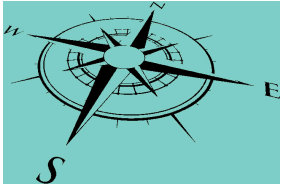# Five ways to be more intentional with virtual meetings

In recent weeks, I've been in some wonderful meetings that were better because they were online. Taking away the need to be in the same physical place means we can bring people together who wouldn't normally meet. And if we're smart about it, we can enable greater participation and a more engaging experience for all attendees.

I've learnt that the key is to be intentional. Making choices together about the why, who, what, how, and when of the meeting is even more important when you're not together in person. I hope this guide can help you organise and facilitate meetings that delight everyone who attends.

Contents

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Description:

Facilitation, complexity, learning and network weaving. Founder @LondonLIDN. Consultant — TI Group and LearnAdapt (DFID/ODI).

Vision

Greater participation and more engaging experiences

Mission

To make virtual meetings more intentional

Values

Intentionality

1. Purpose

Have a clear purpose

1.1. Outputs

Ask people ahead of time what they want to get out of meeting

A purpose is not the same as an agenda. A good purpose will tell you not only what you're trying to achieve, but also what you won't be discussing... The best way to figure out the purpose is to ask people ahead of time what they want to get out of the meeting (yup… it's not rocket science!).

1.2. Discrepancies

Discuss how to meet differing needs

It may turn out that your meeting means different things to different people. To one colleague it's about hearing updates, to another it's a chance to catch-up and connect, to another it's about prioritising next steps... If they say different things, then you can have a conversation about different ways to meet their needs. Can some of it be done on a shared document or an email update? Do you need another meeting, maybe with a smaller group of people? In what order might you tackle the needs of different people? If you think about it as a process of offline and online activities instead of a single event, you may stumble on a more effective option. It's better to consider this openly than to end up spending a couple of hours satisfying nobody.

1.3. Review

Review the purposes of gatherings

Reviewing the purpose of a gathering is especially important when you're moving a meeting than normally happens in-person online.

2. Co-Hosting

Work as a team of co-hosts

Stakeholder(s)

Emma Proud :
One of the pleasures of hosting Adapting to Covid (a workshop about how the international development sector might respond to Covid-19), was working with Emma Proud to plan and co-facilitate the workshop (see her tweets about how we designed it).

It works so much better to work as a pair (or more) when hosting a virtual meeting. It's impossible for you to be looking at people's faces, checking for questions in the chat, preparing the next set of breakout rooms and sharing links for slides, all while giving the next set of instructions and listening intently. The couple of times I've gone it alone, I've found that there will be a point that I've missed what someone has said because I'm fiddling with some settings or copying and pasting some text.

2.1. Speakers & Technicians

Plan in advance who will be speaking in different parts of a meeting and who will be the technical producer.

With co-hosts, you can plan in advance who will be speaking in different parts of a meeting and who will be the technical producer.

2.2. Blind Spots

Help each other see issues they may be missing

The real value of working with someone else, though, is that they see your blind spots and together you'll come up with a much better meeting plan than you would by yourself.

2.3. Tasking

Ask others to take responsibility for specified tasks

Top tip for cases where you're on your own: spread out the work by asking others to take responsibility for timekeeping, notetaking and (my favourite) being the rabbit hole monitor.

2.3.1. Timekeeping

Keep track of usage of the allotted time

2.3.2. Notetaking

Document significant points raised in the dialog

2.3.3. Rabbit Holes

Monitor and point out when the discussion may be leading into unproductive issues

3. Break-Outs

Experiment with break-out rooms

Stakeholder(s)

Zoom :

Before Covid-19 struck, I had heard about the break-out rooms in Zoom but never gotten around to figuring out how to use them. In the last few weeks, they have become an essential part of the meetings, workshops and meetups I've hosted. I won't describe the mechanics, but here are some resources to get you started:

- *This guide to the basics of Zoom is a helpful read even if you've used it a few times.*

- *An essential first step is to switch the breakout rooms feature on in your Zoom settings.*

Liberating Structures :

This video from Anna Jackson and Fisher Qua from the Liberating Structures community helped me get over my initial apprehension.

Anna Jackson

Fisher Qua

You can use breakout rooms in a whole bunch of ways including [in support of the following objectives] You'll just have to get used to the eerie silence of the main room when you've sent everyone off in groups.

3.1. Pairs & Prompts

Pair up for a few minutes to respond to a prompt together

At the beginning of a session, split people into pairs for a few minutes to respond to a prompt together. Then rinse and repeat with different pairs. This is the essence of impromptu networking and gets people used to being whisked away in breakout rooms.

3.2. Topics

Engage in deeper dialog

Give a group of 4–6 people longer to talk and go deeper into a topic in a 'Conversation Cafe' format. For this one, you'll need to give clear instructions in advance in the chat and/or on a slide.

3.3. Tasks

Accomplish tasks

Give groups a task to do together and ask them to record their ideas on a slide. You can even replicate an Open Space session (or a party) by making everyone a 'co-host' meaning they have the ability to move themselves between breakout rooms.

3.4. Self-Inclusion

Enable participants to move between breakout rooms

You can even replicate an Open Space session (or a party) by making everyone a 'co-host' meaning they have the ability to move themselves between breakout rooms.

4. Medium

Consider the medium of the conversation

In a normal face to face conversation, the medium is air. Sometimes we might write on sticky notes or a whiteboard, which helps us have a common understanding of what ideas are emerging and where we have agreement or disagreement. Often one person will be taking notes that are shared afterwards. When we're on a teleconference it can be more difficult to track where the conversation is going. The medium lacks nuance.

4.1. Visual Clues

Encourage participants to turn on their cameras during meetings

We don't have the visual cues we have in person and it's difficult to jump in and say you're confused. This is one reason I strongly suggest people turn on their cameras during meetings — it helps everyone to read the room (plus, seeing faces makes humans happy!).

4.2. Gesticulation

Establish norms for hand gestures for showing agreement/disagreement and for raising questions

It also helps to have norms for hand gestures for showing agreement or disagreement (clapping, thumbs up/ down, etc.) or for raising hands for a question.

4.3. Multiplexing

Allow contributions from many people in parallel

We can go further than this by having a shared space to not only record the conversation but to allow contributions from many people in parallel.

4.3.1. Chat Waves

Pose questions to participants

A simple way to do this is a 'chat wave'. Pose a question to participants and give them less than a minute to write an answer in the chatbox (it could be only a few seconds). Tell them to hold off pressing 'send' until you give the instruction. You'll see a wonderful flurry of messages emerge all at once. You can repeat this with a few questions in a row to make the most of momentum. A chat wave works especially well at the beginning or end of a session — for example, to get people warmed up or to get feedback. You can see some fascinating patterns emerge. If you were in person it would be impossible to get input from everyone at once, in a way that everyone can go back and review straight afterwards.

4.3.2. Crowdsourcing

Write together

When choosing between tools, consider how easy it is for people to get started — do they need to sign up for an account or learn a whole new interface? — as well as the features you need. This blog post is a helpful guide for choosing tools.

Stakeholder(s):

Crowdsourcing Tool Providers :   **Google**
Other places to write together include (roughly in
order of speed of set-up) Google JamBoards (great   **Miro**
for sticky notes), Google Slides and bespoke tools like
Miro and Mural.   **Mural**

4.3.2.1. Preparation

Set things up in advance

Just give yourself time to set things up in advance if you're using slides.

4.3.2.2. Sharing

Share the document

Make sure the document is shared (for viewing and/or editing) and has a title that makes it obvious what it is. Clearly label where people should be writing. If you've got 50 break-out groups, you'll need 50 places to write. And beware of exceeding participants' bandwidth: Zoom video, chat and breakout rooms plus writing in another window is a lot to handle all at once.

4.3.2.3. Focus

Make the written word the main focus of the meeting

You could even make the written word the main focus of the meeting — check out Silent Meetings. We've tried a variant of this for LIDN team meetings and they work well.

Stakeholder(s):
Silent Meetings

5. Patience

Expect things to take longer

A delay while someone installs Zoom. A poor internet connection when housemates are watching Netflix. Confusion from instructions not quite being clear. There are all sorts of reasons for delays in virtual meetings. Rather than feeling anxious that the time you're spending together isn't 'productive' — remember that there is plenty of spaciousness in in-person meetings too. Often, we need to go slow to go fast. It's tempting to skip over a check-in at the beginning of the meeting or to shorten the break from ten to five minutes but it'll catch up with us later when it hasn't been made clear from the start that everyone should be participating or we run out of steam.

5.1. Planning

Plan for things to take longer than they would in person

We need to plan for things to take longer than they would in person and be patient in the moment.

5.1.1. Humanity

Keep it human.

5.1.2. Reflection

Take time to breathe and for people to reflect by themselves.

5.1.3. Levity

Allow for moments of levity and connection.

5.1.4. Disagreement & Learning

Notice where there's disagreement and lean into it

[I]t might not be the conversation you expected to happen, but it might be the conversation that needs to happen for things to move forward.

5.2. Difficult Conversations

Connect well with others virtually in difficult conversations

We may prefer to connect with others and have difficult conversations face-to-face but while that's not an option, we need to get good at doing this virtually.

5.2.1. Chunking

Split up long meetings into shorter chunks

Splitting up long meetings into shorter chunks can help us better work with the energy of the participants; virtual meetings can be exhausting! Instead of a half-day workshop, have three 90-minute sessions. When people have to travel, it makes sense to lump a whole process together for the sake of efficiency. This constraint is absent for virtual meetings.

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