How to Have Successful Virtual Conversations

—

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The Challenges of Going Virtual

Transparency creates trust.

Social distancing can lead to misunderstanding and disconnection.

Emotions play an important and often overlooked role.

The Challenges of Going Virtual

- Human communication is optimized when people talk in person

- Topics can be emotionally or conceptually difficult to grasp without body language

- Facial expression and body language convey a lot of information about emotions that will be missed over the phone or in email/text exchanges

- When you cannot physically see other people, you are more likely to attribute negative intentions

The Challenges of Going Virtual

- Hard to tell who is speaking without a visual, and people are more likely to interrupt each other

- Harder to deal with and understand the role of silence

- May experience problems with the technology (phone cutting off, people not being able to access the chatroom)

- Participants are more susceptible to distractions (such as checking email or social media)

Elements of Successful Virtual Conversations

- Process
- Skills
- Building Culture and Trust

Process Tips to Improve Your Virtual Communication

- Control the conditions
  - Establish time, day, participants, platform, number, if certain speakers will call in from the same location, quiet room, reserve bandwidth for optimal sound/video quality.
- Set reasonable expectations for call length
  - Changing circumstances may mean changes in childcare or other factors that make long calls challenging. Consider a series of short calls rather than one long one.
- Speaking procedure and order
  - One speaker at a time; non-speakers should mute their microphones to reduce background noise. Establish procedures for raising hands, giving non-verbal feedback, or voting.

Process Tips to Improve Your Virtual Communication

- Self-identify before speaking
  - Especially important for audio conferencing, or when speaking with new people

- Encourage requests for repetition
  - Let people know at the outset they should speak up if something is difficult to hear and that requests for clarification are welcome

- Use video where possible and maintain eye contact
  - Helps maintain communication and gives maximum information

- Make accommodations to allow participation from all
  - Closed captions, participating by text, interpreters, support people, etc.

Skills Tips to Improve your Virtual Communication

- ## Questions
  - Consider the type of question that will be most useful. **Open questions,** like "Tell me more about x…", "What are your thoughts on…", "Help me understand" can be helpful to gather information, while **closed questions** are helpful to confirm information and move forward (*Ask for More*, Alexandra Carter, forthcoming May 5, 2020)
  - In a virtual setting, it may be helpful to **identify the person** you would like to answer or suggest a sequence for responding
- ## Summarizing
  - Summarizing consists of **repeating the essence of what the person said**
  - It can be helpful to begin with "If I understood you correctly…" or "You are saying that…"
  - Summarizing can be particularly helpful in a virtual setting where it may be difficult to hear what has been said
  - After summarizing, quickly **confirm** that your summary was accurate

Skills Tips to Improve your Virtual Communication

- <u>Agenda Setting</u>
  - Setting an agenda can help ensure the participants **understand** the process and feel **comfortable**
  - Agenda-setting **steers the conversation** and can **focus the discussion** on the most important points
  - Agendas ensure that conversation remains **timely** and **organized** on key issues
- <u>Acknowledgement</u>
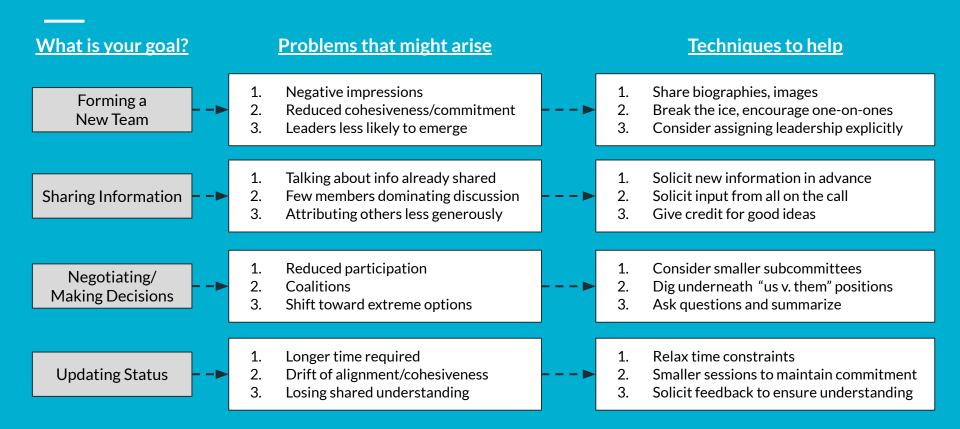 - Acknowledging emotions or contributions and validating effort makes participants feel **appreciated,** highlights **constructive behavior,** and **improves morale**
  - Acknowledgement helps people to feel **heard** and **understood**
  - **If** in a **group setting** and on **difficult subject matter,** consider also doing **one-to-one calls** to leave space for acknowledging emotion

Building Culture and Trust

- Purposeful culture-building

  - Beyond business goals, share your goals for team relationships and support. Bring the same presence on the phone/over video that you are in person.

- Create an open forum for team members to submit ideas and feedback

  - Create a place for members to store ideas. Invite them to evaluate how the virtual arrangements are meeting or not meeting their needs. Also check in one-on-one.

- Recognize diversity

  - Just as we all have different experiences of in-person conversations, recognize that people will experience virtual conversations differently.

Achieving Goals via Virtual Collaboration

What is your goal?	Problems that might arise	Techniques to help
Forming a New Team	1. Negative impressions 2. Reduced cohesiveness/commitment 3. Leaders less likely to emerge	1. Share biographies, images 2. Break the ice, encourage one-on-ones 3. Consider assigning leadership explicitly
Sharing Information	1. Talking about info already shared 2. Few members dominating discussion 3. Attributing others less generously	1. Solicit new information in advance 2. Solicit input from all on the call 3. Give credit for good ideas
Negotiating/ Making Decisions	1. Reduced participation 2. Coalitions 3. Shift toward extreme options	1. Consider smaller subcommittees 2. Dig underneath "us v. them" positions 3. Ask questions and summarize
Updating Status	1. Longer time required 2. Drift of alignment/cohesiveness 3. Losing shared understanding	1. Relax time constraints 2. Smaller sessions to maintain commitment 3. Solicit feedback to ensure understanding

Feedback

- What was useful from this presentation?

- What other topics would you like covered?

- What would be helpful to your organization?

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