









Facilitation in a Virtual Meeting World



Before the Meeting

-  Know your desired outcomes
Keep the end in mind as you prepare for your virtual meeting. Complete the sentence, “If this meeting is successful, at the end, the participants will ...”
-  Build an agenda to achieve those outcomes
Perhaps the most significant thing you can do for any meeting, virtual or otherwise, is to develop an agenda. If you share the agenda with your participants, they’ll know where you’re going and can help you get there.
-  Develop visual content (slides, presentation, etc.) to support the agenda
Every meeting doesn’t have to have visual content, but most meetings are enhanced by some images in the form of slides, presentations (think PowerPoint or Keynote), charts and graphs, or drawings. While the LAMP Virtual Meetings tool can handle several different formats, creating a PDF file is often best.
-  Upload the visual content file
This should be done prior to the meeting actually starting so that participants will see a welcome page when they first join the meeting and so there is no delay while the file uploads.
-  Practice
Don’t assume you know how to do everything. By practicing using the technology and stepping through the agenda (and the visual content), you’ll be more comfortable and will identify potential issues.

Thinking about Video

-  Clothing
Since people will be seeing you, you do need to give some thought to your attire, at least from the waist up. Avoid close repetitive patterns as these tend to “strobe” on camera.
-  Background
Holding a virtual meeting is like inviting people into your office. You may need to tidy up a bit. At least give some thought to the camera can see and the impression it conveys.
-  Lighting
Often lighting for a virtual meeting is very poor. While you don’t need a television set quality of lighting, at least avoid back lighting and make sure your face is illuminated, perhaps with a desk lamp.

Thinking about Audio

-  Background Noise
Background noise is deadly in a conference call. Do everything you can to avoid or lessen any potential background noise.
-  Sound Quality
Sound is perhaps more important to a video conference than the video itself. People communicate most of their content by speaking. Invest in a good quality headset with a microphone that is comfortable to wear.

Latency

Latency is the delay between when one person speaks and the others on the conference hear the voice.

Latency is deadly for a conference call and should be eliminated as completely as possible. This is not always possible, however. Plan to speak deliberately, and pause to specifically ask for input from others when appropriate. Recognize that people may be talking over each other without even realizing it. If needed, facilitate by saying, “Chris has the floor. Then we’ll hear from Pat next.”

Audio Etiquette

To facilitate good audio communication, suggest that participants follow good etiquette and not use a speaker phone when using a telephone. Speaker phones pick up too much ambient noise. If using Voice Over IP (VOIP), participants should use a set of headphones rather than the speaker in the computer or speakers attached to the computer. Microphones can pick up the sound from speakers, creating an echo effect that can range from annoying to quite debilitating. It is a good idea to encourage participants to mute their phone or the microphone in their headset unless needing to speak, thus eliminating unnecessary noise.

Muting

Conference moderators have the power to mute individual participants, or, if necessary, all participants.

Obviously this power should be used judiciously, but if there is a situation that warrants it, use the mute function. Examples of when it might be needed is a user who is using a speaker phone (and thus producing unacceptable background noise) or a user with computer speakers (and thus producing echo).

Hand Raise

Users have the ability to “raise their hand” so that the moderator can see their desire to speak. This can be useful when there are a large number of participants or when latency becomes problematic. As the facilitator, however, it is your responsibility to set the norm for using hand raise mode in advance.

Active Facilitation

Know Your Role

As the virtual meeting leader, you are both the moderator (a technical designation) and the facilitator (who ensures that the meeting process delivers the desired outcomes). Deliberately fill both roles.

Set Norms

Establish ground rules, or norms, so people know what to expect. Will people use their cameras or will this be an audio-only conference? Will you call on people, or may anyone speak as needed? Will you use hand-raise mode? Will you respond to public or private chat messages? What is the backup plan in case the technology should suffer a glitch?

Expect Issues

The technology will not always work perfectly as there are too many variables. Deal with problems as rapidly as possible, and have a backup plan.

Focus

Facilitating a virtual meeting can be very challenging. You will need to juggle four areas: 1) audio, 2) visual content, 3) text chat messages, and 4) user management. This requires intense focus.