

# Better Virtual Meetings: Our Top Tips

*Clients often ask us how meetings can be made better. It is common to work with teams who find their group meetings to be less than useful, frustrating and, in some cases, even, ‘a complete waste of time’....*

## Top Tips for Leaders and Chair People:

### 1. Be clear about your objective and your expectations of participants

Why are you having this meeting? Be clear with your participants about your objective and rationale. And ask yourself the hard question – do we *really* need this meeting or is there another way of doing this? Virtual meetings are curiously exhausting for all involved so be considerate of your participants...

Once you are sure that you *do* need to have a meeting, good practice is to agree amongst a group a series of rules you promise to abide by. These might include proper use of muting, keeping cameras on, pre-agreed hand signals for interruptions, use of the chat function....But, whatever you decide falls within the scope of your virtual meeting etiquette, remind participants at the start of every meeting and be unapologetic in calling out anybody who violates the code.

### 2. Manage different styles in your group pro-actively

In any group, there is likely to be a range of personalities and corresponding communication styles – from the confident and expressive, to the quieter and more reticent. It is the job of a chairperson to consider the interplay between these different types and channel them effectively for the health and productivity of the meeting. For example, this may mean actively managing a participant who is more dominant to provide more space for others to speak. Or, it may mean being thoughtful about other ways in which you can create

conditions to make it easier for quieter participants to join in, such as explicitly inviting them to speak.

It may be prudent – if perhaps a little painstaking – to consider concluding your meetings with a question to every individual present about whether they have more to add or ask. It provides individuals with the opportunity, but not the obligation, to say more if they would like to.

### **3. Consider appointing a silent co-chair**

Chairing or facilitating a large group discussion successfully is a real and much underrated skill. It requires the individual to invest their attention in a number of different places at the same time, and to re-focus frequently without ever losing touch with what else is happening. One suggestion which might help chair-people everywhere is to appoint a silent second-in-command with an explicit mission to focus on the dynamics of the meeting, how people are responding (or not) and to provide directed feedback on what might need to happen next.

### **4. Get feedback**

A quick-win for every meeting chair hoping to make their meetings better for the people in them is – ask them! Ask participants in an open-minded way for their feedback on how the meetings are going, their experience of them and any ideas and suggestions they might like to share.

## **Top Tips for Meeting Participants:**

### **1. Reflect on your own meeting style and contributions**

The cultivation of greater self-awareness is key to communicating effectively in all instances. This environment may provide a catalyst for many to think more deeply about how they communicate and the impact this has on others.

As a general rule of thumb, however you know yourself to behave “in normal circumstances”, consider the possibility that you may be exhibiting more extreme versions of this behaviour to compensate for the abnormal circumstances we find ourselves in.

For example, if you know you are, by tendency, more extrovert i.e. you usually talk a lot, you enjoy interactions with others, you may even solve problems by speaking out loud, you may be doing more talking than ever. By contrast, if you identify as more introvert i.e. quieter, more comfortable thinking through a problem than talking about it, then you may be saying less even than you might usually.

Take the time to notice what you are doing and consider how this may be helping or hindering your contributions, and their usefulness, in group settings.

### **2. Ask a colleague, friend or family member**

Even if we believe we are very self-aware, it is worth checking that we are not being too unkind or too kind (!) to ourselves. Ask somebody who you believe will give you frank and helpful feedback about how you are coming across during group video calls, the impact that is having and how you could improve.

### **3. Act on your feedback**

Once you have that information, do something about it. So, if you have a habit of dominating discussions, make a conscious effort to limit your comments – use fewer words, curb the temptation to need to speak on every item. And enjoy the opportunity to listen harder and better to others. Likewise, if you are told you do not contribute enough, break the pattern and speak up. This doesn't mean you have to speak at

length or even share a view necessarily, valuable contributions to meetings can take many forms e.g. asking a question, highlighting an issue, correcting misinformation, articulating a position.

#### **4. Engage with your chair**

It is often the case that individuals moan about meetings but have made little effort to try and make them better. We would encourage you to show understanding, and active facilitation support, for your meeting's chair – their job can be a tricky and a lonely one.

It is very possible that the chair of your meetings is not aware that you are feeling frustrated. Call any issues to their attention in a 1:1 conversation and be prepared to make suggestions as to what could be done to make discussions more efficient and inclusive. This is not designed to be a criticism of the chair but a piece of feedback about how well a meeting is working from your perspective in terms of your ability to contribute to it.

#### **5. Don't give up if you didn't manage to get your point across**

It is understandable that many people feel disillusioned and dispirited after successive failed attempts to make their voice heard in a group meeting. But, depriving your colleagues of your contributions doesn't help you, them or your collective interest.

If what you have been doing hasn't worked, try something different. Practice how you will say things beforehand, on your own or with a friend or family member, so you become more confident in your strategies.

Engage with your meeting chair and explain what you have felt unable to contribute. Discuss the best way to make this contribution either at your next meeting or in the interim.

### **Communication in 2020 and beyond - let's make it better**

**Feel free to share these thoughts as widely as you like**

**Amy Dempsey & Alan Robertson**

**[dempseycoates.com](http://dempseycoates.com) [talk-wise.com](http://talk-wise.com)**