7 TIPS

FOR MANAGING VIRTUAL MEETINGS WITH CARE DURING A PANDEMIC

Written by Kiara Nagel

As a professional facilitator and trainer in online and in-person spaces, I have found myself supporting colleagues and loved ones as they move work online, often onto new tech platforms and with new methods all while managing their own existence during a pandemic. Recognizing the strain this shift to online collaborative work has put on so many, I wanted to offer some tips for managing virtual meetings with extra love and care, making sure to leave room for a new collective existence to unfold. In the meantime, here are **7 tips for managing virtual meetings with care during a pandemic**.

1. **Prep with love.**
2. **Don't go it alone. Have a copilot.**
3. **Prioritize people and relationships.**
4. **Get creative.**
5. **Remember you have a body.**
6. **Celebrate what works, change what doesn't.**
7. **Keep it short, keep 'em coming back.**

Below I explain each tip and include ideas for how to practice it in your virtual meetings.

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1. Prep with Love

Preparation is an act of love for the people who will take time to meet virtually. You know the meeting that could have been an email? Well, that goes double for virtual meetings during a pandemic! In addition to determining if and why a meeting is needed, virtual meetings require extra kinds of prep. Good prep can make it easier for people to connect, have fun, get things done and be good to one another. We know people are going through a lot. Don't add to their stress. Prep well from a place of love.

Ideas for prepping virtual meetings with love:

- ***Who:*** Typically, we consider who needs to be invited to this conversation. How many people are expected? How well do they already know each other and know about the topic? For Virtual Meetings, you also want to consider how experienced they are with this form of virtual meeting and the technology you are using in particular. If it's their first time, they are going to need a lot more time to just get comfortable with that before you jump into the meeting.

- ***What:*** What are you trying to accomplish? It can be as simple as a chance to connect and share information or getting input or agreement on how to move an aspect of work forward. Being clear and transparent about what the meeting is about can ease anxiety by letting people know what to expect and how to prepare themselves to participate.
- ***How:*** Given what you are trying to accomplish and who you are expecting, you can make some choices about how to design your meeting including structure of the conversation but also what tech tools might best support. Consider accessibility and special circumstances. Your main job is to make it easier for people to do their work together so any tools or agenda are only as good as they serve the people you are working with. Communicate necessary information in advance of the meeting: how to access the meeting, any steps for joining the call or video platform, an agenda, desired outcomes, any pre-work or other information. No one wants to be wading through long emails and extra information right now. Keep it simple and clear as possible.

Once you have a good plan prepared, get ready to be flexible and responsive and deviate from the plan if the group or moment requires it.

2. Don't Go it Alone. Have a Copilot.

Life is more fun with a copilot and facilitation during a pandemic is no different. It's a lot to be working right now while you adjust to life dramatically changing, witness mass injustices daily, and navigate through fear and grief. This is the time to support each other as full and complicated human beings and practice good co-facilitation. And we can have multiple copilots. When people have a role, they are more engaged. So ask or invite multiple people to take on different roles and share more of the responsibility for success. When we do it together, the load quickly lightens.

Roles your copilot can play in the meeting:

Before the meeting:

- Help you prepare, think through agenda design, or test technology.

During the Meeting:

- Help manage time
- Take notes

- Manage chat or call on people who want to speak
- Lead short introductions or icebreakers
- Watch for visual cues
- Set up and run breakout rooms.
- Participate
- Provide Tech support: is sound or video working for everyone? They can also share their phone numbers in case anyone needs tech support during the meeting and step in if you have bandwidth issues. We lost you!? Don't worry, copilot is there.

After the meeting:

- Check in with you and/or other participants to debrief as needed
- Review feedback, share notes, and follow up on next steps
- Give you personal feedback or encouragement, offer observations or advice.

3. Prioritize People and Relationships

It's the people that keep the people coming back. This is true in virtual meetings, and even more so during a pandemic. Allowing time for people to connect, get to know each other, get and give support, and have their voice heard should be part of every meeting. But in all this uncertainty, it can be especially life affirming and gives us permission to step into leadership, be brave and creative and take collective action. These are all things we need right now.

I recently received an email moments before a meeting started from a colleague saying their partner was Covid-19 positive and had just been hospitalized and they didn't feel like they could join the meeting to talk about the pandemic. I responded they should prioritize care for themselves and their family and they were welcome to join at any point if they felt up to it. Eventually they got on and chose to share what they were feeling with the group and the meeting became much more meaningful. People deepened their discussion about how the pandemic was impacting them and their work and this led to new ideas about how to move forward.

The truth is we don't always know what people are dealing with but we know everyone is adjusting and carrying a lot of stress and the impact of Covid-19 is not distributed equally. Traditional disparities of privilege and oppression are only heightened in our ability to protect ourselves and our families' health and exposure, weather the financial and economic impact, and adjust to what is constantly emerging and changing. We can consider how to create room for people to move through this together.

For now, we are able to connect virtually and people can learn together, organize, and create new cultures for their communities. It's possible to be in solidarity without forcing anyone to share things they might not feel like sharing. Prioritizing people and relationships over profit and productivity right now is a gift you can give, a tiny revolutionary act in your virtual meetings. And if, over time, you find this improves your meetings and ability to work together, maybe this is one of those things we decide to keep after the pandemic.

Ideas for prioritizing people and relationships in virtual meetings:

- In virtual meetings, you can combine relationship building time with checking to ensure accessibility and functionality of the technology. For example, people practice taking themselves on and off mute to introduce themselves, making sure everyone's sound and video are working. Or people get comfortable typing and reading responses in the chat or in a shared notes document. I like to ask a question and have each person who answers call on the next person when they finish and keep it moving. This avoids awkward silence and can be fun and playful.
- In a small group you can ask everyone to introduce themselves and share something. I often start with something upbeat like:
    - *What is keeping you grounded, energized, or hopeful in this time?*
    - *Share something you are proud of in your work or in how you have been managing all the changes and challenges we are facing?*
    - *Who is one person or one thing that inspired you (this week/month)?*

This way people can share at the level they choose to engage with. If someone is having a hard time, they can focus on one thing that might be bringing them joy or support and they also get to hear a bunch of good stuff from others which can move energy around. Keep it authentic and match the energy of people in the meeting. You don't want to be overly cheery or silly with a group that is very serious or be too intense and sad with a group that might just be trying to get through the day. Adjust to the people and culture you are working with and the mood or energy you are sensing in the moment.

In recent meetings, I have also asked questions like:
- *What is the weirdest panic purchase you made since the pandemic began?*
- *What don't you miss from our work and lives before the pandemic?*

If the group is larger, you might not have time to have everyone do full introductions but you can still build relationships. Use the chat feature on platforms like Zoom or have people type into a shared notes document and read a few highlights out loud. Thank

people for sharing and taking the time. You can also ask for names and locations out loud or in the chat. If the group is very large it can be useful for security reasons that you hear or see something from each person so you know who is on the call. You can call on people and make the process go more swiftly.

Sometimes it may seem like there isn't enough time to check in or build relationships but two things to keep in mind: 1) Trust that this will be time well spent and 2) You can do a lot in a small amount of time.

4. Get Creative

People learn and engage differently but very few human beings can sit comfortably, listen, and pay attention for hours on end no matter how interesting the people or the topic. These days people are having to do more and more of their work, play, and socializing online. Extended periods of virtual time make staying engaged challenging. So it's important we be creative in the meetings we have during the pandemic.

Avoid creating expectations for business as usual. Instead, see what is possible and generative to people in this time. Experiment to see what is useful to you and your group and the work you are trying to do together. Try a new tech tool, wear funny hats, bring in music or poetry for inspiration. If nothing else, break the monotony of endless online meetings with a little creativity.

Ideas for creative engagement in virtual meetings:

- Visuals can bring meetings to life, help keep us focused, bring more fun to the work. If you are able to share your screen you can give people something to follow along with. You can also use slides, photos, video clips and more. I often prepare a slidedeck to share a powerpoint presentation or I might bring in imagery for relationship building. I ask people to share an image or gif that captures how they are doing, what they are thinking of, or elements of their vision.
- Use a shared notes document like [google docs](#) to allow people to edit simultaneously. This gives you a lot of options, even if you are only on by phone and have no video access. You can take notes together, everyone can have access and some even like to follow along or help out. I might prepare a shared document ahead of time to use in different ways:
  - Share the agenda and some questions to consider
  - Create a template to fill out and get input from others.
  - Create a template for breakout groups to take their own notes.

- - I might make a little table and put everyone's name in a column and give the group 5 minutes to fill out a question or two. If people see others typing they add their ideas in. It is a great way to simulate working together in the room even when we are apart.
  - Surveys can gather input or feedback from a group, even generate ideas or questions.
  - Zoom has a white board feature that is a lot of fun for allowing people to write freehand and draw together.
  - Slido is great for putting out polls or questions to or from the group. This allows you to see results in real time so you can brainstorm together and surface ideas.
  - Use music to share a song you like. What would be the theme song for our group right now? Gather answers and make a collective playlist.
  - Laughter and humor always helps us stay engaged and enjoy our work. Share a joke, a favorite meme, a cute cat video? In good taste, as appropriate, a good laugh is more than welcome in virtual meetings.

There are many platforms and tools to choose from and other articles written about their pitfalls and potential. The important thing is to use what is right for what you are trying to do. I was recently in a Zoom meeting where everyone had their cameras turned off and I was thinking the whole time, this could just be a phone call. On another call, the intention was to encourage discussion but sharing a screen the whole time means you can't see faces as well. This caused conversation to dwindle and we all ended up quietly staring at that screen. Use technology but don't let it use you. Do you want to talk? Do you need to see each other? Do you need to view a document? Not every tool is useful to the kind of work you are doing so use what is useful and experiment with how you can make the experience more enticing and conversations more exciting.

5. Remember You Have a Body

This is a disorienting time. It can be harmful both physically and emotionally. Whether it's going to the gym, dinner with friends, or visiting loved ones, many of the things we usually do to bring ourselves comfort are not possible right now. Instead, we spend time isolated in the house, at times idle, absorbing alarming news and wondering how long all of this will continue. Sitting in virtual meetings all day causes our neck and shoulders to get tight, our energy waxes and wanes, and our bodies beg for relief.

There are many ways to support people to be more present, focused, and embodied during your virtual meetings. Stretch, move, dance, ground, breathe, play, and laugh. It's becoming common knowledge that pants are generally optional for virtual meetings, but

any way to remind us that we have a whole body that is present and alive is most welcome and needed in this time.

Ideas for practicing more embodied virtual meetings:

Grounding techniques can be powerful and well received. Remember they are also not the only way to remind us we have a body and can sometimes cause disassociation depending on how they are presented and practiced. A few weeks ago a friend shared they were on virtual meetings all day and each one started with grounding and silent meditation and it was a bit too much. As a result, they started coming increasingly late to meetings, sheepishly hoping it would all be over. It's good to check in with people in your meeting to find out what they like, want, and need.

- Guided visualization or grounding: Close eyes, feel feet on the ground, body in chair. Notice pain and tension. Breathe and relax.
- Moment of silence, moment of group breath. Pay attention to breath. Take three deep breaths together. Silent pauses give people time to breathe, reflect, stay calm. Breathing brings oxygen to our brains and helps us better manage constant low grade trauma.
- Tell us something you see in your room/ out your window
- Moment of Massage: take a minute to massage something on yourself that needs extra attention or a little love.

In virtual meetings, sometimes you want to bring more centered energy but sometimes you also want to bring the energy up, get more relaxed or silly or freed up or high energy. If you want to bring energy up or in, move something, anything.

- Have people introduce themselves with a movement or sound, the group repeats it back. Everyone is moving.
- Have everyone look up, look down, right/left. Roll your neck and shoulders. A couple rounds of Simon Says?
- Go outside or go on a walk together. One on one or smaller meetings can be walking meetings, you can be on the phone. If on camera, you can show people your face or your view as you talk to feel more connected and in motion. Use a headset to cut down on wind and background noise.
- Group stretch. Anyone can lead it. I like to ask someone to show a stretch, the whole group tries it out, and then they pass it to another person on the call to lead the next one. We do a couple rounds, different people lead, we laugh and move and get back to work.
- Shake out your hands for at least 60 seconds to rewire your nervous system and interrupt carpal tunnel cramps.

- 1 minute dance party. Put on music and give everybody one minute to dance. Are you familiar with tiny desk concerts? Well what about a tiny dance party? Move as little as possible or stand up and shake something.
- Bring an object/pet/child from your house to show for the first or last few minutes.

Different activities or techniques can shift energy up or down, in or out, so consider what is needed in the moment and just have fun with it. All of these techniques bring attention back to the body which allows us to listen in to ourselves and what is needed in a highly disruptive time. Remember the whole body and virtual meetings will improve.

6. Celebrate What Works, Change What Doesn't

Even with careful prep and love in your heart things don't always go well in regular meetings and virtual meetings are no different. The technology fails, people are distracted, or energy is low. You made mistakes, maybe others did as well. Trying new things isn't easy and it doesn't always work. You are experimenting. Allow yourself permission to fail forward. We did something, we tried, it sucked, yay us! Celebrate what works. We all showed up, it felt good to connect, we got a little work done, we ended on time. I didn't hate this meeting. Ok great! Work to communicate well and share responsibility for changing what isn't working.

So how do you know what needs changing? Ask! Get feedback from the group, especially if you are trying new things or working in new ways. Simply asking what is going well so far and what can be even better next time can help people improve together. Good feedback processes can build trust in the group, allow for open and honest communication, improve meetings over time, and make us all better more caring and responsive people and coworkers.

Ideas for celebrating what works, changing what doesn't

- Appreciations. Celebrate each other, give shoutouts, lift up contributions big and small. We all need it and appreciation is an abundant resource which means it doesn't cost anything to give it and the more you give of it the more of it there is to give. You can do this in 1-2 min. For example, everyone puts in the notes or chat one thing or one person here you are grateful for and why. Or you can spend more

time all sharing: *What is working today? What or who are you appreciating about this meeting?* It doesn't have to stop there. Sometimes I even ask people to carry love forward by bringing appreciation to someone in their household or community once the meeting ends. Abundance.

● Use Plus / Delta. Ask what worked well in this meeting? What could be even better next time? This gives you a clear account of the things you can keep doing and specific ideas about what changes are needed. Then you can review and bring it back to the next meeting to remind the group and show transparently any changes you are making based on their feedback.
● Ask for volunteers to help out with some things that need follow up and build more investment in the work and share the responsibility for success.
  ○ *Who can take notes next time?*
  ○ *Who can get on 5 min early to make sure tech is working?*
  ○ *Who can reach out to those who missed today's meeting and catch them up?*
  ○ *What else can people step into to help and support each other?*

Soon you are doing it together and, while virtual meetings cannot replace our entire public society, they can keep getting better and sometimes even be fun, powerful and important.

7. Keep it Short, Keep 'em Coming Back.

A special pandemic plea that I cannot stress this enough: please don't keep people in long meetings for no reason (or even for a good reason). People are tired, managing a lot, energy comes and goes. I recommend keeping virtual meetings short for now. I am currently committed to less than an hour, ideally 45 minutes, even if in the past I was used to much longer sessions. Over time, as the group gets more familiar with each other and more used to working virtually, you can consider longer periods of time working together as a team.

Ideas for keeping it short in virtual meetings:

● Manage time. Give verbal cues such as, "We want to spend about 10 minutes on this," or, "We want to hear comments from 1-2 more people and then we'll need to move on."

- Allow for spaciousness. One of the biggest pitfalls of meetings is trying to cram too much into not enough time. The result is almost assured collective frustration, feelings of failure, and even escalating interpersonal conflict. Give the gift of spaciousness to your meeting agendas and your co-workers. Do less and do it well and thoughtfully. Allow for silence and reflection. If you are newer to this, double the time you think it takes to do any meetings or activity. That introduction you think takes 5-10 minutes, will more likely take 10-20.
- Attend to closings. If there is time, it's nice to hear everyone's voice at the end. You can ask a check out question or what's one thing they are taking away or one word that describes how people are leaving the meeting. But if you are out of time or people are growing fatigued, you can speed things up by asking people to type it in the chat or the notes directly.
- Let it end. Don't be afraid to say "thank you, we can stop here for today. Enjoy your evening, be well. The end." People are rarely angry when you end early, or if you end on time,many will be grateful for the welcome release that comes when we finish a virtual meeting and step away from our screens.

Be gentle with yourselves and each other, there's a pandemic unfolding and a new culture trying to be born. Good luck out there and happy virtual meeting for now!

Kiara Nagel is a creative strategist with 20 years experience building collaborative initiatives and supporting groups, organizations, and leaders to be more engaged, equitable, and effective in their work. Her consulting practice operates from a commitment to dignity of all people and a deep belief in people's ability to come together to face challenges with creativity and playfulness to ultimately shape a more just and sustainable future.

She offers custom facilitation training, coaching, strategy and capacity building to a range of leaders and organizations in local, national and international networks and is an Affiliate with Interaction Institute for Social Change (http://interactioninstitute.org/) and Associate with the Center for Story- based Strategy (https://www.storybasedstrategy.org/). Kiara holds a Masters in City Planning from the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at MIT.

kiaranagel@gmail.com