

The Tao of Virtual Meetings:

Finding the Ultimate Path Through
the Collaboration Space

By Kelly Kincaid

Productivity dynamics have shifted drastically in recent years. Increasingly, modern work is revolving around teams. Corporations now understand that groups tend to innovate faster, recognize mistakes more efficiently and identify better solutions to problems. This shift has changed how, where and when we work. As businesses everywhere implement new modus operandi, solo fliers are out and collaboration is in.



Of course, the medium of collaboration has changed, too. Virtual conferencing is fast replacing the boardroom for everyday meetings. With the availability of cloud-based collaboration services, all knowledge workers have the opportunity to increase engagement and build business relationships. So while workers continue to meet around the conference room table, chances are at least a

few are joining remotely. According to a recent Vodafone survey across 10 countries, employees are varying their hours and using the latest tech to work from home or on the move. And with 75 percent of companies worldwide now promoting flexible working policies, a new global record has been hit — 1.3 billion mobile workers (TRI, 2015) and counting.

In short, the methodology of work is leading us deeper into the digital woods. As we aim for expertise in this space, there's a need to signpost for best practice. And questions arise whether we are old hands or newbies to the virtual conferencing scene. Do virtual meetings have the same impact as face-to-face meetings? How do I best organize a virtual meeting? What strategies do I use to build and engage a strong collaborative team, especially with workers who rarely, if ever, meet in person?

At FreeConferenceCall.com, these are the kind of questions we live for. Best practice-seekers can rest assured — you have come to the right place. Ready to find that path through the trees? Let's get started.





Part I

Virtual Meetings vs. Face to Face: Benefits and Tradeoffs

"Clay is shaped into a bowl, but it is the empty space
that makes it useful." - Lao Tzu

Just like the clay bowl, virtual meetings are only as good as how you fill the space. Virtual meetings are real-time interactions supported by the Internet that may use a variety of integrated features: audio and/or video conferencing, screen sharing and collaborative tools, chat, cloud storage and application sharing. Participants are able to join the meeting from any location. Virtual meetings facilitate work from anywhere, as well as distance learning and web-based trainings.



Virtual meeting attendance is expected to grow at *twice the rate* of live meeting attendance



of respondents indicated they have a positive impression of virtual meetings

Meeting Professionals International

Maybe everyone you need to meet with is in the same location. Can you just skip virtual meetings entirely? While it might seem counterintuitive, virtual collaboration can actually be more effective for building and sustaining participation than a face-to-face meeting. In fact, Harvard Business Review concluded that remote workers are often more engaged with colleagues and supervisors than in-office workers.

It's the plethora of technological tools helping workers stay connected that makes the difference. In a virtual conference room, everyone has multiple pathways for real-time participation at their fingertips — whether it's through a mobile app, a whiteboard or an old-fashioned phone call. Hosts are empowered to choose the tools that best suit the subject of discussion.

Virtual meetings also have a leg up on face-to-face interactions in saving time, money and carbon emissions.

Unless you live for sharing an armrest with a stranger or other joys of work travel, virtual meetings are the most efficient solution, whether you're working on a project or product development. The flexibility of virtual conferencing platforms opens up countless collaborative opportunities. It becomes effortless to brainstorm, troubleshoot, get real-time feedback or elevate a meeting with a subject matter expert.

So what about the trade-offs? Some assert that meaning and intent can be lost in a virtual meeting, arguing that only face-to-face communication can

prevent misunderstandings. It's true, there are times when talking in person is more conducive to opening up. We maintain, however, that a wise facilitator can flip on the video conferencing and work through those issues. For more on building virtual trust, head to Part 3.

The benefits win the day. Quite simply, there's no reason not to get virtual meeting savvy. It's a great medium for collaboration whether your team is in-house or far-flung. In Part 2, find out more about structuring a virtual meeting for success.



Part II

The A to Z of Organizing Your Virtual Meeting Room

"A leader is best when people barely know he exists,
when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say, we
did it ourselves." - Lao Tzu

Leading a virtual meeting, then, means “disappearing” into an organized conferencing space. Demonstrating proficiency will set team members at ease and help facilitate a great exchange. So let’s get equipped with the details.



Articulating Your Agenda

Know what you want to cover and keep your virtual meeting grounded in reality. This might be obvious, but it can’t be stressed enough. Web conferencing etiquette states that structure matters, particularly when you’re not meeting in person. Reward participants for joining a conference call by showing you aren’t wast-

ing their time. Some people prefer getting the agenda in advance, by the way. If you find yourself typing up the agenda 10 minutes before the meeting begins, you might lose points with some personality types.



Bypass the Blunders

To ensure your meetings go off without a hitch, there are a few things to keep in mind. Check your account and feature settings, like entry/exit tones or caller announcements, before the meeting begins. Make sure you can easily connect to the web conferencing platform prior to the call and arrive on time (maybe even consider starting the call a little early). Use regular voice volume and allow people to tell you

if they're having a problem. If screen sharing, it's a good idea to confirm that everyone can see your screen. Next, make sure everyone is familiar with the mute button and the chat feature. Both are critical. If participants aren't speaking, they should be muted. Not only can muting prevent audio faux pas, it will help cut down on unwanted background noise and echoing. The chat functionality allows participants to ask questions or make comments while muted.

Of course, muting might seem like an open invitation for participants to multi-task. To counter the potential loss of focus, develop strategies for keeping participants engaged and responsive. More on that in Part 3.



Identifying Icebreakers

Love 'em or hate 'em, icebreakers are part of corporate culture. It's the way to get people communicating and comfortable the world over, and virtual meetings are no exception. The good news? Cyberspace puts an end to sweaty-handed "Human Knot" disasters and other similarly abysmal icebreakers.

And hey, an icebreaker doesn't have to be glaringly obvious. Reduce performance pressure and keep it simple:



Block out time for a little chitchat in the beginning of the meeting (this can double as an audio/video check). A bit of lightheartedness fosters camaraderie and makes it easier for team members to share ideas as the call progresses. This is especially critical for remote workers who lack face-time opportunities.



If you're up against a particularly long meeting, take a virtual coffee break and get to know each other a bit better.

For the diehard icebreaker devotee out there, here are a few suggestions for virtual meetings that everyone might enjoy:



Ask participants to take selfies in their workspace or a shot of their feet. Then pin pics to a virtual map. This offers a tiny window into each person's life and is a great conversation starter.



Play one of our favorites: “Whose Office Supply Is It, Anyway?”
(Alternative version: “Whose Feet Are Those, Anyway?”)



Mastering the Meeting Website

Some platforms have a meeting website where participants will find relevant information. Your aim? To make your meeting website a meaningful destination. Think back to the agenda you so carefully articulated — this is a great place for sharing it, along with other resources that you don't want to read through during the meeting itself. It can be helpful to post the more tedious pre-meeting work on the site and leave time for substantive (and more interesting) feedback for the meeting itself.



Nominate a Note Taker

Time to delegate. Ask someone to step up and seize the pen. Carpe penna, if you will. Since you're recording the virtual meeting, any helpful volunteer just needs to type fast enough to capture action items. As each agenda point concludes, the note taker can read out participant action items as a confirmation process. Don't forget to also distribute the notes after the meeting so everyone remembers their to-dos (more on this in Part 3).

Platforms that Perform

Whatever virtual collaboration platform you choose, make sure you're comfortable navigating through it. Opt for a solution that is intuitive and agile.

Remember, the goal is a fluid exchange of ideas and information, so the technology should meet your requirements and then get out of the way. Make sure the solution offers a variety of ways to connect and is a no-brainer for participants to join.

- ✓ Desktop app
- ✓ Mobile app
- ✓ Old school landline
- ✓ VoIP dial-in
- ✓ Video conferencing
- ✓ Screen sharing
- ✓ International dialing
- ✓ Easy meeting entry
- ✓ Toll-free option

Rewards of Recording

Most conference call providers offer a recording feature; some services allow you to create an archive of your virtual meeting for free and give you a designated amount of storage space at no additional charge. There are big payoffs for taking advantage of this feature.

If you're making an important presentation, recording=practice. Record yourself and play it back to scan for any weak points or choppy transitions. If practice makes perfect, you could skip the live version and just broadcast your presentation within the meeting.

Recording also enables people to review the meeting later. Remember, everyone learns differently. Some participants may need to hear or see information multiple times for it to sink in.

If the virtual meeting is a webinar, training or workshop, recording opens up marketing opportunities galore. For more tips, check out [Finding Webinar Gold: A Map to Content, Platform and Marketing Greatness](#).



Simple Scheduling

You finally have a meeting time digitally inked into the calendar. Then you remember that a team

member is in China for the week. Fortunately, you don't have to do the math for wildly divergent time zones all by your lonesome. There are plenty of free tools available, from Doodle to World Chat Clock. But also be sure to select a virtual meeting platform that features an invite tool and meeting calendar. Even better, look for a platform that also features Outlook® and Google Calendar™ integration for easy scheduling.



The Veritas of Video

Physical cues are critical to interpreting meaning. Words actually account for only seven percent of total

communication. The rest is non-verbal, which means your body will be communicating whether you intend it to or not.

To get your body saying the right things, nod your head, smile genuinely, maintain eye contact (that means look at the camera, not your own little square), sit up, lean forward and gesture openly. Just don't get carried away. Excessive nodding looks forced. A plastered-on smile or eye contact lasting longer than five seconds can seem creepy. And resist the urge to fuss with hair, face or clothes.

Also, avoid video fiascos by keeping the camera at eye-level and double checking the background before going live. Neat and tidy office=good, bathroom door=bad.



Zen in the Zero Hour

We'll wrap up this section with a simple reminder. Don't get distracted by the "techiness" of it all. "By letting go, it all gets done," Lao Tzu once said. Relax, breathe (into a bag, if necessary) and be you. A virtual meeting is just another way to work, so treat it like it's another everyday meeting. One, of course, with a mute button.

The background of the slide is a close-up photograph of a spiderweb covered in water droplets. The lighting is soft and warm, creating a bokeh effect with the droplets. A white rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the main title and subtitle. Inside this box, there is a smaller white rectangular box containing the specific topic of the slide.

Part III

Strategies for Maximizing Engagement

Why We Need a Psychological Safety Net in the Virtual
Meeting Room

In this final section, we strategize how to keep virtual meeting participants on task. Collaboration is a game changer, but some people definitely work together better than others. To plot the best route through the virtual meeting landscape, we need to first understand what makes teams effective.

As Charles Duhigg of New York Times Magazine describes, Google's Project Aristotle initiative has endeavored to understand just that. Project researchers undertook an extensive study of team effectiveness and dug down to try to understand the impact of group norms — or the set of unspoken and largely unwritten informal rules that govern individual behaviors when we gather together.

As it turns out, what distinguished “good” teams from dysfunctional groups was how teammates

treated one another. They discovered there was one key to success: Establishing the psychological safety of group members.

Being Fully Present

Amy Edmonson of Harvard Business School describes psychological safety as “a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up.” The goal is for team members to feel free to interact with colleagues and to share ideas. It seems Lao Tzu was right when he declared, “Kindness in words creates confidence.”

Achieving this goal requires progressing past outdated business acumen that declares emotions have no place in the corporate sphere. As Google researchers surmised, no one wants to put on a “work face” and leave their personality and inner life at the office door;

rather, psychological safety is the prerequisite for being “fully present” at work.

Strategies to Engage and Encourage

When team members are collaborating at a distance, weaving that psychological safety net is even more salient a challenge — especially if we expect to harness the full benefits of teaming. So now for the big question: How does a virtual meeting leader facilitate a secure environment that fosters all-important collaboration? According to Edmondson, building a healthy team climate starts with leaders encouraging team members to be curious, passionate and empathic.

Extrapolating from Google’s data, virtual team collaboration will thrive if team members are encouraged to communicate openly about issues and impediments,

strive to resolve surfaced concerns and contribute time and effort towards ensuring balanced exchanges.

Three Treasures and Four Rules

Does all this engaging and encouraging seem easier said than done? Perhaps, but take advantage of wisdom that has lasted through the ages. As Lao Tzu advised, “Simplicity, patience, compassion. These three are your greatest treasures.”

In the same vein, Edmondson offered up four rules that apply to every workplace leader: “When leaders ask genuine questions and listen intently to the responses, display deep enthusiasm for achieving team goals and show they’re attuned to everyone’s diverse perspectives no matter their position in the hierarchy, curiosity, passion and empathy start to take root in a culture,” she declares.

Rule 1: Prompt, Don't Push

As moderator, keep in mind that not everyone will speak up without a little prompting — but don't forget that it isn't productive to put someone in a tight spot, either. Invite people to contribute, but carefully regulate your tone of voice and language to communicate that it's acceptable if they do not choose to. The goal is to have a real conversation, and one won't emerge from beneath strict regulations or the threat of repercussions.

Rule 2: Chat It Up

Some participants might be more comfortable interacting via chat. As Jaclyn Kostner, Ph.D., founder and CEO of Bridge the Distance, Inc. related to Forbes Insights, instead of going around the virtual table to present ideas or solutions one by one, a moderator can state an issue and “each person in the [virtual] meeting can offer an idea all at the same time by typing it into the group chat.” As Kostner concludes, virtual collaboration can result in better participation than face-to-face meetings. “Participants will be more deeply engaged, since there's an instantaneous response to their participation — their input matters.”

Rule 3: Mix It Up

Switch up media to capture interest. Think about your stash of recorded meetings and webinars, YouTube videos, GIFs, images or even song snippets that could drive home a point in a memorable way. Also, consider breaking up the monotony by switching presenters (with advance notice!). This will not only challenge team members, it will highlight each person's preferred work style.

Rule 4: Follow It Up

After everyone exits the virtual meeting room, your job is nearly done. Make sure to send out a copy of action items and a link to the recorded meeting. Offer the opportunity for participants to ask further questions. Lastly, thank everyone for their attention and don't hesitate to be specific about employee contributions. Details make the difference between a platitude and positive feedback.

The Takeaway

The “tao of virtual meetings” can’t all be sourced from a handbook. The best way forward has to be built, one team member at a time — starting with you. When we connect, as Duhigg asserts, “we must know that we can be free enough, sometimes, to share the things that scare us without fear of recriminations. We must be able to talk about what is messy or sad, to have hard conversations with colleagues who are driving us crazy. We can’t be focused just on efficiency.”

Ultimately, virtual collaboration happens when everyone is heard and has the freedom to work together through a shared space. The quality of that shared space can be maximized with a few basic organizational tools and a little bit of know-how. As

meeting leaders become more proficient navigating the virtual conferencing landscape, their energy can be focused towards effective facilitation. In other words, with the broad strokes out of the way, you can hone in on the finer points of getting the most out of your team.

And remember, you’re not wandering through the digital woods all alone. At FreeConferenceCall.com, our Customer Care team is right here, 24/7.



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