Mastering Virtual Meetings

Boost your virtual-meeting skills with these pointers.

By Andy Robinson

How many online meetings have you attended recently? How many were engaging, satisfying, and effectively facilitated?

Given the popularity of virtual meetings – plus other online activities, such as remote workshops and webinars – this is a great moment to improve your virtual facilitation skills. Here's how.

The Downside & Upside of Virtual Meetings

First, let's acknowledge that virtual engagement comes with a variety of challenges:

Multi-tasking. It's way too easy to check e-mails, etc.

The deep difficulty of "reading the room." With a dispersed group, there isn't really a room to read.

Technology. Reliable internet and cell service aren't available to everyone, which is both a logistical and equity issue.

However, online meetings carry several advantages:

Efficiency. No travel time required! Also, virtual meetings include fewer random conversations, assuming you're blessed with an effective, strong-handed facilitator.

Accessibility. Those who are unable to travel – or have health challenges preventing them from hanging out with other people – can participate.

Equity. The big talkers and dominant personalities tend to dominate a little less during virtual meetings. If you're the facilitator, it's easier to level the playing field among participants and hear everyone's voice.

Eight Tips

Here are several nuts-and-bolts suggestions to improve your online meetings and increase your confidence as a virtual facilitator.

1. Share the agenda in advance. This lets people collect their thoughts and arrive better able to participate.

> "It's a learnable skill set, and it's also an art."

> "Encourage those who over-participate to listen."

2. Prepare well. Design the meeting – this is deeper work than simply assembling an agenda. How will you connect people? What tools will you use at each stage in the meeting?

3. Engage your team early. Introduce an icebreaker, ask a question, give them something to do. If you're using a platform like Zoom, you can break one large group into small groups for more intimate conversations.

4. Focus on relationships. You might feel the need to prioritize meeting outcomes, which is appropriate. At the same time, do your best to make sure that everyone feels heard and respected.

5. Facilitate forcefully! This might be the most important tip. Drive the agenda, call on people, ask those who haven't spoken yet to add their thoughts while encouraging those who over-participate to listen and share the microphone.

6. Leadership = strong agenda + broad participation. This equation is about balancing the need to lead assertively with creating space for everyone. It's a learnable skill set, and it's also an art. Practice will help.

7. In mixed meetings (some people in the room together, some remote), designate someone to be a "bridge" to ensure that remote colleagues can participate effectively. This person shouldn't be the facilitator but someone else whose job it is to be sure everyone's needs are met and all voices are heard.

8. Close well. Define clear next steps – because that's the end of a satisfying meeting.

How to Look Your Professional Best

With kudos to public speaking coach Gigi Rosenberg (gigirosenberg.com), here are several tips to help you look your best during virtual meetings, webinars, and other online events.

Set your computer camera at eye level. It's a more flattering angle. (If necessary, use boxes to elevate your laptop.) Look into the camera while speaking.

Light your face well. If you're too dark or lit from behind, it looks like a hostage video.

Choose a non-distracting background. Move to a neutral background or hang a photographer's cloth behind you.

Relax your face – and also be energetic. It's a conundrum, right? Be energetically relaxed! But remember that people may look at your face even when you're not speaking so you don't want to look bored or uninterested. Keep the edges of your mouth turned up just a bit at all times to show you're engaged in the meeting.

Andy Robinson (trainyourboard.com) is a consultant to nonprofit organizations and author of What Every Board Member Needs to Know, Do, and Avoid: A 1-Hour Guide *and* Train Your Board (and Everyone Else) to Raise Money *(co-written with Andrea Kihlstedt).*

> "Use boxes to elevate your laptop."

Put on Your Best Face

Helpful Blog Posts:

Many thanks to these bloggers for sharing their expertise, which informed this article:

Seven Presentation Tips for Speaking Online in a Virtual World (Gigi Rosenberg, gigirosenberg.com)

Five Tips for Making Virtual Meetings Work for Your Capital Campaign (Andrea Kihlstedt, capitalcampaignmasters.com)

How to Facilitate Effective Virtual Meetings (Beth Kanter, bethkanter.org)

Resources from NonprofitWorld.org:

Connecting through the Camera & Keyboard (Vol. 38, No. 3)

Powerful New Communication Tool for Your Meetings: Engaging Both Sides of Your Brain (Vol. 26, No. 3)

Improving Board Meetings: Three Steps (Vol. 24, No. 6)

The Surprising Science of Meetings (Vol. 41, No. 1)

Risk & Your Brain (Vol. 38, No. 4)

How to Run the Perfect Board Meeting – While Inspiring Board Members to Raise Funds (Vol. 36, No. 4)

Seven Kinds of Listeners & How to Approach Them (Vol. 39, No. 2)

To Make an Impact, Improve Your Non-Verbal Skills (Vol. 38, No. 3)

It's Not Over till It's Over: Five Strategies to Improve Your Meetings (Vol. 30, No. 1)

Get Energized! Create Energy in Your Virtual Meetings (Vol. 40, No. 3)

Do All Board Members Speak Up in Meetings? (Vol. 40, No. 3)

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