

Making Remote Meetings Work



Remote Meetings are Here to Stay

It's the first week in May 2020 and it is estimated that nearly half the U.S. labor force is working remotely. While these numbers are temporarily higher, in 2019 the Society for Human Resource Management reported an increase from 60-69% in the number of companies offering ad-hoc telecommuting benefits. Remote meetings have been taking place for a long time but more of us are participating in them today and will likely do so in the future. What's the best way to make these meetings valuable and effective?

At a time when everything seems to be changing, you might find it reassuring to know that some things never change. The same rules that you practice for worthwhile in-person meetings apply to remote meetings. You still must have an agenda stating the meeting's purpose and outcome. You still only invite those whose participation is needed to achieve the stated outcome. There is no change with respect to starting and ending on time; being upfront about deciding how to decide; or having ground rules, a facilitator and minutes. Remote meetings simply require some tweaks and adaptation.

There are two reasons for this. First, you hold a meeting because its purpose requires **personal interaction**—for identifying issues and options, for making decisions or for developing the collective capabilities of a team and aligning performance. Given that, the second reason is directly tied to this first one: we meet to communicate—**to share meaning and understanding**. During remote meetings, that communication is challenged when we must adapt to technology and the absence of verbal cues and context that affect how we speak and listen. In a virtual setting, we interact and respond differently than we do in person. How

can we communicate more effectively and feel like our time was well spent when we click on “leave meeting”? Let’s look at four pillars of remote meetings: technology, process, engagement and relationship-building.

Why it Matters

We are holding remote meetings with increasing frequency. Technological advances are helpful but making remote meetings effective has its own challenges. Most in-person meeting planning and facilitation guidelines still apply. Some adjustments will support communication, team building and execution.

Technology

One of the most frustrating aspects of remote meetings is having inadequate **tools** or insufficient knowledge on **how to use them**. The technology you use should support the meeting effectiveness, not drive the process. As Nancy Settle-Murphy, author of *Getting the Most out of Remote Meetings* recommends, "select technology tools that best support different kinds of virtual meetings: communication, data gathering, idea generation, team building, problem solving, decision making." She suggests you design your agenda first, then choose the right tool. The UF Information Technology (UFIT) website (www.it.ufl.edu) offers many UF-approved platforms and tools for remote communication and collaboration as well as a full [UFIT Training Catalog](#). UF Training & Organizational Development’s Spring 2020 [Keep Growing](#) Series also offers relevant training on using technology to support remote teams.

Once you decide, make sure that meeting participants have the equipment needed and know how to use the features. For recurring meetings, it’s best to choose one platform and use it consistently to benefit from all users’ increased familiarity and proficiency. Having a camera will be very helpful for optimal communication. Ask participants to test their equipment and try any chat box or participant interaction features before the meeting starts. These preparation tips could be included in your agenda and meeting invitation.

Process

Have an **agenda** and send it out well in advance. This will allow participants to prepare (attaching to it any readings or discussion questions for individual reflection will also help maximize the time together) and serve as an accessible road map throughout the meeting. Consider including any meeting number and sign-in instructions on the agenda for easy access. Be mindful that addressing issues virtually will take longer than in person and the more participants, the more time you’ll need. Schedule sufficient time for each item.

Schedule **regular** meetings for the same day and time of the week. The routine will help reduce stress for the team and support the cadence of accountability. Consider setting up a recurring meeting invitation so each occurrence repeats the same sign-in process.

Agree on shared **ground rules**. A code of conduct and expectations will help maintain a standard for all participants, minimize disruption and support full participation. Here are some for consideration:

- Introduce yourself before speaking (unless you are using video or identifying software).
- Direct questions to a specific person to minimize cutting off, repeated information and overall frustration.
- Keep your microphone on mute except when talking.
- Keep your video on so we can see you.
- Use a visual signal or the chat box to indicate that you want to respond or add to a discussion item.
- You are responsible for your full participation; stay off your email and cell phone and be present.

For recurring meetings, it's best that **team members participate** in the establishment of ground rules. You might want to have them react to the ones above, choose the top three that would be most valuable, and discuss why. You might also ask them to add others that, based on what they know about the way they operate, would make sense for the team. This conversation can become an opportunity to work on your team's virtual culture. Consider asking them to agree on acceptable professional standards and behaviors, such as eating, turning off video/sound for personal interruptions (we all know stuff happens) or "comfort breaks" and what to do if someone has connection difficulties. Getting to this shared understanding promotes buy-in and the right mindset to keep the meeting efficient.

- Encourage visual cues to minimize voice interruption; use non-verbals such as nodding and hand gestures. Let team members create their own on index cards and make them fun (encouragers, smiley faces, thumbs up)!
- Enable virtual backgrounds to reduce visual distractions and personalize your image.
- If you need to brainstorm, consider sending the topic or question as part of the preparation so members can reflect on their own first. Use the meeting time to compile ideas first or use chat, rather than voice, for "in-the-moment" idea generation.

- Think that your audience is “in” the camera; speak to it.
- Assign roles. In a virtual meeting, the facilitator has to work especially hard; think air traffic controller. Address questions to a specific person, offer clear instructions on how to participate, how any questions or new items will be prioritized and manage any rambling communications. Allow for sound travel delays and give people time to think before engaging in a new discussion topic. Don’t assume that silence means the end of an issue; confirm by asking “anything else?” Then, allow time for responses (request sharing on the chat box or signaling to be invited to speak) before moving on. The timekeeper can remind participants of the remaining time for each agenda item. The note taker can capture and send out meeting minutes and be in charge of saving the chat box text.

Engagement

Keeping everyone engaged is one of the main challenges of remote meetings; assume that people will get distracted. Ward off boredom and multitasking early on by constructing an agenda that encourages participation through frequent questions. When soliciting input in larger groups, offer a format that makes it simple to provide answers, such as completing a fill-in-the-blank statement or indicating the top choice off a list. The Zoom meeting platform also allows for breakout groups where participants can temporarily engage in small groups discussions.

Rotate meeting roles (discussed above) and assign talking points or a process for inclusive participation in brainstorming, solution-generation and decision-making (especially if by consensus). According to Kellogg School of Management professor Leigh Thompson, research indicates that in a typical six-person meeting, two people do more than 60 percent of the talking; increase the size of the group, and the problem only gets worse. Vocal people tend to speak more, which silences other participants’ voices—their input and opinions.

Facilitators may consider sharing their screen or displaying a scoreboard or dashboard, so participants can see where the group is on the agenda and what’s coming up next. Collaboration tools like Microsoft Teams® or SharePoint® allow team members to work on documents simultaneously and assign tasks allowing team members to leave meetings with updated documents and assigned tasks. With clear meeting goals and ways to track progress and shared accountability you can let people do the work in whichever manner that best suits them (no need to micromanage or track activity) as long as they deliver results.

Stand-up meetings offer a highly engaging meeting variation that works well remotely. The traditional format has each participant speak for 60 seconds—no one can interrupt. They each answer 3 questions:

- What did you accomplish since the last meeting?
- What are you working on until the next meeting?
- What barriers are getting in your way or keeping you from doing your job?

Team members indicate when they are done (or are told when their time is up) and the next person gets called; if they don't have anything to report, they can "pass." After all members have reported, others on the team offer help with any barriers and help with new work according to their capacity. These meetings are quick and high-energy, often occur on a weekly basis and can last 15 minutes or less.

Relationship-building

Don't forget that meetings offer a golden opportunity for building trust, relationships and creating community all of which are especially important for remote workers. Often, your meeting can accommodate both the task and relationship-building purposes. Instead of jumping right into a task discussion, consider using the beginning of the meeting to strengthen social connection. You could occasionally structure the agenda to complete the work part of an hour-long meeting in 45 minutes and use the last 15 for catching up and supporting informal interactions.

Remote teams don't have the natural environments to bond over lunch or office celebrations. Deciding that the purpose of your meeting is to create opportunities for social proximity, despite the physical distancing, is also appropriate; you'll enjoy developing that agenda! Strong relationships support team resilience and productivity.

Final Thoughts

Meetings, whether remote or in-person, with a full team or an individual, are an often-overlooked setting for embedding messages of organizational **purpose, vision and values**; the latter being especially important for nurturing a remote culture. Some leaders may ignore culture management and forget that creating the space for team members to talk about how we do what we do strengthens team culture. Remind the team why your unit's work is important and reinforce how you will accomplish it, not just in checked-off tasks but in the ways that you all walk your team's talk. Help people stay aligned; remind them how their role supports the team's current efforts to achieve the long-term vision; and thank them.

Finally, it doesn't matter if you are new at testing the waters of virtual team meetings or very experienced in running them, asking for feedback from participants is always valuable. Find out what they think worked well, what was not so helpful and what could be better next time and try some adjustments on for size.

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