

Hybrid and Dialogical Meetings

A [recent McKinsey survey](#), discussed in the [Harvard Business Review](#), suggests that 90% of organisations will adopt some combination of remote and on-site work which will necessitate a hybrid approach to meetings as an inevitable component of our ‘new normal.’

Satya Nadella, Microsoft’s CEO says, “We want to ensure those joining remotely are always first-class participants.” As a leader and manager it is your role to ensure you treat everyone fairly, where meeting participants, whether in the room, in the next city, or another country, feel engaged, valued, and equal.

One of the key aspects you need to look out for is proximity bias, in line with the Universities value of Inclusivity. This can show up as an “us versus them” attitude. You need to be on the lookout for this in your team, and importantly, in yourself. This is a kind of presenteeism that can exist physically and virtually. A basic recognised good practice is having all-team meetings on Teams or Zoom, even though some people may be together in the office. Hybrid meetings are unfair to those not physically in the space, and all in-person meetings are unfair to those who cannot make these for whatever reason.

However, there are also issues with having people online when they are seated in the same building. This can create resentment and perpetuate proximity bias. So, there are some recognised good practice approaches to hybrid meetings to minimise this.

Get your audio right

We often focus on the visuals, so remote participants can see everyone, but it is the audio that is often the priority that is overlooked. To avoid issues around poor audio, make sure the room is equipped with enough high-quality microphones so remote participants can hear.

Video

However, visuals are still important, but not just seeing the in-room attendees. As you design the meeting, continually ask yourself: What do remote participants need to see in order to fully engage? They should be able to see any shared presentations, physical documents being handed out or discussed, content which is being created during the meeting on whiteboards or flipcharts, etc.

Test, and use the right technology

Nothing kills a meeting’s momentum like waiting to fix a glitch in technology. Prior to a meeting, test the audio-visual set up, both in-room and for the remote attendees. Schedule this in to make sure it happens.

Useful technology to consider might be to access Zoom’s [Smart Gallery](#) which uses artificial intelligence to detect individual faces in a shared room, pulling them on to the screen so remote participants can see them in the now-familiar gallery view.

Make remote participants full sized.

Another way to give remote participants equal stature is to give them greater presence in the room. In addition to the main screen, set up additional large monitors showing ‘life-size’ images, or as near as possible, of the remote participants for the duration of the meeting.



Design meetings for all attendees.

Review each activity or exercise focusing specifically on how remote participants will engage, and how in-room and remote participants will interact, such as,

- Polls - use a phone-based survey tool to collect everyone's input in real time, rather than a show-of-hands or relying on verbal feedback. This puts remote participants on an equal footing.
- Notes - to capture meeting notes use an online whiteboard (or focus a remote camera on a flip chart) so everyone can see what's being written as it happens.
- Breakout Rooms – it is worth considering the logistics of having remote participants split across different breakout groups as this accentuate their equal status, rather than going for the easy option of putting all the remote participants in a single group, which sends a clear message of 'proximity bias'.

Provide strong facilitation.

While the meeting will be chaired, it is good practice to also allocate someone the role of guiding the conversation to ensure in-room participants do not dominate the discussion and so ensure all voices are heard, not interrupted or talked over.

Use a dialogical approach

Dialogical conversations restore the value of people by emphasising listening and responding to the whole person and their context. This is less about the issue and more about 'being with' the person and their situation. This draws on the work of the philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin and helps mitigate any sense of isolation and distance, giving a greater sense of voice and agency, allowing people to participate more meaningfully in both the conversation and the resulting decisions, and therefore is well suited to a hybrid meeting context.

There are some key aspects to taking a dialogical approach, as noted in the report [Key Elements of Dialogical Practice](#):

- Use open-ended questions (see our [Hints and Tips](#) page for Effective Questioning, Exploratory Questioning, a Crucial Conversations approach, and also see link to [Appreciative Enquiry](#)).
- Respond to the person's utterances (ie, using the other person's words through reflection and paraphrasing which requires deep, responsive listening).
- Emphasis on the present moment (this includes allowing for emotions to unfold, and is aligned to our value of compassion).
- Elicit multiple viewpoints through generating creative exchanges and juxtapositions in line with our value of inclusivity, not consensus (which often perpetuates pre-existing biases).
- Use of a relational focus in the dialogue, which draws several participants into a discussion in which relationships can become more clearly defined and differentiated, instead of more confused. This aligns to our value of collaboration.
- Respond to problem discourse or behaviour as 'meaningful', so trying to understand why people might be behaving as they do rather than defining them as a problem and silencing them. This is not the same as tolerating bad behaviour, which should be addressed, but trying to understand the root cause.



- Emphasise the persons own words and recognise their story, which connects to reflecting back what we hear (not what we think people should be saying). There is a strong connection here to Crucial Conversations where we clarify the facts, but then share the story for mutual understanding and mutual purpose.
- Conversation amongst professionals, where we engage in reflective practices, reflecting upon the ideas, feelings, and associations.
- Be transparent, which connects to our value of integrity.
- Tolerate uncertainty, where we recognise there are no ready-made solutions.

The starting point of a dialogical meeting is that the perspective of every participant is important and accepted without conditions. No one should be made to feel they must conform to 'group think'. It is the leader or managers responsibility to conduct the meeting in a way that creates a space where it is safe, and they are able to, express themselves. It is important then to emphasise that the leader or manager will express their own perspective, but for the purposes of dialogue, rather than being a 'truth' imposed in a top-down fashion.