

10 PRACTICAL TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL TEAM MEETINGS

Many of our teams are now working virtually, whether this involves team members working from home a couple of days a week, a number of team members spread across the state or country, or global teams that have members spread across a range of countries and time zones.

Without the opportunity for regular face to face meetings, virtual teams are using tools such as teleconferencing, videoconferencing and webinars to communicate. But, if you have attended any of these virtual team meetings, you will know that they come with particular challenges.

This paper provides 10 practical tips for ensuring your virtual team meetings are successful. Some of the tips relate to all meetings, but are even more important without the benefit of face to face communication.

BEFORE THE MEETING

1. Keep the technology simple

The technology is merely a tool for communication and shouldn't be overly onerous or complicated. So, you need to choose a form of technology that everyone can use, and ensure that every team member has access to the technology and has been trained in using it correctly.

2. Develop meeting protocols and ground rules

It is important that, as a team, you agree on how questions will be handled during the meeting. You can't necessarily see a puzzled look on a team member's face, so you will need to decide whether questions and comments will be taken as they arise or covered at the end of each agenda item. You will also need to agree on how individuals will alert the meeting chair when they have a question or comment to add.

It is important that everyone also agrees to virtual meeting ground rules. For example, a side conversation or in-joke between co-located team members is sure to alienate other team members and create divisions within the team.

Another important issue to cover in ground rules is the use of mobile phones and instant messaging during the virtual meeting. While some may feel it is inappropriate to check messages during the meeting, others will consider it necessary. Either way, it is a point to be agreed on by team members and then adhered to.

Once you have your ground rules and/or protocols, it is a good idea to have these up on the webinar or videoconference welcome screen, as a reminder for meeting attendees to read through before the meeting commences.

3. Make sure everyone has a copy of the agenda and has had an opportunity to add items

This is a standard requirement for meetings generally, but is more important with virtual meetings. You want to make sure everyone feels involved in the meeting and knows what is being covered. So, share or send out the agenda well before the meeting, with a copy of all relevant papers, so that team members have the time to read all the documents and add comments or agenda items prior to the meeting.

4. Find the best meeting time

If you have people in different time zones, find a time that is most suitable to all team members. Try to rotate the time for meetings, so that the burden of late night and early morning meetings is shared by all team members, rather than the same people having to be the night owls for every meeting. It is also important to confirm the meeting time and date, taking note of the relevant time zones, so that everyone is sure of the meeting time.

6. Agree on food and beverages

Food and beverages often form an important ritual during face to face meetings, such as an early morning meeting over coffee, or a mid-morning meeting over morning tea. Food and beverages can also form an important element of virtual team meetings, with each team member bringing their own tea, coffee or snack along to the meeting. For example, a virtual morning tea to celebrate a team member's birthday or the achievement of a milestone can be a great connector for the team. However, some meeting attendees might find it uncomfortable watching others munching on their muffin or cake while they have nothing to eat. So, it is important to agree on the inclusion of food and beverages.

DURING THE MEETING

7. Start with a check-in/roll call

One of the key challenges of virtual teams is ensuring that every team member feels a part of the team and recognises all other members of the team. To ensure this is the case for the virtual meeting, it is useful to start the meeting with a quick check-in or roll call so that everyone knows who else is there and to ensure that the technology connections are working. It is also a good idea to start with a fun connective activity for team members or to have some informal, non-work related conversation before getting on to the agenda items.

8. Chair the meeting explicitly to keep everyone involved

It goes without saying that virtual team meetings need a chair. The role of chair will be more explicit in the virtual meeting than it is in a face to face meeting. A key role for the chair will be to ensure everyone knows what is happening at the beginning and

throughout the course of the meeting, and to ensure that no one is 'lost' from the meeting process. At the beginning of the meeting, the chair should:

- Cover housekeeping, including the meeting duration and any special events that will occur during the meeting
- Confirm the agenda of the meeting
- Remind everyone of the agreed meeting protocols and ground rules

Throughout the meeting, the chair should keep everyone on track regarding agenda items. This involves introducing each agenda item, introducing the speaker for that item, handling questions as agreed and confirming agreement on action items before moving on to the next item. To keep the human element in the meeting and avoid confusion, it is also important to use each team member's name as you address a comment or question to them.

7. Be precise

When we don't have the benefit of non-verbal feedback, we can't be sure that everyone fully understands what is being discussed and agreed, and draws the same conclusions. It is therefore vitally important to be very precise in your communication and explanation of key points. Repetition of the key points will also assist in ensuring that everyone has heard and understood these points. For important points, it can also be useful to do a 'round robin' to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to add their opinions to the discussion, ask any final questions and confirm their understanding of the issues and decisions made.

8. Summarise, summarise, summarise

Following on from tip 7, it is also important to summarise regularly throughout the meeting and provide team members with the opportunity to ask questions to clarify and verify their understanding.

It is also important to ask for questions at agreed points during the meeting. This may be throughout the discussion, at the end of each agenda item, or at the end of the meeting. The handling of questions needs to be discussed and agreed by team members. When inviting questions, it is better to ask "What questions do we have?" rather than "Are there any questions?" as this will encourage questions, particularly on points that may be unclear or require a decision.

9. End with a strong finish

When closing the meeting, ensure you:

- Ask for outstanding questions
- Summarise key points discussed
- Confirm agreements or decisions made

- Read out action items
- Confirm responsibility and timeframes for action items

It is important to also confirm the details for the following meeting, while you have everyone in attendance. That way everyone has input and is aware of the details.

AFTER THE MEETING

10. Circulate minutes quickly

Send the minutes out as soon as you can after the meeting and ask people to read them, clarify anything that is unclear and ask questions on points they are unsure of. This provides another opportunity to ensure that everyone is on the same page regarding meeting discussions, decisions and action items.

[Korrine Jones](#) of OD Consulting is Australia's leading specialist in real training for virtual teams. OD Consulting specialise in providing virtual team leaders and members with the strategies and skills they need to ensure highly productive and effective virtual teams.

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