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Run better virtual meetings

by focusing on what (really) needs to be done

Right thinking

Virtual meetings have fast become our new normal; and while principles for running effective in-person meetings remain highly relevant, we need to adjust our approach and focus to get the most out of our virtual interactions. Here we discuss two key fundamentals: rigorous preparation and structured facilitation that's adaptive to the virtual realm. Focus must be placed on the following questions: 'How can I capture and hold the attention of the people in my meeting? How can we move people towards the outcomes we need to achieve?'

As we made the transition to working from home sparked by COVID-19, virtual meetings fast became the new normal. This new way of working hasn't come without challenges. Through our work with dozens of organisations since the emergency began, we have developed a set of simple fundamentals for running effective virtual meetings.

We've written extensively about meetings in recent years because meetings are a source of pain for many organisations. Clients are increasingly looking to us for ideas to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of these everyday group interactions — their organisations' 'meeting fitness'.

We published an article on the 'five Ps' of meeting effectiveness (Levy, 2014) and we wrote about ways to reclaim lost time in meetings (Levy & Mills, 2019), in response to client complaints about the variable quality of their meetings and how much time they spent attending them.

At Right Lane we use the 'five Ps' to get the most out of our meetings: purpose, process, product, perspective and participants. We expect meetings to have an agreed purpose, a clear process and an end product. In consulting, we want our team members to bring their perspectives to the discussion, have a view on the issues and 'get in the game'. We pay attention to who should participate in the meeting, the parts they should attend and their roles.

While principles for running effective in-person meetings such as these remain highly relevant, running effective virtual meetings requires more preparation and a different kind of facilitation. This isn't an environment to wing it. In this environment, poor planning and meeting management are laid bare. We've been operating with some goodwill up until now, but as meeting and working virtually is normalised people will start to lose patience with meetings that frustrate them and feel like a waste of time. To top it off, we've

noticed participants find it more difficult to concentrate in the virtual realm for long periods, especially if the meetings are not engaging and well executed.

We believe it's important to pay careful attention to two key fundamentals:

rigorous preparation and structured facilitation that's adaptive to the virtual realm. In planning these two aspects of virtual meetings – the preparation (agenda development and session planning, the pre-reading and pre-work) and the facilitation – focus must be placed on the following questions: 'How can I capture and hold the attention of the people in my meeting? How can we move people towards the outcomes we need to achieve?'

Below are some tips for improving virtual meetings by attending to these two fundamentals.

1. Rigorous preparation

- In preparing for the meeting, set robust foundations. Get clear on why you are having the meeting by establishing a clear purpose.
- Working from this clear purpose, establish a firm view on the questions you want to have answered by the end of the meeting to give you clear outcomes to work towards.
- Understand that pre-meeting materials need to 'work harder', preparing participants for sharper discussions and setting up decisions needed from the meeting.
- Keep presentations to a minimum. Instead, have erstwhile presenters pre-circulate the content they would have spoken to with a cover sheet that establishes what they want discussed and decided at the meeting, or record the presentation and issue it to participants in advance so they can watch it before the meeting.
- Compress sessions and allow for longer breaks.
- Provide a briefing to make sure any handover points in the meeting (facilitator or chair to others) have been clearly communicated in advance so that they're not clunky.
- Make sure participants are clear on their roles and contributions are well thought through.

2. Structured facilitation

- Focus facilitation on the set of specific questions you want answered and on systematically working towards desired outcomes.
- Think carefully about what tools you will use to elicit input – for small groups of five or fewer, a fist to five or 'hands-up' vote is often effective; for larger groups, polling technology may be suitable.
- Mix up the methods of interaction to aid concentration. Zoom has an excellent break-out group function. Invite feedback using virtual whiteboards or even virtually 'going around the room'.
- Actively draw in participants by name to maintain energy and momentum.
- Be ruthless and disciplined in carving out of the meeting any discussions that do not require the input of the whole group.

As we've said in the past, improving your organisation's 'meeting fitness' is more than just an exercise in operational hygiene. The benefits to be realised are tangible and significant. Our post-project analyses indicate significant time (and therefore financial) savings can be made through improving meeting effectiveness – in one recent case we helped an executive team regain 44% of the time they were previously spending in meetings. And in this current climate, by improving the effectiveness of virtual meetings, these benefits can be backed up by increasing the productivity, engagement and trust of our people.

References

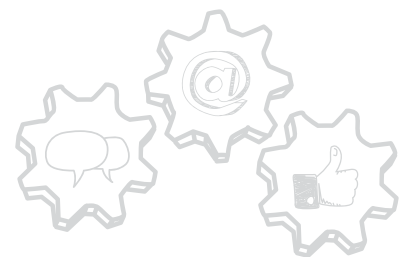
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How can I capture and hold the attention of the people in my meeting?

How can we move people towards the outcomes we need to achieve?



Structured facilitation

want to know more?

If you would like to discuss this article in more detail, please contact **Zoe Pappas**: zoe@rightlane.com.au

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We employ our distinctive ideas and processes, and our absolute commitment to delivery, to help clients we care about pursue their inspiring missions.

We work alongside clients who do great work within the sectors they operate, and we are excited to be involved in creating outcomes that truly make a difference.

We are an ethical consulting firm with a strong belief in the work we do, and with a passion to give back to the broader community with the skills and expertise available within our walls.

Right Lane was established in 1997 to help private, not for profit and public sector clients to clarify and accelerate their future plans. Over the past 23 years, we have helped the executive teams and boards of around 300 organisations to define and adapt their direction and strategy, identify and clarify their priorities, align their efforts with their aspirations, get their major projects started and finished, and measure and improve their performance.



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