From Silence to Success
10 Tips for Better Virtual Meetings

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June 2019

More and more meetings happen virtually these days – videoconference technology has become more accessible and reliable, and meeting online saves the time and costs required to travel to an in-person meeting. And when done well, virtual meetings can be as effective as meeting in person.

But facilitating a virtual meeting effectively can be tricky – there are new challenges to overcome when all of your participants are not in a room together. In 2018, we shared our practical guide to better meetings. Many of the recommendations in the guide are applicable whether your meeting is virtual or in-person, but here are 10 tips for making your virtual meetings more successful.

1. **Preparation matters the most.** Because virtual meetings can seem less formal than in-person meetings, we often don't prepare as fully. Which is a big problem, because regardless of your meeting format, 70% of your meeting's success is determined by your preparation before the meeting begins. That's even truer for virtual meetings, which as detailed below, face tougher logistical and time constraints. Pre-meeting preparation must include:
   - Getting clear on your meeting goal(s);
   - Ensuring you have the right participants to achieve your goal(s) and you know where they stand on the issues you will discuss;
   - Planning for pre-work that gets participants ready for the discussion; and
   - Mapping out an agenda that includes activities that will work well in a virtual format.

2. **Mind the clock.** While you can plan a successful full-day or multi-day in-person meeting, the maximum time we recommend for a virtual meeting is three hours. More typically virtual meetings are in the 60- to 90-minute range. This means if you're replacing a longer in-person meeting with a virtual one, you'll need to think about breaking the content into smaller chunks that you'll tackle over a series of meetings. Mapping out the entire series and scheduling all the meetings at the start will help your participants understand the full picture of the work. For virtual meetings that are two or three hours long, plan a five-minute bio break at roughly the mid-point in the conversation.

3. **Keep the group size manageable.** Some virtual meeting platforms don't have the option to break people into smaller groups – a critical technique for effectively facilitating large in-person meetings. If your entire conversation will need to happen in the full group, virtual meetings where you're trying to achieve a specific outcome like developing an action plan, gathering feedback, or reaching a decision tend to be most effective with no more than 15

participants, and fewer is even better. This size makes it possible to hear from everyone over the course of the meeting.

4. **Use video.** Video conferencing makes virtual meetings – especially those longer than an hour – dramatically better. When your participants can see each other, they immediately feel more connected. And video reduces the temptation for participants to multitask. When the facilitator can see the participants, it's much easier to judge their level of engagement and interpret silences by reading body language and facial expressions. Set the expectation when you send the meeting invitation that it will be a video conference, so participants are prepared to be on camera.

5. **Be intentional about building connections.** Having participants on video is a good start, but it's also important to take time during the opening of the meeting to help participants connect. This can be as simple as asking everyone how they are doing or starting with a more formal icebreaker. Spending just a few minutes connecting as humans lays a stronger foundation for the rest of your meeting, especially for a group that already has a relationship built during previous in-person time together. (One thing virtual meetings aren't good for is discussing very contentious issues in a group that hasn't come together in person before. It's hard to establish relationships in a virtual session, and in that case, we'd recommend meeting face to face instead.)

6. **Prioritize discussion over presentation.** A virtual meeting is different than a webinar in that it's more focused on interaction among the group rather than the one-way flow of information from a presenter to the audience. Interaction is what keeps participants focused and engaged. Keep any presentation-type elements of the meeting short – 15 minutes or less. Share materials in advance for participants to read, and focus on sharing highlights as a quick memory refresher and answering clarifying questions instead. Once participants have tuned out – as they will be tempted to do during a long presentation – it can be hard to get them to tune back in for the rest of the meeting.

7. **Turn your screen into a flip chart.** Use the screenshare feature of your video conference platform to share a document where you capture notes, decisions, and next steps during the meeting. For participants who are visual rather than auditory learners, this will help them better track the conversation. Seeing the discussion and outcomes in writing on screen allows participants to immediately correct the record if their position has been misunderstood. If facilitating while capturing notes is overwhelming, delegate the responsibility to another member of your team or even one of the participants.

8. **Squash the crickets.** One of the biggest challenges with virtual meetings is handling silence. Here, being on video helps as well – silence tends to be a bigger problem on audio-only meetings. It helps to set a ground rule at the start of the meeting that everyone needs to contribute to the conversation. That gives you as the facilitator license to call on people to make sure you hear from everyone. When asking for feedback or taking a decision, it can be

helpful to do a go-around and ask each person on the call to share their perspective, name the option they prefer and explain why, or something else appropriate to your conversation.

9. **Be ready for inevitable technical challenges.** Technical challenges are a fact of virtual meetings. But there are a few strategies that can help you manage them – starting with you. Test the service you are using a day or two before, and then plan to start the meeting platform a few minutes early to make sure you have time to sort out any technical issues on your end. If you have participants joining from around the world, your chance of technical challenges increases. Allowing a few extra minutes at the start of the call and ensuring participants have local call-in numbers in advance can both reduce the risk. Suggest participants use a headset rather than their computer microphone and speakers to avoid the dreaded echo. If one participant is having significant difficulties but everyone else is fine, don't let those difficulties take over the entire meeting. Mute that person, have them communicate via chat or do an individual call with them afterward, and then troubleshoot ahead of the next meeting. Finally, if there's a system-wide problem, it's a good idea to have a back-up plan, especially if it would be a problem to delay the meeting. At Springboard, we use Zoom for video conferencing but have back-up FreeConferenceCall.Com numbers in case of a Zoom outage.

10. **Follow up in writing.** Summarizing the discussion, decisions, and next steps in writing after a meeting is good practice for all meetings – but even more important for virtual meetings. This is easy to do if you've been screensharing notes throughout the meeting, will be helpful to anyone who had technical challenges, and provides an important mechanism for charting your progress if the meeting is one in a series.

Virtual meetings have their limitations, but their clear cost, calendar, and carbon advantages mean they are here to stay. These simple tips can help you make the most of this powerful communication tool.