9 Creative Meeting Ideas for Remote Teams

Lisa Tener | Nov 19, 2020 | HR Daily Advisor

Remote meetings were a brilliant solution to social distancing. Meet virtually, stay connected, run things by each other—it worked. And then suddenly, it didn't work so well.

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The enthusiasm in connecting and getting things done soon gave way to fatigue—tired eyes, difficulty focusing, and other challenges from staring at an electronic screen. There are only so many minutes a day we can look at people's faces in a bunch of squares on a lit-up screen. Our eyes and brains weren't made for this!

So, how do you take the good with the bad, make it better—more engaging, inspiring, and powerful—and avoid putting your team to sleep?

It Starts with You and How You Show Up

Have you ever entered a conference call to find the host is adjusting the camera or searching for notes on his or her desk? I feel for that person, but do I want to be on that call?

Come to the call prepared and in a space that feels orderly and welcoming. One intriguing accent piece in the background—especially one that relates to your passions or an aspect of the work at hand—can add interest. More will likely distract.

How to Keep Your Team Engaged in a Remote Meeting

Before the call, privately center yourself in whatever way works for you, whether that's taking a few deep breaths, singing a favorite mood-elevating song, giving yourself a pep talk, or envisioning the results you want on the call. Your positive energy will lift the crowd.

Amanda Madorno, a leadership development coach who focuses on building emotional intelligence (EQ) skills, suggests this:

"Don't get distracted by yourself. Many people feel like they're looking in a mirror during virtual meetings. It's easy to feel self-conscious. We can become unsettled by the quirks we see in ourselves – a lopsided smile, our less than perfect hair day. Practice ignoring yourself and focusing on others. Actively observe others when they speak, the way others react and keep your eyes from wandering back to yourself."

Such an "other-focused" orientation starts before the call. If you find yourself worrying about how others will perceive you, remind yourself that you're here to serve. Think about your team and the project, and you'll show up authentically—and that will engage your team members more than any particular strategy.

Now, we're ready for team engagement strategies!

How do you meet the needs of your team members and keep them inspired and productive?

1. Breathe. OK, you've taken your deep breaths before the call; now, invite your team to take theirs! Rather than jump in, lead everyone in a few deep breaths, such as simple abdominal breathing (which will relax participants and improve their blood flow, making them more alert and supporting brain health) or pursed lips breathing (which the Cleveland Clinic points out "causes general relaxation"). A bonus: By starting the meeting this way, distractions fall away, and you'll have everyone's attention.

2. Engage their contribution from the start. Perhaps invite all team members to type a one-word intention for the meeting in the chat box. Or use a one-word check-in—where are they at the start of the call? By monitoring their current state or intention, you help them get present for the business at hand. And by generating a group list in the chat box, the group coalesces as a team from the start of the call.

3. Invite movement. Movement enhances learning. So, don't wait until everyone's antsy to move around. Start the call with stretching, gentle yoga, or even jumping jacks. My favorite is gentle qigong bouncing.

By getting your blood flowing throughout your brain and body, you and your team will experience greater vitality, creativity, and brain engagement. Continue to initiate or invite movement

throughout the call. You may also want to use a standing desk for all or part of the call, and invite others to do that, too, as a way to keep energized.

4. Ask questions, and involve the "quiet people." If some team members tend to dominate the conversation, steer questions toward the quieter members, who may not be as comfortable talking on screen.

5. Use breakout groups strategically. Breakout groups can help you get everyone involved in idea generation and problem-solving and make sure all voices are heard. Break people up into teams of two or three for an exercise or portion of the call. When everyone returns to the larger group, ask what came up.

Elicit questions, challenges, insights, and ideas. With small groups, you'll retain the attention of all team members, including those distractible folks—like me—whose brains may need a variety of tasks and modalities to function effectively.

6. Use engaging visuals. Damaris Lasa, Chief Digital Marketing Science Instructor and Learning Consultant at Silicon Valley education start-up Green Fig, points out, "Evidence suggests people will remember information longer if you use visuals. This is known as the pictorial superiority effect."

According to the research, "when we read text alone, we are likely to remember 10 percent of what we read three days later. If that information is presented to us as text combined with a relevant image, we are likely to remember 65 percent of the information three days later."

7. Add a group theme. Shalini Bahl, PhD, an award-winning researcher and Certified Mindfulness Teacher and Consultant, suggests adding playfulness to your Zoom meetings. "Invite team members to choose a theme for virtual backgrounds like favorite movies, vacation destinations, or superheroes and award best background prizes."

8. Show empathy. Bahl stresses empathy: "Leaders need to let their team members know they care. One way you can do that in the context of Zoom meetings is to reach out to participants ahead of time to inquire about special needs they may have such as hearing disabilities, language barriers and assistance with technologies."

9. Bring a prop. A prop can be fun or instructive—a book you're reading that the team might find helpful or a playful hat that plays into some aspect of the call. Or, ring a Tibetan singing bowl to get the meeting going. Such activities grab our attention and draw us in if done well. Such playfulness can put you and your team at ease and in a more relaxed and creative mode.

An Exercise in Mindfulness

Bahl describes being invited by a multinational client's transformation office to facilitate an experiential workshop to energize the team before their Zoom meeting. "The team was zoomed out, working non-stop, and wanted something to disrupt their usual meetings that typically had lots of slides."

Bahl offered a mindfulness exercise to give participants' thinking minds a break by using their senses (see the scientific explanation for this below). You can engage all five senses, one at a time, as she did or choose one sensory experience at the start of each meeting.

"Invite participants to share a favorite song or start the meeting with looking at something in their environment that they feel gratitude for. You can get more adventurous by inviting participants to taste special chocolate treats that are delivered ahead of time or drinking a few sips of their favorite beverage like tea or coffee."

Bahl points out thatneuroscience suggests that we experience the world through two distinct neural networks: the narrative or default mode (used for thinking, planning, remembering, etc.) and the experiential or sensory perceptual mode (uses the senses to experience the present moment). We tend to overuse the default mode, which leads to anxiety and overwhelm. Using our sensory mind gives the thinking mind a rest.

Wrapping It Up

Keep an eye on the time. Let team members know how long the meeting will go, and do your best to stick to that timing. Studies show that in the best of circumstances and conference call-friendly cultures, people can focus on a conference call for 30–37 minutes. Many people can't even last that long. The takeaways? Breaks are critical to engaging team members on calls that last longer than 30 minutes. And keep calls as short as possible.

Pick a few suggestions from the list above, and incorporate them in your next team meeting. I'm confident you'll see productivity rise. Ask your team members for input and ideas, too! They know what will engage them!