How to Run an Effective Virtual Meeting

Create a culture where all meetings are valued and respected. Setting a meeting culture will take time, but it is worth it for creating more efficient meetings. Display good meeting skills, where the meeting etiquette is equally important in a virtual setting as it is at a face-to-face meeting.

Meetings are difficult enough, but remote meetings present unique challenges. People have this very relaxed mindset in virtual calls where they act and dress more casually. They eat on camera, slouch on a couch or a bed or turn off their video altogether and start multi-tasking. You need to dress appropriately and conduct yourself appropriately, just like if you were meeting in person.

*This guidance should be used in conjunction with 'How to Run Effective Meetings.'

✓ Only hold meetings when required

Reduce the number of meetings by finding other ways to address business, for example, if information-sharing or reviewing documents consider email or other written communications. Virtual meetings can be short and punchy, and much better way to keep in contact and complete tasks.

✓ Format

When planning a virtual meeting, ask: "What are we trying to accomplish?" Then, choose the right format. If you need to brainstorm, weigh an idea's pros and cons, problem solve, or discuss complex issues, your virtual meeting must have a shared screen on which you write the points people make. If you only need an update and to interact about that information, a conference call may do.

✓ Participants prepare for the meeting

Provide an opportunity for all to input into the agenda.
Prepare and submit your own report prior to the meeting.
Read all documentation/reports in advance, so only ask questions at the meeting on these reports.

✓ Set up equipment / IT before the meeting

Virtual meetings – check everyone is invited, test the system.
Check your presentation.

✓ Agenda

Circulated at least a week in advance.
Keep the meeting objectives task and action focussed.
To solve a problem - start with a brainstorming session first to stimulate creativity; write ideas somewhere visible in the room and do not censor input. Once everybody has had a chance to express their point of view, you can decide which ideas work best.
Consider including 'set' items for each meeting agenda.
Review of actions from previous meetings.
Any other business (AOB).

✓ 'Log in' or Call in' by time

This should be at least five minutes before the meeting starts, to avoid late attendees. Some common reasons are they cannot find the email with the log-in information, they have a computer glitch, they get distracted by something else and lose track of the time, or they just habitually wait until the last minute to dial in. Start on time, otherwise, you train people to come late. Even better, block latecomers. True, some agenda items may suffer without the "right" people there. But you only have to do this once or twice before everyone gets the message you are serious about starting on time. In the future, they will make sure they do. And by the way, also end on time.

✓ Unusual start and end times

Occasionally people may experience back-to-back virtual meetings which tend to start and finish on the hour or half hour. Think about starting or ending your meeting at quarter to or past the hour, to allow time for a comfortable break and making a drink before the meeting.

✓ Create meeting ground rules

Set guidelines around how people should participate in the meeting. For example, raise a real hand or virtual hand to speak and when they can use the chat box.

✓ Mute your microphone

Ask people in advance to mute themselves. Unless you are talking, stay muted because background noise can interrupt the speaker.

✓ Webcams on

Create a Webcams On policy as it creates accountability and improves a feeling of connection. People stay focused and do not multitask. Seeing people pay attention to what you say, nod in agreement or even roll their eyes communicates so much more than audio-only silence. It creates the welcome sense of a live conference room.

✓ No Multitasking

In virtual meetings it is too easy for people to do other things which may mean they are not paying attention. Put away your phone and turn off notifications on your computer before your eyes and attention wander. Banish multitasking ahead of time by getting everyone's agreement in exchange for the benefit that the meeting will more focused and take less time.

✓ Be aware of what you look like when you are not talking

When we are not actively engaged, our face can appear bored or more typically disengaged. To avoid this, glance at yourself on screen occasionally while others talk and adjust your expression if necessary.

✓ Do not do all the talking

Ask questions to draw people out. In groups, call on reserved attendees to give their opinions.

✓ Pause after speaking

Online audio lags. When we stop talking but do not get a response right away, we often rush to fill the silence. But in web calls, when people speak at the same time, it mashes the audio and creates confusion. When you say something, leave a slight pause at the end. If you are someone who tends to give verbal affirmations, like "Yes" or "Cool," consider giving visual cues such as nodding or smiling.

✓ Speaking order

In virtual meetings people tend to be too polite and say nothing or talk over each other which makes them less likely to try again. All meetings should have a speaking order which could be included on the agenda. In virtual meetings you could use the circular order (going around the room) gives everyone airtime. For even more accountability, establish a random order, in which you as organiser call on everyone in no particular pattern. For a voluntary speaking order use the Chat function in the meeting software. People just type in their name and you have a visual order that everyone can see. It is highly efficient.

✓ Provide clean sound

Use earbuds to avoid feedback and consider using a microphone if your room creates echoes.

✓ Ensure your lighting is as natural as possible

Face a window or illuminate yourself with a desktop lamp or simple webcam lights. Do not aim the light at your face, aim them at the nearest wall or the ceiling to produce a soft light that spreads out over a wider area.

✓ Adjust your camera

Good eye-contact is another tactic for encouraging virtual meeting engagement. Often, we put the laptop on the desk at arm level and then tilt the camera up to an unnatural angle. Put the laptop on a stand, even if you must improvise. The webcam should be at eye level, so you look straight into the camera.

✓ Manage your background

Your setting contributes to the tone and focus of meetings. Adjust your camera so it reveals as little background as possible or use a narrow-angle webcam. Simplify your background to eliminate distractions.

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✓ **Summarise the meeting & actions**

Have a shared screen and summarise in bullet points on a PowerPoint slide the points people are making and close with a plan of action and timescales if appropriate.
Ensure that everyone leaves knowing what is expected of them and by when.

✓ **Follow up with notes & actions**

As soon as possible, within a few days, circulate the meeting notes and actions.
Evaluate the meeting, did you meet your objective?
Personally, follow up 'Thank you' to individuals for their input via text, phone, face to face or email.
Contact people regularly, talk to them using the most suitable option like face to face, phone, text, meetings, social media, email or socials.

There are likely to be higher expectations as online meetings become the norm. Practicing good virtual etiquette now will give you the advantage going into the future, producing more effective meeting results, better solutions and do it in much less time.