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How to Make Virtual Meetings More Engaging and Effective

*By Justin Hale*

**Dear Justin,**

We are learning how to use videoconferencing as our new meeting platform. Do you have tips for facilitating meetings to promote participation and feedback, as many people seem uncomfortable because they can’t read non-verbal cues from others? Also, do you have effective methods for guiding people with interaction? No one is using the “raise hand” feature, so we often end up speaking at the same time and it’s awkward. We aren’t communicating as well as we did with in-person meetings. I’ve also noticed that people tend to rush, maybe because they’re uncomfortable speaking and seeing themselves at the same time. How can we ensure conversations flow more smoothly in a teleconferencing format? How can we encourage everyone to share their questions and concerns?

Signed,  
Needing Ideas

**Dear Needing Ideas,**

Thanks for your question. I’m guessing many of our readers share your concerns. It’s hard to get people to pay attention in any meeting, but when people aren’t in the same room, it can be especially difficult. And it’s particularly annoying when you make a nine-minute argument, pause for a reaction, and get “I’m not sure I followed you,” which might as well mean, “I was shampooing my cat and didn’t realize I would be called on.”

Meetings are often ineffective because there’s little to no accountability for engagement. There are four primary reasons to hold a meeting: to influence others, to make decisions, to solve problems, or to strengthen relationships. Since all of these are active processes, passive passengers in a meeting rarely do quality work. The precondition for effective meetings—virtual or otherwise—is *voluntary engagement*. Here’s what works.

**1. The 60-second Rule.** First, never engage a group in solving a problem until they have *felt* the problem. Do something in the first 60 seconds to help them experience it. You might share shocking or provocative statistics, anecdotes, or analogies that dramatize the problem. No matter what tactic you use, your goal is to make sure the group understands and appreciates the problem (or opportunity) before you try to solve it.

**2. The Responsibility Rule.** When people enter any social setting, they tacitly work to determine their role. For example, when you enter a movie theater, you unconsciously define your role as observer—you are there to be entertained. When you enter the gym, you’re an actor—you’re there to work out. The biggest threat to engagement in virtual meetings is allowing team members to unconsciously take the role of observer. Many already defined their role this way when they received the meeting invite and determined to work on something else while they “check in.” To counteract this implicit decision, create an experience of shared responsibility early in your presentation. Don’t do it by saying, “Okay, I want this to be a conversation, not a presentation. I need all of you to be involved.” That rarely works. Instead, create an opportunity for them to take meaningful responsibility. This is best done using the next rule.

**3. The Nowhere-to-Hide Rule.** If everyone is responsible, then no one feels responsible. Avoid this in your meeting by giving people tasks that they can actively engage in so there is nowhere to hide. Define a problem that can be solved quickly, assign people to groups of two or three (max). Give them a medium with which to communicate with one another (video conference, Slack channel, messaging platform, audio breakouts). If you’re on a virtual meeting platform that allows for breakout groups, use them liberally. Give participants a very limited timeframe to take on a highly structured but brief task.

**4. The MVP Rule.** Nothing disengages a group more reliably than assaulting them with slide after slide of mind-numbing data. It doesn’t matter how smart or sophisticated the group is, if your goal is engagement, you have to mix facts and stories. Determine the *Minimum Viable PowerPoint* (MVP) deck you need. In other words, select the least amount of data you need to inform the group. Don’t add a single slide more.

**5. The 5-Minute Rule.** Never go longer than five minutes without giving the group another problem to solve. Participants are in rooms scattered, who knows where, with dozens of tempting distractions. If you don’t sustain a continual expectation of meaningful involvement, they will retreat into that alluring observer role, and you’ll have to work hard to bring them back. Consider wrapping up a presentation or brainstorming meeting with a group-generated list of options, then throw out a polling or voting opportunity to determine the team’s opinion about where to begin.

I adapted these tips from an article I recently co-wrote with Joseph Grenny for *Harvard Business Review*. You can review the [full article here](https://hbr.org/2020/03/how-to-get-people-to-actually-participate-in-virtual-meetings). I hope this helps.

Best of luck,  
Justin