

ONLINE MEETINGS KNOWLEDGE BASE

Smoothing your progress with a Virtual Production Team

If you have read our overall guide to preparing for an effective online meeting, you will know that the principle we operate to is:

***In face-to-face meetings, you get the attention you command.
In virtual meetings, you get the attention you deserve.***

In order to maintain your focus as facilitator/chair/leader of an online meeting, it is important to minimize the distractions that such systems offer. You would be unlikely in a face-to-face meeting to connect up the Public Address system yourself, arrange the chairs and write out all the name badges, but that level of effort is what online meeting software can seem to demand from you.

Just as you would not do everything yourself in real life, in a virtual meeting you should recruit a Virtual Production Team (VPT) to take some of the load. These individuals need not be co-located with you, as the online meeting software will connect them with you and your participants.

We have identified three key VPT members, these roles can be combined into one person but if you have willing volunteers, it is best to keep them separate:

Online Facilitator:

The Online Facilitator (OF) should work closely with the Chair on developing the workshop agenda and attendance list – then when the meeting takes place the OF will be aware of who is joining at what time, whether any attendees expect to arrive late, etc.

Online meeting software contains multiple streams of information – chat boxes, online polls, etc. – that are difficult to monitor and interpret whilst ‘holding the room’ as chair/facilitator. The Online Facilitator takes this load, watching the chat stream, identifying useful contributions to the conversation and questions that need answering. It is advisable for larger meetings of 50+ people to have two online facilitators to ensure that as much information as possible is covered. They should be empowered to answer straightforward questions themselves via chat, bringing in the Technical Producer if needed. At intervals, you should link across to Facilitators to summarize what is coming in on chat and what questions have arisen. These contributions should be concise and you should plan the first one early in the meeting to encourage further chat input as the meeting progresses.

When launching online polls and breakout rooms, the Technical Producer initiates the technology and the Online Facilitator monitors the results, reads the votes, etc.

You might consider asking the Online Facilitator or another participant to sum-up the meeting at the end, as they can devote headspace to preparing this that you as chair/facilitator may not be able to.

Breakout group facilitators:

Zoom offers the facility to run Breakout Groups (accessed from the Advanced Features menu in Settings) which are an excellent way of varying the pace and level of connection in your meeting. However, each Breakout Group (you can decide how many you have) needs a facilitator of its own – you should preselect these volunteers for smaller groups, or specify a clear way for the participants to choose their facilitator for larger groups.

Preselecting volunteers to facilitate is useful to set expectations, and to share general tips on handling a group (e.g. providing guide questions to spur conversation for Session A).

For situations that don't allow for preselecting volunteers, you can design ways to choose them by incorporating it into energisers at the beginning of the workshop. For example, after introductions, the participants with the most colourful clothes in the group will be facilitators.

Additionally, during the plenary session, give each of them a brief agenda for their breakout time and some guidance on how to run their discussion to maximise productivity. Gather and address questions from group facilitators before proceeding into breakout rooms. You wouldn't want participants guessing their way through an activity! This might lead to less than ideal output.

Pre-selected volunteers might not always have the time to go through the brief agenda and the breakout instruction. Clear instructions and guiding questions should be given beforehand in the online template so that volunteer facilitators are able to independently guide the group as the Chair sends everyone off to breakout rooms.

When volunteer facilitators have questions on the exercise instruction, they can directly ask the Chair or the Online facilitator.

Technical Producer:

Even the most technically astute participant can have problems, especially in the sign-in/joining period, which can usually be resolved over person-to-person chat or email communication. Your Technical Producer (TP) is responsible for this, and will monitor the output feed from you to ensure the quality is sufficient, slides are changing appropriately, and so on.

They will also be responsible for ensuring the session is recorded and, working with the online facilitator, trigger breakout rooms and online polls when required. When participants are introduced to a new platform (ex. Mural), it is especially important for the TP along with the Online Facilitator to monitor how people are interacting with the app as well as with each other on it.

If needed, dedicating a few minutes at the beginning of the meeting for participants to explore the existing functions and tools through simple energisers or ice breakers (such as creating post-its and writing down your name and a hobby you would like to pick up this year) will help down the line. These will help participants explore the functions and tools needed in the actual session.

This is so they can raise questions and clarify how they can make the most out of the platform before proceeding with the session proper. The TP can directly provide input and guidance on this for attendees, while the Online Facilitator can flag any recurring concerns that might arise, and to give you as Chair a heads-up on things that may need to be addressed during plenary.

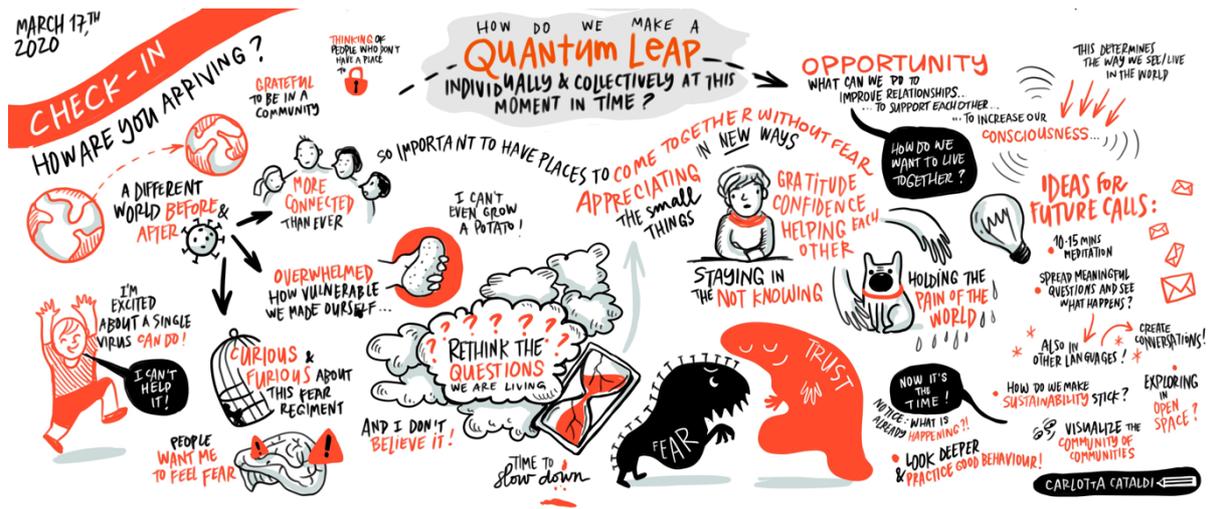
Both the TP and Online Facilitator will communicate with you individually via the chat box, WhatsApp or another mechanism that will attract your attention when it fires. For communication with the whole group, it is normal to bring them into the live meeting to make their point.

Note-taker and Graphic Recorder

One disadvantage of online meetings is that they can lack continuing impact: they finish, participants go back to their other work in seconds and there is no reflection time to embed the learning from the meeting.

You can counteract this with effective meeting notes: agree on the format with your note-taker before the meeting and ensure that you review and publish the notes as quickly as possible after the meeting in order to keep participants engaged immediately after the session.

Even greater effectiveness can be achieved with a graphic recording: the recorder attends the meeting and produces a graphic representation of the discussion, the decisions taken and the next steps. An example, from Carlotta Cataldi, www.carlottacat.com, is below:



Graphic recordings like this are an excellent way of re-animating a meeting after it has concluded, bringing it back to the forefront of participants' minds.

This is the second in a series of Knowledge Base notes on Running Effective Online Meetings; more will be added as experience builds.

If you would like to contribute material, please get in touch.



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