



BRINGING VITALITY TO VIRTUAL MEETINGS -

Practical and psychological tips for coping with remote working through coronavirus.

CONTEXT

The COVID-19 outbreak has brought unexpected challenges for businesses and leaders globally. It is beginning to impact us all in our day-to-day lives and work. Travel bans are resulting in cancelled Team Events, Workshops and Conferences. It is also impacting our interpersonal experiences with each other. High-fives are frowned upon and 'elbow-bumps' are becoming an established and hygienic way to acknowledge and greet each other. None of us know how long this may last or how severe the impact may be, but one thing is clear: it will continue for several months so we all need to re-think some of our working practices. YSC Consulting has outlined some recommendations on how to not only cope with this impact, but reframe this as a positive opportunity.

This is particularly targeted at situations where a Team Event has been re-scheduled virtually – something that Steve Van Zuylen, Managing Director, had to adjust to for his recent Global Markets Team Off-site. Our advice therefore is partly based on our own evolving experience, partly based on our psychological insights regarding interpersonal dynamics and, as always, creating an inclusive environment.

PRACTICAL TIPS

- 1 Join individually, but participate on an even field:** Make sure that all participants connect via laptop and enable their camera individually, rather than grouping people together in a room. Otherwise, you can create a split dynamic whereby online participants feel like they are observing someone else's face to face meeting. The individual camera to face ratio creates a true virtual shared meeting environment and vitally places every participant on a level footing. Joining a meeting room via video conference (VC) can otherwise feel like watching a party through a window.
- 2 Be prepared and stay disciplined:** Maximize pre-reading to ensure time spent together is as useful as possible. Stay on time, have clarity on purpose and outcomes. And remember, over-running carries the risk of unwanted participants inadvertently joining your virtual meeting. Finally, share the load, ensuring a range of colleagues take ownership for various segments of your session.
- 3 Get creative:** Think about how you might use webinars, video-recorded core messages or get some virtual chats going...but be realistic. You cannot simply replace a 2-day off-site with 2 days on VC.
- 4 Get to know your tech:** Whatever VC or platforms you use, really draw on its functionality. Most have breakout room features, screen-sharing, polls, whiteboards, voting buttons and 'raise hands' options.
- 5 Use your camera:** VC beats phone, all day, every day! It is always better to see each other. At a basic level it encourages focus and presence, it enables connection and facilitates effective verbal and non-verbal communication, most obviously through tapping in to facial expression.
- 6 Be mindful of time zones:** Be respectful of your colleagues in different territories. Spread the 'burden' of early mornings and late evenings. Encourage colleagues to buddy-up to cover and share with each other if time zone differences are too extreme.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TIPS

- 1 Principles:** Agree to clear ground rules, be razor-sharp and transparent on owners. Doing so will maximize psychological safety, and minimize annoyance at any perceived 'wasted time'. A period of working in this way may even enhance your normal meeting disciplines. Alongside this, make it fun. Use periodic energizers to lift the mood and build connection and don't skip the 'small talk'. Time and focus on relational connection becomes more, not less, important when we are not able to be together physically.
- 2 See the positives:** Reframe the inability to travel in terms of positive impact. This might include reduced negative environmental impact and improved work-life balance through less time away from home.
- 3 Celebrate 'embarrassment':** Many colleagues may have worry provoked at the prospect of joining extended sessions via VC. They may not have a suitable space at home, or young children and pets may make a guest appearance. Rather than allowing this to create awkwardness, create safety around this, enjoy it and use it as an opportunity to get to know each other more deeply. (You might even design an energizer along these lines!). You can create a sense of connection by asking people to orient you to where they are and tell you something about their home working environment. This can be especially useful in global meetings so you know what time of day it is for people. You might also encourage people to change their VC 'background' if they are concerned about being judged by colleagues.
- 4 Manage energy:** Work in short, sharp bursts or 'sprints' (maximum 90 mins), with plenty of breaks – both 'virtual', where colleagues can connect and network and 'offline', where colleagues can have downtime or check emails.
- 5 Play to the diversity of styles and needs:** Create variety in your agenda by mixing up the modes and methods. If you've had an analytical debate about budgets in the first session, follow it with something that will engage different styles afterwards, such as a visioning activity or relationship building exercise.
- 6 Create dialogue and minimize group-think:** You may need to work harder to surface and explore perspectives. Watch-out for your closed questions (such as 'does this make sense?') and instead prioritize truly dialogue-creating open-ended questions (such as 'what does this make you think/feel?'). Doing so will help to ensure colleagues feel cared for. Equally, as part of this, ensure all voices are heard. The risk of group-think can be pronounced when working via VC. Really challenge yourselves to tap in to all perspectives before converging on action.

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