MEETINGS

Virtual Meetings Don't Have to Be a Bore

by Andy Molinsky

March 19, 2020

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We've made our coronavirus coverage free for all readers.

Those of us who present, facilitate, and teach for a living understand the importance of developing a personal connection with an audience. It's critical to be and feel natural; to make people laugh, feel at ease, and fully engage — and perhaps even lose themselves — in the content you're delivering. That's why it feels so unnatural and awkward to create this kind of atmosphere in a virtual environment where you have no in-person audience at all.

As a professor, I'm now grappling with the challenges of teaching and presenting in a COVID-19 world and have recently brought my classes online as a result of the pandemic. But I'd been doing a great deal of online teaching and facilitating even before this crisis. I've done keynote speeches online — often to hundreds of people at a time. I've participated in group meetings both as a group member and as a consultant. I've also provided online training to people scattered around the globe on their computers or tablets, with all of us staring into that little dot of a camera at the top of our screens.

What have I learned about online teaching and facilitating from these different experiences over the past few years? That it's truly an entirely different context, not a simply an in-person meeting or class on a screen. And while you should shoot for the same goals as you would in an in-person setting, you'll need different tools to achieve them.

With that in mind, here are my tips for embracing the differences and making the most of a format you might not yet be comfortable with.

Make it personal

Virtual settings can feel quite impersonal because of the physical and psychological distance, so you need to be creative. For starters, I like to arrive to my online meeting early so I can greet people as they pop up on the screen and engage in a bit of friendly small talk before the main meeting. I also encourage people to turn on their video functionality, if possible, in order to enhance the personal connection. Because some people need preparation time to feel comfortable and presentable on video, I typically let them know ahead of time if video is preferred.

I also try to imagine the reactions of the people I'm interacting with — especially if I'm presenting to a large group — since I don't necessarily see these reactions as I would in real time. For example, when looking at the camera on the top of my screen, I remember to show a warm, engaging smile, insert an occasional laugh, and convey a friendly, engaging tone. It feels like acting at times, but at least to me, it doesn't feel false; it just feels necessary to create the warm, inviting effect that I'm aiming to create.

Finally, I also try to use people's names when referring to them, and invite them to take the floor and participate, if they feel comfortable doing so. And with a chat function that indicates who said what alongside video images with people's names, it makes personalized facilitation easier.

Convey warmth and presence

Typically, when we look at a screen, we do so passively, sinking into the couch to watch our favorite TV show or listen to a webinar or how-to video. But when you're facilitating an online meeting, you have to adopt an engaged, active persona in an environment that doesn't necessarily lend itself to that.

There are a number of little things you can do to create warmth virtually. For starters, make "eye contact" with your participants by looking directly into the camera as often as possible. This can be hard to remember to do, especially when the image of your participants may be away from where the camera is on your computer. I often manually move that image as close as I can to the camera, so I'm simultaneously making eye contact with them and also seeing their response.

You can also try to make sure that your image and the angle of the camera on your face is at a comfortable level for others to see you. When I first started out, I'd erroneously put my laptop on the desk and tilt the camera up to my face, which I soon learned gave my audience a great view of my nostrils.

Just like in-person settings, on-line environments also have their own distinct cultural rules and norms, and not all settings are the same. For example, there are some contexts — say, my undergraduate class or a meeting with collaborators on a consulting project — where it would be fun and appropriate to turn the camera on my dog laying by my feet on the floor. It's a great way to create a sense of warmth and connection. However, I probably wouldn't use the same tactic during a virtual keynote talk to a corporate audience or in an executive education presentation. In these more formal settings, I'd probably start with a personal story, a poll question, or ask people to write in where they're calling from — all in order to create a personal vibe that's more in line with that setting.

Get used to delayed feedback

Presenting virtually inevitably means learning to become comfortable — or comfortable enough — with a different mode of receiving feedback. For example, when delivering a virtual keynote speech, I typically receive no real-time feedback about how I'm doing. No nods of the head, no laughs from the audience, no opportunities to move around the room and engage with people in the crowd. In an online setting, I can deliver an entire 30-40 minute talk and by the end *have no idea at all about how well the message was received* until afterward, when I speak with the event organizers.

At first, I found this disconcerting and even distracting. My thoughts about my performance and its effectiveness or ineffectiveness were interfering with the very performance itself. But, over time, I learned to anticipate these feelings and remind myself that my talks are generally quite effective online, even if I receive no confirmation until well after the fact.

Make it interactive

I always try to make my presentations engaging and interactive — and with the right tools, you can make the virtual world just as engaging, if not more so. For example, I actively use the chat function. This enables people to comment in real time as I'm talking. Then I can involve these participants in a discussion. For example, I might say: "Anita just wrote in a great point about cultural differences in group dynamics — and it seems Juan also has a similar point to add. Do either of you want to explain to us your points in a bit more detail?" One big advantage of virtual settings is that they lower the bar for participation; you often get thoughts and insights from people who ordinarily might not speak in an in-person environment.

I often use the polling function on online platforms at the beginning of the session as well. It's a great warm-up for the discussion and an early opportunity to get people involved and engaged.

I have also started using break-out rooms on the platform Zoom, which enable you to instantaneously beam small groups of students into their own virtual chat rooms to discuss a case or a problem before reporting back to the larger group. As the facilitator,

you also have the ability to join these rooms yourself if you wish, just like you might be roaming around the room during a live event you're facilitating. And then when you're ready, you can bring everyone back to the overall meeting with a click of the mouse.

We are all getting used to operating in new ways — and moving to online platforms will push many of us out of our comfort zones. It's important to acknowledge that while this form of delivery is different, and challenging in some ways, it also has advantages. Perhaps the biggest is that it allows us to stay connected and engaged in what's a trying time for all.

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