

Over the next weeks and months many of us will become virtual reality experts, finding the best ways online to meet our growing need for information, ideas, reassurance and real human connection. This last seems as or even more important than filling the gaps in official work life caused by the shutdowns.

The first step – choose a Conference App

Find the right one for you and your group. Zoom, Google Hangouts, Slack, Webex...

Scheduling

It's much more efficient to use Doodle or another online scheduling tool so people can indicate their best dates/ times directly on a grid.

Purpose

Decide on what the call is for and then be clear in the setup email. Is it a catch up call, a business call, a decision-making, strategy-deciding event? A plan the day, plan the week, check in with the team call? A being-together for strength in these strange times call?

What's the Agenda?

What do you and the others most want to make happen or achieve in the time? That's the vital part of your Agenda. So ask in advance and be sure on the day.

Setting up your table

Use a Powerpoint slide to create a 'table'. Place each person by name at the table. Maybe add a background image? Send the table out with your agenda topics and key questions. Now people feel they are attending something of value, they know who else is likely to be there, and they see what they will get from it all at a glance.

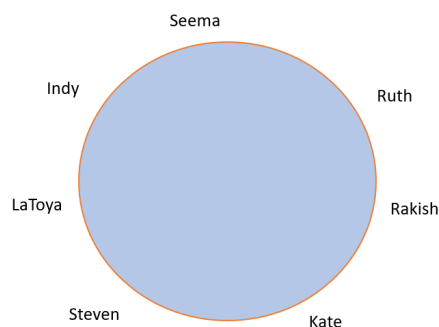


Table for our meeting on Friday 10th 11.00-12.00

What the group needs to know in advance

No Tech: Invite everyone to shut off all other tech. We know when people are online or Whatsapping - and it breaks the connection and the thinking. Please stay 'in the room' and keep noises at minimum.

Timed Turns: In turn each will speak at equal length. This is a benign disruption of the norm, it has huge impact on the quality of the thinking. Phones are useful as timers so please put them on airplane mode.

On the day

Assuming you are chairing/ leading/ facilitating this meeting. Arrive early. Allow good time for glitches online and try to be comfortable with what comes up. Encourage muting if there is background noise.

After a brief welcome you run through the process. Explain that the group will be using Rounds to think about each question. This means that each person will speak in turn going around the table either anti-clockwise (right) or clockwise (left) from whoever first starts. Confirm attendees, and then the final order 'round the table' (nb do this as if facing inwards). If it's the first time doing this be at ease with some confusion, know it will take a bit of time to be smooth. And that it's worth it.

Prime the pump: start with what's going well

We think better in the presence of positive reality and even in these tough times there will be something good if small to mention. First invite people in an opening Round (each one taking max a minute with no interruptions) to answer a question like 'What's something positive that you've noticed recently?' then simply listen, without interruption, to the end of the Round. This is like priming the pump for better thinking afterwards.

NB: Given the stress that many people will be experiencing, particularly those for whom working at home may be difficult, be aware of how much people's feelings may be repressed – which in turns represses their capacity to think clearly and well. You could use a second Round to ask the question: 'what would you like us to know about that will help you to think well today?' Remind the group to stick to the agreed timing.

Confirm the Agenda topics

Check that everyone is happy with the Agenda topics. If something new is added, something else must go so arrange the topics in priority order. Chunk the Agenda into time slots that all can recognise as real.

What's the best question?

Find the best possible question to address the first topic. Ask it. Suggest a time – 2 mins is often good. Each person can time themselves or you can hold the time. Let it be audible. Ask if someone will begin and indicate if the new Round goes to the right or left of that person. Encourage all to listen with interest and without interruption – really without interruption – until the Round has finished. This is vital.

Decision, Action, Next Steps

Are you now ready to make a decision, decide on action, define next steps? If not, ask a new question designed to get you/ the group there, and start another Round. New person, new direction to left or right. Keep on listening without interruption. If you are the decision-maker, decide, or find consensus. Commit to Action, Next Steps, Accountability, By When.

Next topic

Repeat the process: find the best question to address the topic: if you begin with What or How or Why, it makes a question that will get more thoughtful answers. Ask it and set the Round off again. Open Discussion is tempting and energising but limit it to 10 minutes at most, or you'll lose 70% of the group.

Burning Issues Round

5-10 minutes before the end (and ideally having dealt with all your topics using Rounds) ask the group if anyone has a 'burning issue or question' that needs noting by all before finishing the call. This can surface some important unknowns which can be dealt with next time, or offline.

Finish well to think well

The final Round needs to be positive. 'What's one thing you've valued about this call?' is a good question to end with. Or a Speed Round: 'In one word, what's something you've appreciated in our call today.' It's a great exercise in succinct appreciation.

Where does this information come from?

Transforming Meetings™

This is a bare bones outline of Nancy Kline's renowned 'Transforming Meetings' process with the key elements arranged for use online. See www.timetothink.com for more.

Doing this will transform the awkward jumble that people often experience during conference calls. Be bold and transform yours.