

HOW TO HOLD PRODUCTIVE REMOTE MEETINGS

When your team needs to connect from a distance, you'll need to adjust your approach to ensure that you keep people's attention, that everything gets done, and that no one feels left out.

Facilitation

Use your voice to direct the flow of conversation.

In person, discussions tend to unfold naturally. You look at someone, and they feel compelled to talk. For remote meetings, no one knows what you're looking at, so you'll need to use your voice more forcefully than you may be accustomed to in order to prompt others (e.g., "Yamada, what are your thoughts on this?"), discourage dominators (e.g., "Thanks for that, Joe. Who else has thoughts about this?"), or play traffic cop if multiple people want to speak (e.g., "Pinyin, you first. Then Jane.").

Seek feedback to be sure the discussion is meeting participant needs.

A few well-placed questions like, "Is this discussion helpful?" or "Should we spend more time on this or should we move on?" or "It seems like we're digressing and it's time to move on. Does that sound OK?" can make the difference between getting things done and half the group getting bored and tuning out.

Allow a few seconds of silence for people to speak up.

Remote communication can be a split second slower than in-person, so allow for that. They may be waiting to see if others jump in first or fumbling to unmute themselves.

Narrate for the group what nonverbal cues you're seeing.

This will help everyone understand people's moods and reactions (e.g., "I see Jean nodding" or "Fulana, you look like you might have a thought on this - are you concerned?").

Technology

Start with a sound check.

By asking everyone to say a casual hello as a way to test their microphones and volume, you'll avoid having to interrupt the conversation later with "We can't hear you."

When possible, request that attendees turn their cameras on.

It can be tempting to sub in that polished headshot for an actual live broadcast, but it's best to turn on your camera as much as possible. Especially when working remote, it's key to get input from facial expressions and other non-verbal cues, and it also fosters a sense of connection and camaraderie that's so important for any team.

Ask those with iffy internet connections to also call in on their phones (and mute their computer audio). Separating the video and audio feeds ensures that you can still hear someone's point even if their face is frozen in mid-sentence on the screen.

Use mute feature when appropriate.

For large meetings, to reduce background noise, ask participants to mute unless speaking. This helps especially in meetings with many participants, if someone is outside, or when some participants are in public spaces. For smaller meetings, consider leaving microphones on so people can catch the "Aah" and "Mm-hmm" verbal cues of what others are thinking and feeling in response to the person speaking.

When possible, share your screen and use visuals to engage people.

Prepare and open them ahead of time to avoid making everyone sit through 30 seconds of watching you search your desktop or waiting for a website to load. Enlarge visuals to full screen, especially if you notice participants leaning in and squinting.

Encourage participants to use the chat feature for asides.

Since only one person can speak at a time in remote meetings, chat can be a great way for someone to share small details without interrupting the speaker (e.g., "I have to leave five minutes early for a client call").

Caveat: Don't let chat become a substitute for remote participants speaking their minds. If you notice a substantive point in chat, prompt the person (e.g., "Matti, you just made an important point in chat - could you expand on that?").

Planning

Have a detailed agenda.

Agendas for virtual meetings are especially important. When a conversation wanders, people's attention will, too - after all, you're competing with their in box and news and social media feeds. If you can't come up with a solid agenda for a standing meeting, check in with participants about whether you need to meet at all or if a quick check in is all that is needed.

Invite only those who truly need to be there.

When in doubt, ask people beforehand if they want to attend or make their meeting invites optional. If you have agenda topics relevant to only some participants, put the full-group agenda items first, allowing people to drop off if they'd like when the subject shifts.

For exploratory discussions, plan a structure.

It is possible to have creative and collaborative discussions remotely - just be explicit with people how they should contribute and give them time to prepare (e.g., frame the issue in advance and ask everyone to bring three ideas to share and discuss). Also plan for how you'll share and organize ideas, whether that's through a simple online doc, etc.

Assign meeting roles.

People are more likely to stay engaged if they have a specific responsibility, whether that's keeping time, taking group notes, leading an agenda item, or serving as designated dissenter to prevent the group from lazily going along with an idea without considering alternatives.