

Inclusive and Engaging Online Meetings

INTRODUCTION

Our current remote working environment brings both opportunities and challenges for inclusivity and engagement online. Technology can facilitate connections. At the same time, it can stifle engagement and create barriers to access and inclusivity. This document shares key principles and approaches for creating inclusive and engaging online meetings.

PRINCIPLES FOR INCLUSIVE AND ENGAGING MEETINGS

Priority for Equity Diversity and Inclusion (EDI): Diversity creates value for the team when all team members are able to contribute to and influence team discussions and decisions.

Incorporating equity, diversity and inclusion practices into your online meetings will result in a richer experience for all team members.

Flexibility: Working remotely and meeting online will require a flexible approach. What is easy and workable for some will be hard for others. Take the time to identify the technology and team norms that will ensure all team members can participate equally.

Power and position: Technology may exacerbate differences in power and privilege. Take steps to create inclusion rather than assuming it will happen automatically. Without conscious inclusion efforts, exclusion can result.

Listening and respect: While not requiring disclosure, ask about what people are experiencing and find ways to learn from and integrate their perspectives. Respect that everyone will have a different approach to what they want to share.

Embrace awkwardness: We will make mistakes, and need to create new norms of doing everything (saying hello; asking questions; leaving a meeting; confirming what someone is saying.) Normalize the strangeness of this, and propose, model and structure ways to do these things.

PLANNING FOR INCLUSIVE AND ENGAGING MEETINGS

Take the time to plan the meeting process, tools and activities to build in inclusion and engagement. Below are some considerations to set your meetings up for success:

1. Leverage your technology to increase engagement

- Plan to use the interactivity tools that are part of your platform. Zoom, MS Teams and Skype for business have options for sharing your screen, poll questions, break out meeting rooms, chat/text boxes, interactive white boards and shared document annotation.
- Explore external free apps and tools such as: [slido](#) or [menti](#), to create interactive polls, quizzes, word clouds or manage Q and A's.

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- Recognize that technology can allow more equitable participation by neutralizing the ability to use physical presence to gain more attention. Remote meetings allow for all faces on screen at same time and provide options to participate verbally or in writing.
- Practice using new technology or functions before the meeting so you can move smoothly between screenshare, breakouts, polls or other tools while managing group interactions via video or chat. This creates a seamless experience for all participants.

2. Support participants using the technology to ensure equal opportunities for participation

- For larger meetings, assign a co-pilot to help with the technical aspects of the meeting such as breakouts, chats or technical challenges experienced by participants. The co-pilot can also help manage participation by flagging questions raised in the chat.
- Plan to provide a brief overview of the technical features of the platform at the start of each new meeting so everyone can participate equally. Recognize that different devices have different navigation options (desktop, smartphone, tablet or phone)
- Consider what options work best for each group and develop team agreements for regular online meetings. Some examples include: Will all participants be using video? How to mute on/off? Best way to indicate participation (raised hand or simply unmute and talk?) How to participate if on the Phone? Continue to experiment and expect this to change over time if your group meets regularly.
- Acknowledge challenges with video. Not everyone is comfortable being seen in a video or having their homes seen. Acknowledge challenges with the chat function, not everyone can type quickly or is confident with their spelling and grammar.
- Silence is not agreement. Allow extra time for people to respond to questions or participate in discussion. It may take time to find the unmute button, type a response or to summon the courage to step into the online space without talking over someone else.

3. Structure meetings to encourage participation

- Set up each meeting with clear explanations for respectful participation including what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable forms of interaction.
- Plan clear and simple agendas and send them out early, including any preparation and discussion questions. It can be helpful to post a link to the agenda in the chat function for easy access during the meeting. Include sufficient time for set-up, check-ins, dialogue, debriefing and check out.
- Keep meetings short and ensure people have breaks between meetings to avoid “Zoom fatigue”. Shorter, more frequent meetings are better than long sessions online.
- Make sure that processes are clear before you call on people so they’re not caught unaware. (e.g. everyone will be called on to participate with options to “pass”, how to “raise your hand” etc.)

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- Emphasize the various ways participants can contribute, including typing questions/comments in the chat, raising hand to speak, and options for smaller breakout discussions

4. Acknowledge barriers to online participation and plan to mitigate them

- Some disabilities make it hard to do certain tasks such as keyboarding, looking at screens, or sustaining attention. Additional time or frequent breaks might be needed. Some disabilities require special hardware such as adaptive keyboards, or special software for voice recognition or optical character recognition. Ensure these are available at home.
- People may have varying skill levels with reading and typing. Offering materials in multiple formats, providing notes, providing materials in advance and as a follow-up can help make sure people have access to the same information.
- Varying socioeconomic circumstances mean a broad spectrum of access to resources, including private space, individual use computers, specialized hardware and software, internet access, etc. Respectfully ensure your team has options to participate.
- The type of digital device used can limit the file types participants can access and the screen size of phones or tablets can limit the ability to access materials while participating in online meetings.
- Address and minimize power imbalances online by rotating speaking order, providing the opportunity to “pass” on contributing, or establishing speaking time limits.

CREATING AN INCLUSIVE AND ENGAGING ONLINE MEETING SPACE

As committee chair or team leader, there are many ways you can build an environment of safety and trust that creates inclusive and engaging online meeting spaces.

1. Acknowledge the context of working remotely and social isolation creates its own stressors, and employees may be distracted by competing priorities and challenges in their own lives. Ensure everyone knows where and how to get [mental health assistance](#).
2. Prioritize social connections as well as business results by building in time and activities for participants to create personal connections with colleagues.
3. Leverage the informality of being at home by providing opportunities for participants to share something about their home workspace, introduce a pet or have a family member say hello to the team.
4. Expect some challenges with the online environment and roll with it. Model calmness and acceptance of technological and communication challenges. Repeat instructions and provide support both verbally and using the chat function or written instructions.
5. Online communication can exacerbate misunderstandings, and it can make it easier to ignore or dismiss conflict when we are not in the same room. Don’t shy away from difficult conversations. Embrace repetition as a way of reinforcing team agreements and create clarity around expectations for respectful communication.