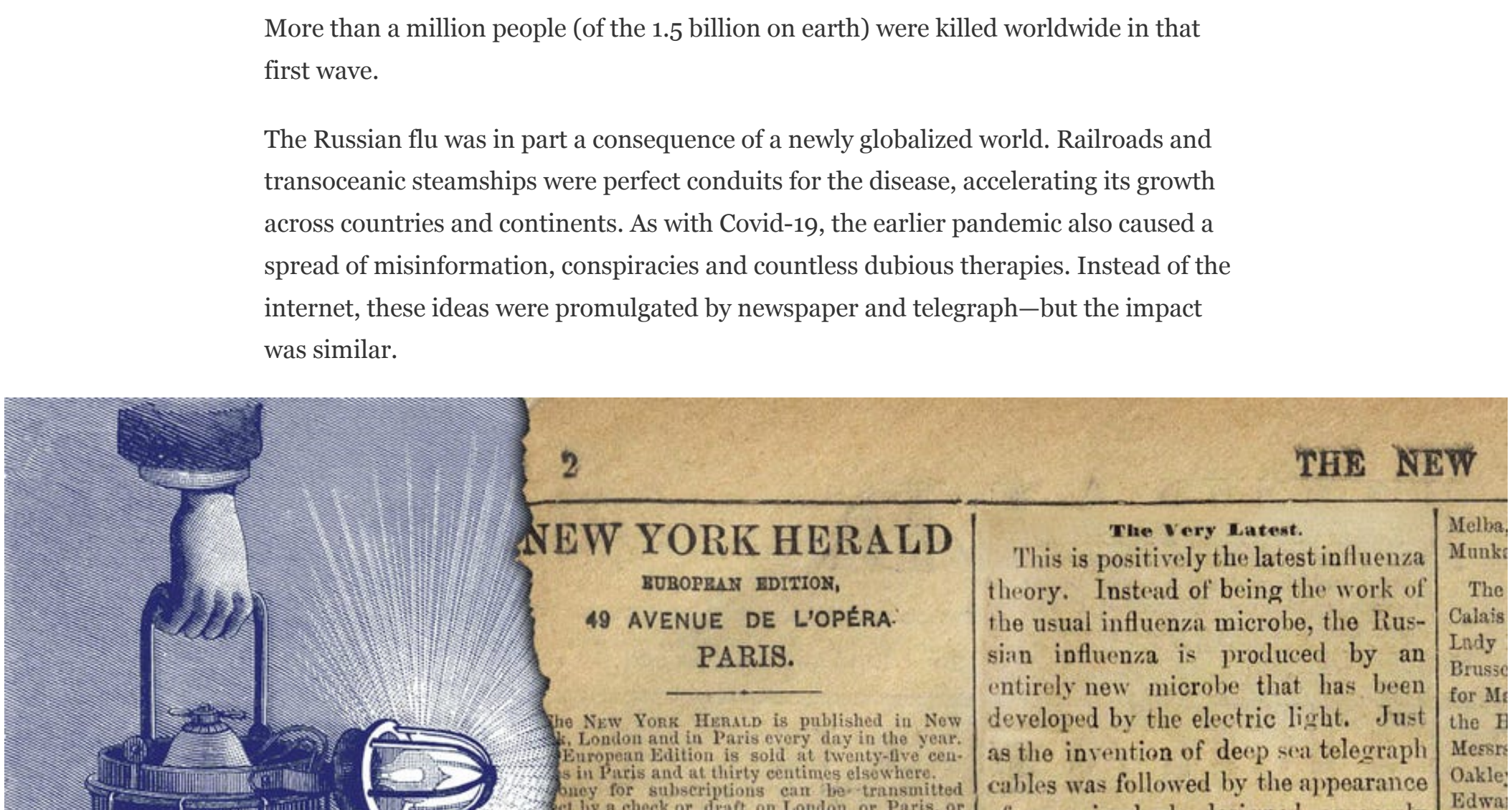
It doesn't take Dr. Fauci to know that conspiracy theories have always been a predictable symptom of pandemics. More than a century ago, the truthers of the day tried to blame a deadly influenza outbreak on a similar technological innovation.

On January 31, 1890, the European edition of the *New York Herald* ran an item suggesting that the electric light was somehow responsible for a global influenza outbreak. After all, "the disease has raged chiefly in towns where the electric light is in common use," the article noted, and went on to note that the disease "has everywhere attacked telegraph employees."

ADVERTISEMENT
IQ test - What is your IQ?
Take this online IQ test to discover your IQ score
www.test-iq.org
Open

The illness in question was the first modern influenza pandemic, known as the Russian flu or "La Grippe." The disease likely emerged somewhere in the Russian Empire in 1889 and quickly spread around the world in successive waves. It took only four months to hit every part of the globe, with the United States seeing its peak in January 1890. More than a million people (of the 1.5 billion on earth) were killed worldwide in that first wave.

The Russian flu was in part a consequence of a newly globalized world. Railroads and transoceanic steamships were perfect conduits for the disease, accelerating its spread across countries and continents. As with Covid-19, the earlier pandemic also caused a spread of misinformation, conspiracies and countless dubious therapies. Instead of the internet, these ideas were promulgated by newspaper and telegraph—but the impact was similar.



The Very Latest.

This is positively the latest influenza theory. Instead of being the work of the usual influenza microbe, the Russian influenza is produced by an entirely new microbe that has been developed by the electric light. Just as the invention of deep sea telegraph cables was followed by the appearance of an animalcule designed expressly to feed on cables, so the invention of the electric light has been followed by the appearance of a microbe that employs its spare time in producing Russian influenza. The disease has raged chiefly in towns where the electric light is in common use, and has penetrated slowly and reluctantly into towns where the electric lamps are unknown. The close connection of the microbe with electricity is moreover shown by the fact that it has everywhere attacked telegraph employees. Perhaps the inventor of this

LIGHT NEWS: A newspaper account from 1890 claimed that electric light was to blame for the Russian flu.

"People have an epistemic need to know the truth and they also have an existential need to feel safe," says Dr. Karen Douglas, a researcher who studies the psychology of conspiracy theories. "In times of crisis, these needs are unmet so conspiracy theories can seem appealing."

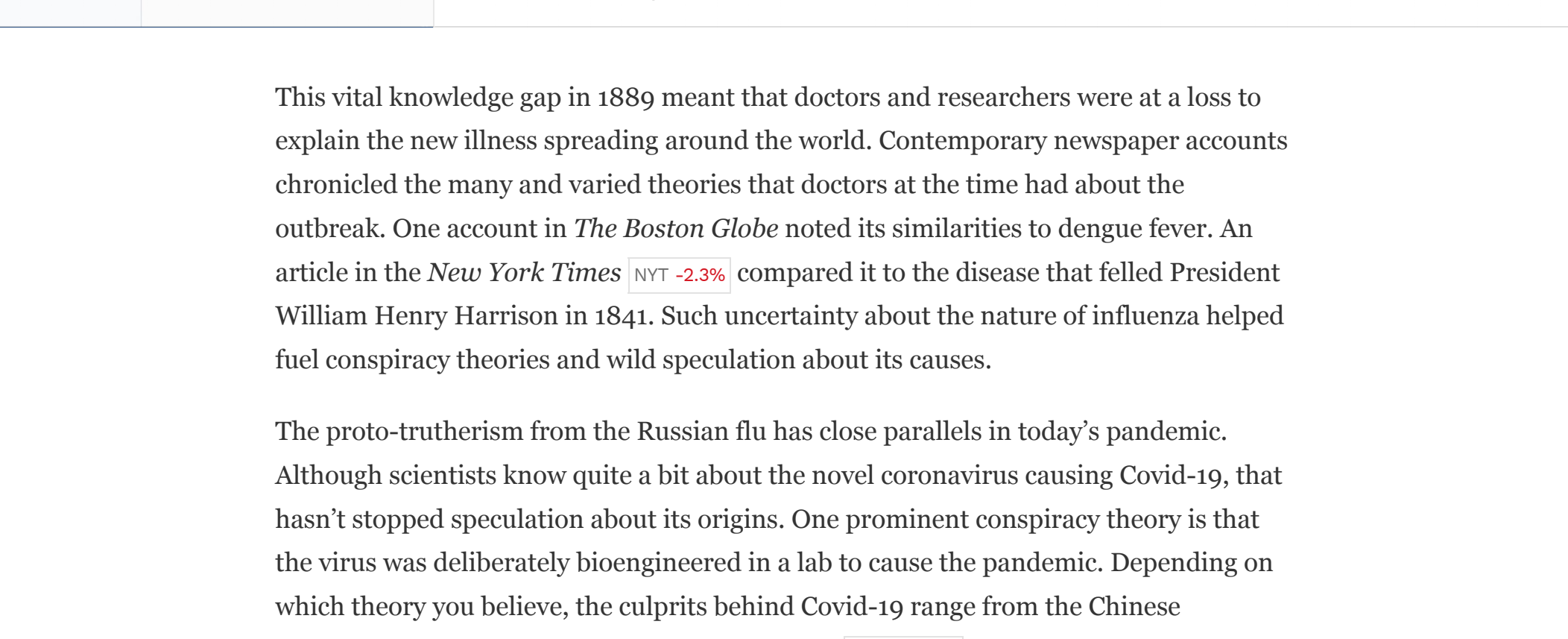
When reports of the Russian flu first emerged, medical science was in the middle of a major transition. The early 19th century was dominated by what's known as "miasma theory"—the idea that diseases spread through the inhalation of "bad air" from rotting matter. By the mid-19th century, though, the germ theory of disease— what we now understand as the idea that illness is caused by microbes—became increasingly popular, though miasma proponents persisted even into the early 20th century.

Even with the advances in medicine by 1889, the causes of the Russian flu pandemic were still unknown. While scientists such as Edward Jenner and Louis Pasteur had already developed vaccines to protect against and prevent diseases, the discovery of the first virus was still three years away. And it wasn't until the early 1900s that viruses capable of infecting humans would be discovered. That the Russian flu and the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 were caused by influenza viruses wouldn't be definitively determined until 1933.

ADVERTISEMENT
IQ test - What is your IQ?
Take this online IQ test to discover your IQ score
www.test-iq.org
Open

This vital knowledge gap in 1889 meant that doctors and researchers were at a loss to explain the new illness spreading around the world. Contemporary newspaper accounts chronicled the many and varied theories that doctors at the time had about the outbreak. One account in *The Boston Globe* noted its similarities to dengue fever. An article in the *New York Times* NYT -2.3% compared it to the disease that felled President William Henry Harrison in 1841. Such uncertainty about the nature of influenza helped fuel conspiracy theories and wild speculation about its causes.

The proto-trutherism from the Russian flu has close parallels in today's pandemic. Although scientists know quite a bit about the novel coronavirus causing Covid-19, that hasn't stopped speculation about its origins. One prominent conspiracy theory is that the virus was deliberately bioengineered in a lab to cause the pandemic. Depending on which theory you believe, the culprits behind Covid-19 range from the Chinese government to the U.S. government to Microsoft MSFT -0.6% cofounder Bill Gates. The coronavirus behind this pandemic almost certainly naturally evolved—there is already considerable genetic evidence pointing to it—but that doesn't halt the rampant speculation.



CATARRH
CURED
By a New Method.
Two Months' Medicine
FREE
Sent to any part of the country.
Illustrated explanation Free.
BRONCHIAL
INHALER
Eccles Medical Co.,
181a Tremont St.,
Boston, . . . Mass.
WONDER CURE OF THE 19TH CENTURY
IMPROVED BATTERY
ONLY KNOWN CURE FOR CATARRH
STOPPER
COMPOUND
PATENT BATTERY
CURES
CATARRH
RESTORES
EYESIGHT
PRICE $10.00
U.S. REGISTERED LABEL "GENUINE" MUST ACCOMPANY EACH BATTERY.
86 5TH AVENUE NEW YORK U.S.A.
SOLE PROPRIETORS AND MANUFACTURERS.

NASAL MANEUVERS: Ads from 1890 promoted "cures" to remove excess catarrh (or mucus). GETTY IMAGES

"This is a classic example of a phenomenon in conspiracy theory research that people perceive patterns that are impossible, or at best very unlikely," says Dr. Douglas. "People essentially 'join the dots' when connections shouldn't be made. When there is so much information going around, and pieces of information often contradict each other, people are more likely to see these illusory patterns."

While there weren't any whispers about genetic engineering in the 1890s (after all, DNA itself wouldn't be discovered for nearly 70 years), that didn't stop more fantastical theories about the origin of the Russian flu from infecting the public. In addition to the idea that telegraph poles or electricity might be responsible for the spread of the disease, Dr. William Gentry of Chicago caught the attention of newspapers by claiming he had isolated the microbes that caused the pandemic.

The source of these microbes, Dr. Gentry claimed, was stardust passing through the Earth's atmosphere at regular 16- to 17-year intervals. Other physicians soberly rejected Dr. Gentry's idea—preferring instead to consider the role of volcanic dust, bird migrations or other equally misguided causes.

ADVERTISEMENT
L'oreiller ergonomique Quiesco
Un oreiller ergonomique de la plus haute qualité
Quiesco
Ouvrir

This lack of understanding about the new deadly strain of flu left doctors perplexed as to the best way to treat it. An 1889 article in *The Lancet* conceded that "our want of complete knowledge of the nature of the disease renders it difficult to suggest measures of prophylaxis other than the uniform observance of general hygienic rules." (That's another sobering parallel to today's pandemic—as of now, the only approved therapy for Covid-19 is remdesivir, which has been granted an emergency use authorization by the FDA thanks to clinical trial findings showing it can reduce hospital stays.)

In the absence of science-based treatments for the Russian flu, many dubious therapies flourished—taking advantage of people scared of a disease for which no known treatment existed. This, too, has parallels in today's pandemic. The FDA has sent multiple warnings out to a variety of companies pushing specious cures, ranging from herbal teas to colloidal silver solutions to ingesting detergent.

Covid-89

Did a coronavirus cause the Russian flu pandemic of the 19th century?

More than a century after the Russian flu of 1889, there are still multiple theories about its origin. During a similar global pandemic in 1957, evidence suggested that they were both the result of an H2N2 flu. But a 1999 study concluded that the Russian flu may have begun with an H3N8 strain of influenza, a virus commonly found in ducks and horses that can infect humans.

And there is another intriguing possibility. In 2005, when researchers published the genetic sequence of OC43—a coronavirus associated with the common cold—they noted that it likely crossed over from cows to humans around 1889 and speculated that it may have been the genesis of the Russian flu. More research is needed, but as epidemiologists continue to investigate, it's possible that history may remember Covid-19 as the second coronavirus pandemic.

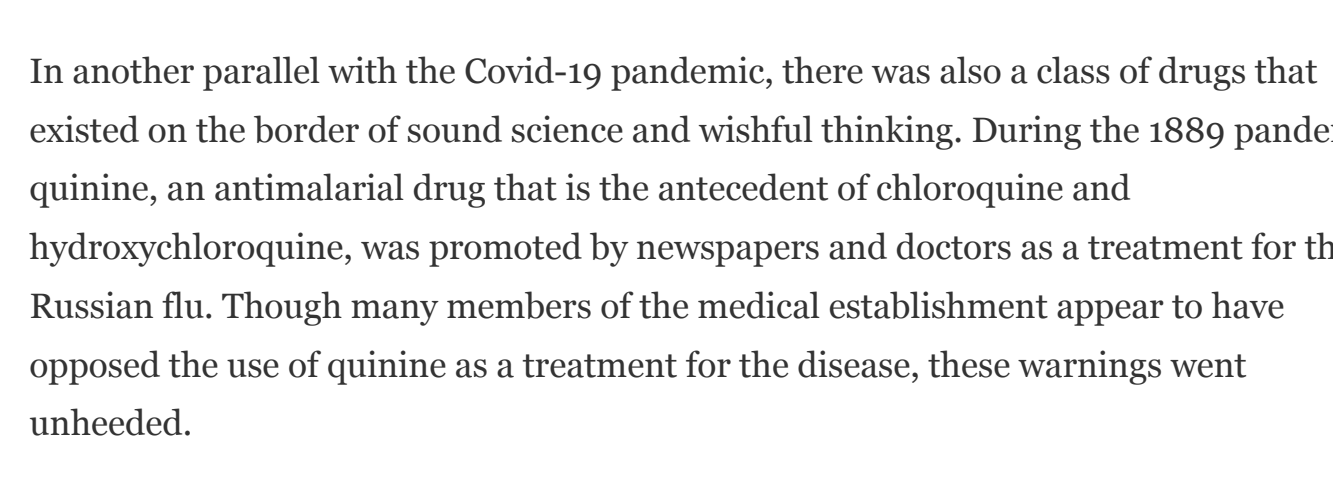
Newspaper advertisements from the 19th century similarly tout a number of "cures" for the Russian flu. Castor oil was a treatment pushed by at least one newspaper, and other protocols included a bronchial inhaler and an electric battery (which promised to improve eyesight, to boot.) Even doctors promoted the idea that drinking brandy and eating oysters was the key to staving off infection.

The most famous remedy for the Russian Flu, however, was the carbolic smoke ball. These were manufactured in London and widely advertised. The balls released a "smoke" of finely ground phenol powder (an ingredient commonly used in soaps at the time) that would be inhaled through the nostrils. The company that manufactured this treatment promised that it would prevent customers from catching the Russian flu. And if the product failed, the company promised to recoup its customers £100— or about $13,000 today. In December 1891, Mrs. Elizabeth Carlill purchased one of those products and used it on multiple occasions. Then she succumbed to the epidemic.

ADVERTISEMENT
L'oreiller ergonomique Quiesco
Un oreiller ergonomique de la plus haute qualité
Quiesco
Ouvrir

Because the carbolic smoke balls failed to work, Carlill and her husband filed a claim with the Carbolic Smoke Ball Company, but it was ignored. In 1892, the couple took their case to court. In the case of *Carlill v. Carbolic Smoke Ball Company*, the court found that that Mrs. Carlill was entitled to the money and that the Carbolic Smoke Ball Company was in breach of contract for failing to pay her upon submitting the claim. The ruling was a vindication for Mrs. Carlill and the case itself is still cited as precedent throughout common law jurisdictions, including the United States, and is frequently taught in law school classes to this day.

In another parallel with the Covid-19 pandemic, there was also a class of drugs that existed on the border of sound science and wishful thinking. During the 1889 pandemic, quinine, an antimalarial drug that is the antecedent of chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, was promoted by newspapers and doctors as a treatment for the Russian flu. Though many members of the medical establishment appear to have opposed the use of quinine as a treatment for the disease, these warnings went unheeded.



In December 1889, a Boston newspaper chronicled people taking quinine to combat the disease. That same month, an investigative article in the *Kansas City Star* bemoaned price gouging for quinine pills and noted that demand for them was keeping medicine out of the hands of people suffering from malaria. This has its own parallel today, where there have been multiple reports that excess demand of hydroxychloroquine may cause harm for those suffering from rheumatoid arthritis, for which that medication is often prescribed as a treatment.

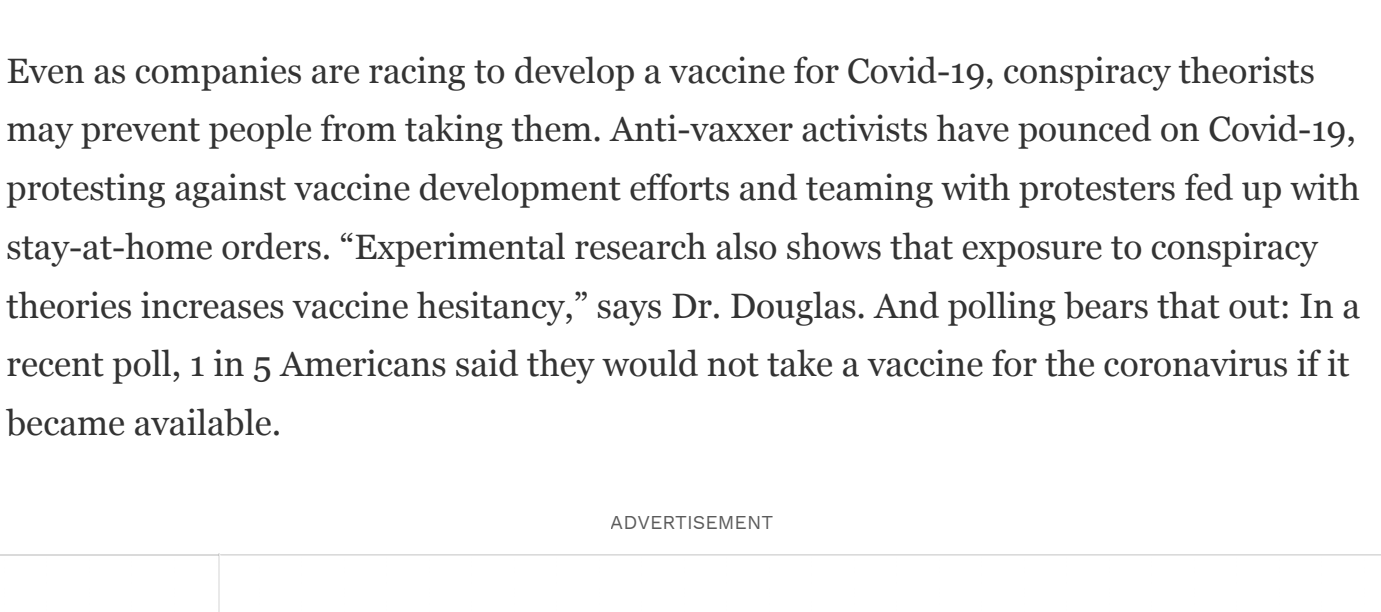
While studies are still being conducted about the efficacy of these Covid-19 treatments, there is little doubt that these drugs can be highly toxic and several clinical studies bear this out. In one tragic case of desperation, a man in Phoenix died (and his wife was hospitalized) after ingesting a chloroquine derivative intended for use as a fish tank cleaner to prevent the illness.

ADVERTISEMENT

That tragedy also has an unfortunate parallel in the Russian flu. Newspapers in January 1891 reported at least two instances in which families suffering from the Russian flu mistakenly took the poison strychnine, thinking they were ingesting quinine. Several of them died as a consequence.

An unhealthy dose of misinformation, conspiracy theories and the embrace of dubious treatments is quite common during epidemics and pandemics, says Dr. Douglas, who adds that the psychology around them is intertwined. "Research suggests that people who believe in conspiracy theories are more likely to turn to alternative remedies and distrust mainstream medicine."

More alarming, the spread of misinformation and the lack of trust in scientific evidence has the potential to cause real harm. Turning to untested treatments can lead people away from getting the care they need, exposing them to greater risk. And while some alternatives, such as drinking herbal teas, are relatively harmless, others are not. Colloidal silver, for example, which the FDA has warned against, can cause permanent skin discoloration and make it difficult for your body to absorb medicines, including antibiotics.



Six Newly Discovered Viruses May Explain Cold
BREAKING NEWS
229E
The Secret History Of The First Coronavirus
NEW, RUGGED COLD GERMS DISCOVERED
They Resemble Those That Give Bronchitis To The Birds
NIH Group Isolates 8 Cold Viruses

Occasionally, the spread of conspiracy theories can cause actual harm as well. In the United Kingdom, where the idea that 5G causes Covid-19 has taken a firm hold in a significant segment of the population, there have been dozens of attacks on telecom towers. While no one has actually been killed yet, it's not for lack of trying—the UK conspiracy theorists are hiding razor blades in anti-5G posters on telephone poles and threatening harm to people who work on those cell towers.

Even as companies are racing to develop a vaccine for Covid-19, conspiracy theorists may prevent people from taking them. Anti-vaxxer activists have pounced on Covid-19, protesting against vaccine development efforts and teaming with protesters fed up with stay-at-home orders. "Experimental research also shows that exposure to conspiracy theories increases vaccine hesitancy," says Dr. Douglas. And polling bears that out: In a recent poll, 1 in 5 Americans said they would not take a vaccine for the coronavirus if it became available.

ADVERTISEMENT
L'oreiller ergonomique Quiesco
Un oreiller ergonomique de la plus haute qualité
Quiesco
Ouvrir

Perhaps the most insidious conspiracy theory about Covid-19 is one that seems more innocuous—the simple downplaying of the harms of the disease. You don't have to go deep into Facebook or Twitter to find speculation that Covid-19 fears are overblown. Similarly, there are numerous opinion pieces and TV segments devoted to the idea that the economic damage from stay-at-home orders causes more harm than the disease itself.

"This is very common because it allows people to pretend that nothing is wrong and they can get on with their lives," Dr. Douglas says. "This is an example of motivated reasoning. People believe what they want to believe."

Once again, there is a historic precedent in the Russian flu pandemic. In an article about the illness in a December edition of *The New York Times*, it was reported that while the disease was spreading, it was mostly harmless. "There is nothing fatal about the universal cold," wrote the author.

By time the epidemic subsided a few months later, the Russian flu had claimed the lives of more than 2,500 New Yorkers, making it the hardest hit city in the United States.

Follow me on Twitter or LinkedIn. Check out my website. Send me a secure tip.

Alex Knapp

I'm a senior editor at Forbes covering healthcare, science, and cutting edge technology.

Print
Reprints & Permissions

ADVERTISEMENT
Your team's imagination, now open for business.
MURAL

Jan 12, 2022, 11:58am EST | 6528 views

6 Ways To Make Your Meetings Count

MURAL Contributor Brand Contributor
MURAL BRANDVOICE | Paid Program
Innovation

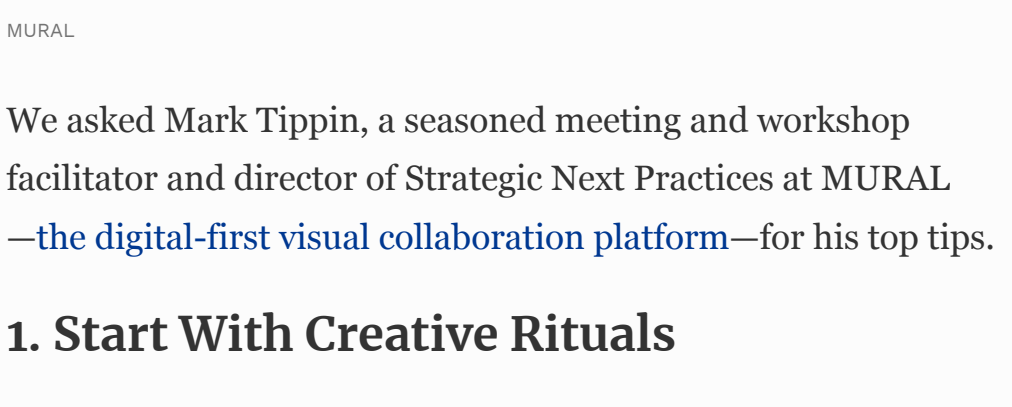
ADVERTISEMENT
More juice
Less squeeze
Give your team the power to produce better ideas more easily.
MURAL

Remote, hybrid or in-office, our calendars remain crammed with meetings. Here's how to make yours count.

No matter where your team goes to work, chances are you're still spending hours of your week in meetings.

For many in the modern workforce, "meet" is a four-letter word.

It doesn't have to be this way. Luckily, it's never been easier to host engaging, inclusive and collaboratively productive meetings —and conduct them entirely digitally. If you know how.



MURAL

We asked Mark Tippin, a seasoned meeting and workshop facilitator and director of Strategic Next Practices at MURAL —the digital-first visual collaboration platform—for his top tips.

1. Start With Creative Rituals

Two years ago, being remote meant staring at each other's faces (and living rooms) all day. But collaboration software has unlocked new ways for coworkers to engage with each other.

The best meetings now use collaboration spaces (like MURAL's visual collaboration space, for example) to stoke creativity and connection, and workers are adapting fast. "I always find that I'm blown away with the creativity and engagement generated when people are given permission and feel safe," says Tippin.

With MURAL, teams can adopt visual "themes" for their meetings (like, say, the Bahamas or autumn) and devise ice-breaker activities inspired by those themes (wherein everyone picks the tiki cocktail that matches their personality, maybe, or lists their personal goals on a leaf). These brief activities bring a game-like quality to meetings that keeps everyone invested. They also naturally invite participation so that everyone co-creates together. These simple and quick experiences open the door to discussion, avoiding the natural tendency to "check out" and listen passively.

ADVERTISEMENT
Bread + butter
without
the
churn
Foster an environment that's more fun and more productive.
MURAL

Above, a snapshot from a recent warm-up activity Mark Tippin led with a team. The theme this activity sets up is a Bahamas beachfront. This short 5-minute activity helped the team connect before getting into the work of the meeting. MURAL

"There are all these ways to engage the emotions and even have fun at work. Importantly, it's all for the purpose of building the team—all by creating small rituals that add meaning to the work you do together," explains Tippin.

2. Give It Structure

With hybrid collaboration, employees might be working in different time zones on opposite schedules, so it's important to clarify the purpose of each meeting to avoid blocking too much time on anyone's calendar.

Send information you plan to share in advance so team members can review it asynchronously. (Mark considers pre-work a best practice.) Then ask participants to come prepared with feedback and ideas.

In one-on-one meetings, Tippin likes to use a framework called "Rose, Thorn, Bud" to drive conversation. "What are some roses since our last meeting? That is, what are some things you feel really good about?" he prompts his colleagues. Everyone uses digital stickies on a mural, adding things to share and discuss. The activity continues with Tippin asking, "What are some thorns, some areas that didn't go well? And what are some buds—something that's interesting or some things you want to work on?"

Observations // Rose, Thorn, Bud
Themes //
Jason Moll
Celeste Olivieri
Zack Shubkagel
Tabby McDaniel
Christen Joy
Janet Blake

Above, an accelerated glimpse of a team conducting a Rose, Thorn, Bud exercise within a mural. MURAL

A framework like this can give team members the guidance they need to maximize their contribution—while also keeping meetings productive and efficient.

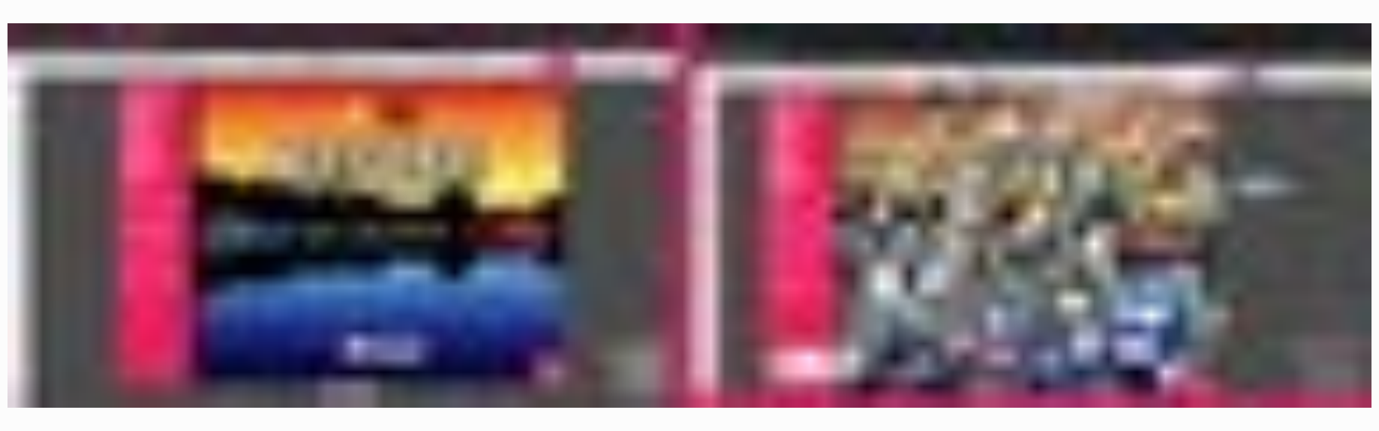
3. Forget The "All-Hands" As You Know It

"The inevitability of an expensive, monolithic meeting that the whole team flies in for, where the conversation is preordained, is over," reports Tippin. In its place: A series of sequential conversations that allow the team to break into smaller cohorts, pivot (when necessary), think deeper and come back with richer insights.

This is actually a much more inclusive way of working, according to Tippin. "Every meeting becomes an opportunity to have a smaller portion of the discussion with time to invite more voices, then allow some time in between," he explains. "The slower, deeper thinkers like myself are able to take in information and have time to think about it and respond in different ways."

Of course, all-hands meetings can be extremely useful for sharing information that everyone needs to know, building culture and more. That's why Tippin and the team at MURAL take time to turn virtual all-hands meetings into unique experiences that even feature warm-up activities built to engage hundreds of MURAL employees at the same time.

Tippin led one of these warm-up activities at a recent all-hands. Using a mural, he invited a couple hundred colleagues to share a photo of what they did at a company-wide "rest and relaxation day," a bonus holiday MURAL has been experimenting with on a quarterly basis. In a matter of minutes, a beautiful collage emerged, one made from every participants' simultaneous contributions.



Before and after the Rest & Relaxation warm-up. This striking difference happened in the course of 3-4 minutes as it was built by a couple hundred MURAL employees! MURAL

Best of all, virtual all-hands meetings mean employees don't have to fly in. More people are included, no matter where they work.

4. Use A Visual Template

Visual tools can help teams transform a brainstorm into a plan of action. "Marry the generation of ideas with a process of discussing and evaluating which ones you should advance," says Tippin.

MURAL has built-in templates from the LUMA Institute to help analyze and prioritize next steps. Tippin likes the Importance/Difficulty Matrix, which allows workers to plot action items visually according to relative importance and difficulty, to help make decisions and allocate resources.

The Importance/Difficulty Matrix is a method from the LUMA Institute that has been made virtual, available to use by teams from anywhere with a free MURAL template. MURAL

Involving everyone in these analytical processes helps create greater engagement, alignment and investment, he says.

5. Learn To Listen

When your team lacks a culture of active listening, there's a high potential for miscommunication. "This is very costly from a productivity standpoint," says Tippin. He suggests using meetings as "a lab where people get to experiment with listening."

Try exercises like one in which teams break into pairs to discuss something benign, like what they ate for lunch—but each person's response must start with the last letter of the last word said by their partner. This primes participants to fully listen before formulating a response—a skill they can then bring to other key conversations, helping create alignment and ensure that everyone feels heard.

"I think we're just starting to scratch the surface of using these types of small momentary mental exercises with a sense of intention and purpose, and pairing them with the discussion we're going to have next," says Tippin.

6. Be Vulnerable

Fostering a sense of psychological safety among team members is key to creating an environment where people feel free to ask questions and give honest feedback—teamwork takes trust. And this starts with managers who are brave enough to lead with vulnerability.

Tippin says trust-building exercises can include asking everyone to share (and then also sharing yourself) embarrassing moments from high school or even how a recent failed team deliverable made you feel.

"If you can slowly build up to a point where someone can express truly how they're feeling ... I am always surprised at how immediately that is met with love and care and support and acknowledgement," says Tippin. "And that is how teams actually become inseparable. They become more trusting of the space and offer more of themselves."

Learn more about how MURAL can level up your meetings.

MURAL Contributor

Cookies on Forbes