

commentary: it's teatime

"There is no problem so great or grave that cannot be much diminished by a nice cup of tea." Bernard-Paul Heroux

Drinking tea makes you more effective at work. Any type of liquid caffeine works well, but the effect is best when cookies are added. This isn't the result of the latest medical study—just an observation we have made while working in dozens of departments and laboratories around the world. We know it isn't really the caffeine that helps us—it's the psychology of switching mental gears while out of our offices.

When a colleague asks us if we want to take a break, we usually feel a strong gut response that says, "I don't have time right now," but making the time always ends up being worthwhile. We all feel the pressure of deadlines pulling on us, but stepping out for tea lets our minds rest and helps us re-engage with our work after a brief respite.

Although we won't get too picky about our drink of choice, some of us have noticed a difference between tea culture in Europe and coffee culture in the United States. Coffee is something you have here on-the-go, while doing something else, but tea is a more leisurely ritual. That ritual is what we seek.

The benefits of tea are many: As students and postdocs, tea provides regular time for the moral and intellectual support we share. But having our advisors present is even better because we know there is a time when we catch them for a couple of minutes, without needing to make an appointment or interrupt some other task. It probably saves us time overall. Also, having administrative members of our groups join in is always more pleasant than only seeing them when we need help.

Differences in culture, climate, and colleagues all shape teatimes. In some institutions, there is a daily time in the afternoon assigned to tea and coffee (such as at Fermilab; the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton; the Kavli Institute for Theoretical Physics, Santa Barbara; and the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics); in others, there are 15-minute breaks twice a day (such as at the University of Cambridge); and in others there is a central location where you can always find colleagues (such as at CERN). In some places, the entire institution shares a space; in others, there are dedicated teatimes for individual groups. We think the exact timing and size of the event aren't the most important concerns.

We do need a specific location suitable for sitting, standing, and lounging. The teatime space should always be available as a place to



Photo: Diana Rogers, SLAC

create a mental environment different from our offices. The regular presence of group leaders is vital: When leaders are involved, others follow and we all get more from the experience.

And we don't want to hear about the inflexibility of a regularly scheduled time for a break, or that it interrupts important work. Nothing is so important it can't be put off for a few minutes.

The teatime we have in mind contains no talks or seminars. Sure we might talk about our work; we might talk about science tangentially related to our own research; we might just talk about the latest news, what we did on the weekend, or what we're up to tonight. In each conversation, though, we relate to each other in a much more human way than we do when immersed solely in the context of work. We certainly like the organized talks that come with tea and coffee; we just also want to make sure there is always room for an informal but regular teatime.

We all like our teatime, and we'll keep on having it, even those of us who'll drink coffee during it. If you visit the new KIPAC building at SLAC when it opens soon, and hear a ship's bell ring through the corridors, it means a new pot of tea is brewed and it's time to take a break.

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