

Virtual meetings, new social rules and coping with a new normal

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Moving from face to face to virtual meetings

My coach Supervisor laughs at the notes that I take in some of my coaching conversations because so many include drawings: What does this cat remind you of? Draw your day? Johari Windows and Freeze/thaw/freeze pictures and doodles which would only be comprehensible to me and the person being coached.

I have always been loathe to coach via a computer because I thought I'd miss out on the nuances of body language and the easy sharing of written ideas, thoughts and notes.

However, we are at a place where virtual meetings are becoming more normal and are likely to stay with us for far more than the occasional Skype conversation with distant family. (By the way, if you want to make those really good fun, then switch on the subtitles!). The whole idea is going to bring a new set of 21st Century social rules, so here are a few thoughts from my experiences so far.

Technology

As we all set out into our new virtual world, there is no doubt that the technology will be one of the big challenges (and we won't all have a five year old to hand to sort it all out like the TV). It (almost) goes without saying that you'll need decent broadband speeds and a computer running modern software.

a) Security.

There is a lot out there and much is free, but, as my Cyber Security expert friend reminds me, if the product is free then there is a strong chance that YOU are the product. Be careful and watch out for updates, news and support around security, follow basic rules around cyber-safety and consider what you share very carefully.

b) What's out there?

I'm no expert on the different pieces of software but have used GoTo meeting, Cisco's Webex, Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, Facetime. There are others including MS Teams and, plenty more I'm sure. Check out their websites for their plans, pricing and ways of working. Talk to other people about ease of use, scope and what seems to work well for them.

c) Try out the different apps.

See what works well for you - for example things like the phone apps are OK for 1:1 conversations, but it is awful trying to have a serious conversation with someone when they keep wandering around and lose their audio or show you videos which give you the opportunity to examine their nostrils, (Ugh). Zoom works well, but is very busy at present so bandwidth has been a challenge at times and their security in chats was questioned by National Newspapers recently. Skype is fairly straightforward to use, but the video quality is variable. (Also, I struggle to find all the settings easily on the mobile app).

d) Practice

Try your chosen system/systems in non-critical conversations with family, friends or close colleagues.

Play with the settings and see what you can achieve. It's worth doing it pretty much daily while we all get more used to working like this. Even complex job interviews are being carried out virtually so it is really important to be familiar with the technology so that you can focus on **WHAT** you are saying, not **HOW** you are saying it. After all, we don't have to think hard about talking in a face to face interview, which means that we can focus on the content of our conversation.

Tips and wrinkles - setting up and getting started

I've had to do some thinking, researching and training so some of these tips have come from there, some from my own experience.

1. Practice. Make sure the software is loaded and you know how to access your meeting / call.
2. Always have your mobile handy and share this with your meeting organiser so that if technology has a blip then you can text or call to sort things out.
3. Make sure you are somewhere comfortable! Get a coffee or glass of water in case you need refreshing during the discussion.
4. Set up your device to provide the best audio you can and video so that the light is coming from the right direction and doesn't make you look like a being from a sci-fi movie. Oddly, having light directly in front of you (i.e. behind the device) usually works well.
5. Consider your background. Some software allows you to blur the background or add a virtual one.
6. 'Arrive' in good time. You can be sure that if you leave it until the last minute, you will have a software glitch or the laptop will want to update or run a security scan and gobble up time and memory.

Tips and wrinkles - social niceties

Some of our social rules won't change, but for some reason seem to get 'lost' as people move to a virtual world. We also have new ones that will make sure we can work collaboratively and effectively.

1. Be presentable. There seems to be a more 'heads than threads' approach online, but it is just as important to create a good impression virtually as it would be in person. In truth, it might be even more important as we might miss out on some of the smaller signals that we get about people when we meet face to face.
2. Be punctual. You can't creep into a virtual meeting like you do to a room full of people! If you do come late then it will be noticeable and can be disruptive.
3. As host, make sure that introductions are made where appropriate and try to welcome people as they arrive. This creates a positive feeling and also acts as a form of introduction.
4. Make sure that there is a clear agenda. One of the downsides of virtual meetings is that discussion has to be more clear cut and it isn't always easy to spot who wants to say something. In a room, there will be some form of 'intention gesture' that can be picked up on by the host - not always so easy in a virtual room. A good agenda will help to focus everyone in the same direction and support input from those who need to give it.
5. Turn mobiles to silent once the meeting starts.
6. Shut children, pets and family out - they can be an unwanted distraction. There are times when they might add a personal dimension to the discussion, but make sure it is for an appropriate audience.
7. Follow the host's instructions on audio and video, but generally it is good practice to mute your microphone unless you are making a comment to the meeting. (Failing to do this creates sometimes unbearable noise for everyone else).
8. Engage. Your hosts might be fairly new to all this too.
9. As host, it might be useful to have a co-host who watches chat boxes to pick up on relevant input that needs to be shared.
10. Look at the camera - we are used to looking at the face of someone that we are talking to, but on a laptop this might mean that you are looking at your colleague over their shoulder.

A couple of other thoughts

Have a think about what might distract you in a virtual meeting and try to manage it so that you can focus on the conversation. The kind of things which people report as distracting are:

What they look like, what their colleagues look like (how's my hair looking three weeks into lockdown?!), are my bookshelves tidy? What is that on their wallpaper? Shall I just answer that incoming e mail? Am I using the technology properly? And so on....

This is just a quick blog, so I'd love to hear your hints and tips for effective meetings over the internet!

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