

Best Practices: Facilitating Virtual Meetings

Written by Alan Hewitt on November 12, 2019



In the past week, I attended our regular board meeting comprised of four individuals. It sounds straight-forward. It had none of the complexities that usually accompany meetings with a cast of ten or more, but we found ourselves attending the meeting from different countries: one was in Hong Kong, the other in New York, another in London, while I was in France. Four countries, four time zones, and the meeting worked quite well, with good participation from all attendees. However, I wonder how things would have played out with ten or more people.

How do you have effective virtual meetings that allow for good participation and engagement from all attendees, regardless of the number of participants?

Our particular call was purely a voice link with the option of video links, which can be helpful or distracting depending on your point of view. Video should, in theory, be better as voice-only meetings remove a vital communication component: body language. But this, too, can also have its drawbacks.

Many years ago, I attended a video conference call with over a dozen participants and the system was voice-activated, i.e., if you said something your face would pop up on the screen. Unfortunately, one of the attendees had a coughing fit and hence spent most of the time on screen increasingly getting red in the face.

But assuming that technology is working in your favour, what is the best way to facilitate a virtual meeting?

I came across this document in my research: [Facilitating Consensus in Virtual Meetings](#). The highlights from my standpoint are the following:

Facilitating virtual discussions in real time will often benefit from very clear facilitation – the kind that in a face-to-face meeting might feel over the top. Because we can't take visual cues from and the facilitator (and each other), it's easy for people to talk over each other and go off on tangents. By explicitly explaining what they are doing, the facilitator can help the group understand where the discussion is at and when they should speak or type.

Although in a 'normal' face-to-face meeting things like breaks, regular summaries and clarity about the process are important, when you can't see each other these things are perhaps even more important, but easier to forget about. So do:

- *plan in regular breaks – it can be difficult to concentrate at a virtual meeting. Split up the meeting into sections if necessary;*
- *summarise lots – it's so easy to lose the thread of an email or chat based discussion (mix your media – if you are using VOIP, post summaries on a wiki: this reminds everyone where things are at);*
- *keep an eye open for people who aren't contributing – it's very easy to overlook quiet participants when you can't see them;*
- *only discuss one thing at a time;*
- *If using real time tools, take names of people who wish to speak before the next person starts their contribution."*

The above points seem quite obvious. But how often does the person chairing the meeting get involved in the details and lose control of the process? As the document states, the absence of feedback from body language makes achieving proper engagement across the group that much more challenging.

Finally, the Harvard Business Review has a good article on this topic: [How To Run A Great Virtual Meeting](#).

The following recommendation made me smile, perhaps because I've been guilty of it in the past:

Kill mute. In a co-located meeting, there are social norms: You don't get up and walk around the room, not paying attention. Virtual meetings are no different: You don't go on mute and leave the room to get something. In a physical meeting, you would never make a phone call and "check out" from the meeting. So in a virtual meeting, you shouldn't press mute and respond to your emails, killing any potential for lively discussion, shared laughter and creativity.

Perhaps it's fair to state that virtual meetings are here to stay. Making them work well, with good engagement, and good outcomes are of primary importance.

When have virtual meetings worked well for you?
Where have they left a little to be desired?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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