



5 Simple Ways to Improve Virtual Meetings

In the 1950's, theorist Wil Schutz¹ conducted a groundbreaking study that identified three basic needs that individuals have in a collaborative environment (i.e. work or meeting environments): Inclusion, Control and Openness.

The inability for some managers to transfer their management skills to the virtual environment has become a major stumbling block. Managers and team members that appeared effective previously may have overcome some of their shortcomings by virtue of the fact that they communicated together face-to-face.

Incorporating the virtual meeting into the process of collaborating and production upsets the established mechanisms for the team to meet its basic needs as identified by Schutz.

Taking away face-to-face interaction removes the automatic feeling of inclusion. It becomes easy to overlook individuals that are not in the same room with you, including their potential input and position on issues raised. As a meeting leader, it is critical to ensure that you are constantly polling for understanding and feedback from all parties. Additionally, the use of names will further strengthen all participants' feelings of inclusion and connectedness.

Control is an issue that everyone struggles with, whether conscious or subconscious. Moving to the virtual environment, individuals lose some of the tools available to help them control their environment. For instance, one can no longer indicate a desire to contribute by raising a hand or making gestures. A participant can no longer provide cues to indicate consensus or disapproval. The lack of these tools chips away at our ability to control the environment and the flow of conversation. Incorporating deliberate meeting processes and organization (i.e. a clearly communicated agenda), along with proper control mechanisms, will help attendees feel more in control of their own environment.

With several people at separate locations, one challenge is to ensure that everyone feels welcome and secure enough to provide input and comment without fear of rejection. A sense of openness among all team members is critical. This is difficult to achieve, as it requires success at all of the best practices for virtual meetings. Skilled management of the virtual environment will produce comfortable and confident team members whose need for openness will be met.

The key to successfully managing the virtual meeting environment is to remember that, while the desired outcome may be the same as the face-to-face meeting, the approach has to be different. Beyond ensuring technology is in place, you must ensure that the needs of your team members are met, so they can focus on the goals of the business at hand.

Five Simple Ways to Improve Virtual Meetings:

1. **Poll the Group Frequently:** Seek understanding and input (be sure to use names).
2. **Ground Rules:** Set boundaries and expectations at the beginning of the meeting, including what topics will be covered, what mechanisms will be used for feedback, etc.
3. **Provide Color Commentary:** When conversation or activity breaks out within a room that is not directed toward the meeting, provide commentary for those not present.
4. **Supplement with Additional Forms of Communication:** Web enabled documents, video conferencing, etc.
5. **Create a Team Map:** Prior to the meeting, create a team map that shows who will be joining and where they are geographically. Something visual gives everyone another perspective from which to "see" everyone.

¹ Schutz, W.C. (1958). FIRO: A three-dimensional theory of interpersonal behavior. New York: Rinehart.