

Facilitating Fabulous Online Meetings

As the leader of an online meeting, workshop or other virtual gathering, it's your responsibility to ensure that things go smoothly, and if there are any hiccups, manage them effectively. Follow these tips to facilitate online meetings with grace and ease.

Tip #1: Manage your energy and presence

Preparation is key! Ensure you feel prepared before the meeting or session, physically and mentally, and content and process-wise. Hydrate. Be well rested. Review your materials. Organize your environment. Have your supplies ready, batteries charged or devices plugged in, and limit distractions and potential interruptions so your attention can be on the meeting or session.

It can be helpful to visualize your meeting flow and play it out in your mind's eye -- just like athletes do with a big race or game. Picture yourself bringing the energy and aplomb to the space as you open the space and connect with participants...lead a discussion about group agreements...review the agenda...keep time and document decisions...agree on actions and follow-ups...ask participants to evaluate the meeting...and close the space.

As you lead the session, pay attention to your physical and mental stamina and make adjustments to help sustain your energy and focus. Sip water. Breathe deeply. Have a snack to nibble nearby.

Tip #2: Manage the time-space continuum

One of the primary functions of a facilitator or workshop leader is to ensure you deliver the content of the session within the allocated time and get through the agenda to the desired outcome. No one likes when things run long, and many of us are booked up solid during our business day. You'll risk people dropping off your call if it looks like the agenda's run amok like kittens chasing butterflies.

Keep a clock or your phone handy, or run a timer on your screen so you can stay within time parameters, or, assign time management to a participant who's keen to be the timekeeper. Listen particularly for circular discussions, where people are saying the same thing in different ways and the agenda isn't moving forward.

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Use a “parking lot” to capture ideas that aren’t on-topic so they can be carried forward to a future meeting or session. And, know when people need to stay on a topic because it is a rich and meaningful discussion. This comes with practice, so don’t sweat it if this is new and feels a bit awkward. The solution? Ask: do we need to dwell here? Is there something else to be revealed? Or, can we move on?

If it looks like entire agenda items or topics won’t be covered in the allotted time, step in and let the group know that a particular item will be tabled for a future conversation. This helps them stay focused on the present topic and come to resolution.

Tip #3: Manage the personalities

We’ve all been in meetings with someone who likes to hear themselves talk, or has trouble staying on topic, or initiates side conversations. With online meetings, you have some unique tools at your disposal that you don’t have in a face-to-face meeting; namely, the mute and video control buttons!

It’s best to mute everyone except the speaker at any given time, especially if participants are at home or in a loud environment. Recommend folks wear headphones or earbuds to further cut down distractions.

Watch for disruptive behaviour and address it promptly by pointing back to the group agreements you established at the beginning of the session. You did that, right?

If online meetings are new to participants, tell them the process to use when they want to speak. For example, they could wiggle a pen to let you know they have something to share, or they could raise their hand, or they could type their name in the chat function for you to call on them in order. Make it easy for participants to... participate!

Keep an eye on the body language of each team member or client, and be sure to name into the space any questions about how things landed, or what’s going on with them. It’s important to feel into the energy of the shared environment and speak to things that feel “off” or very present, such as excitement. Again, this comes with practice.

Don’t be afraid to take charge and lead participants through the meeting or session, especially if virtual settings are new to them. They are looking to you to guide them through the experience safely and efficiently, so bring your mad skillz!

See my other tip sheets at www.jillyhyndman.com/virtually-awesome on (#1) hosting online meetings and (#3) creating connection online for more tips, and feel free to send your participants (#2 - Tips for Participants) so they can be fabulous online participants for you!