

6 Ways to Keep Virtual Meetings Engaging

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As with most working professionals, my approach to providing executive coaching and leadership training has changed dramatically since the beginning of the COVID lockdowns. For example, in March of 2020, my monthly training sessions for one client went from in person to Zoom with the help of a couple of Human Resources folks familiar with the technology. I travelled to their headquarters, made my masked way to the same training room in which I had delivered the first two sessions in person, and facilitated the Zoom training.

The level of engagement in the first virtual session was not very high, so we worked on other ways to create engagement in the subsequent sessions. From that experience and reading on the subject, I have synthesized these six ways to keep Zoom meetings engaging.

Technology. After installing the Zoom and Teams apps on my laptop and phone, I had to decide which one of these would be easiest to use for scheduling and conducting the meetings? I noticed that the camera on my phone created a relatively 'tight' shot of my head and background, whereas the laptop captured more of the room behind me. Did I want the focus to be primarily on my face, or did I want to send a message by what other folks on the call could see of my office in the background? To make it more casual with my team, for example, would it be better to position my phone/laptop on a stand so that the background would include my fireplace and an overstuffed chair? Make sure your technology of choice is charged fully before you begin, and some would recommend restarting your device in advance of a meeting, to make sure it does not decide to update in the middle of the call.

Environment. Since most of us are sheltered in place and working from home, it is important to recognize that the camera and audio for Zoom captures a great deal of ambient noise from the environment in which we are sitting. While there are electronic devices you can purchase to attenuate this noise, there is much you can do in advance to minimize the distractions on these calls. For example, recognize that turning the volume down on your computer, disconnecting a landline in the room that might decide to ring, and making sure your kids, grandkids, parrot, and dog are far enough away from you should eliminate 90 percent of the unexpected noise. Do not eat food on the calls, unless you have scheduled a virtual lunch.

Eye contact. When using virtual meeting technology, one question that many people have not considered is where they should look to make the communication as 'real' as possible. For in-person coaching or training, for example, I always look people in the eye as we talk to make sure the connection is there. Put people in front of a screen, however, and I notice that they look down, sideways, and every direction except into the camera! As much as possible, it is important to remember to look directly into the camera eye, rather than at the person's image on your screen. Place your webcam or laptop/phone camera eye at your own eye level and just above the screen you are viewing. When you lean into the camera to make a point, look at the camera eye, not the person's face on the screen.

Interaction. For Zoom in particular, there are various methods at your disposal for creating the kind of interaction you might have in an in-person team meeting. During my training sessions with a group of 20 attending virtually, we used the function that allows you to create breakout rooms in which small groups of participants can discuss the questions you raise, and then come back to the full group to discuss themes. These breakout rooms can be created manually or automatically, and the leader can sit in on some or all of them during the discussion time. Other options you could employ include a

whiteboard function, so that instead of looking at your face the whole time, they can share ideas where others can see them and edit. The software also includes the capacity to vote on issues or take a poll in real time. Again, you could do this with a show of hands, but a different medium can increase interaction.

Visuals. Since the main visual in most virtual communication is your face, make sure it is lighted well. That is, do not sit so that a window with bright sunshine is directly behind you, or talk from a dark corner of your office or living room. Make sure people can make eye contact. One way to divert the attention from your face to another perhaps more interesting visual is to incorporate PowerPoint or video in your discussion. These have functioned very effectively in my virtual training sessions, and they could also add engagement to a one-on-one call. Having people follow along on a pdf document that you have sent them in advance can add visual interest. One individual I talked with recently used a virtual background that placed her in different geographic locations as we talked, thereby generating visual interest. The only caution here is to not pick backgrounds that will distract from the interaction and derail the discussion.

Variety. Often referred to as the spice of life, adding surprises and variety to your communication helps to create greater engagement. Examples of this include: asking a pop question to get them thinking, inserting a funny slide in your PowerPoint presentation, putting up a quick poll for participants to answer virtually, or assigning the role of meeting leader to each team member on a rotating basis so the focus shifts from you. For fun, you might schedule 'dress up' day once a month where people dress more like they would in the office, rather than how they dress most days working from home. I have done this with some coaching meetings and most client calls. It helps you be more business focused when you are dressed for it!