



How to Foster Psychological Safety in Virtual Meetings

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When Covid-19 was recognized as an emerging public health crisis earlier this year, tens of thousands of employees were sent home from offices around the world to start working from home for the [foreseeable future](#). It may take years before we understand the full impact of this abrupt shift to virtual work on people and companies, but it wasn't long before many started to wonder about the impact of virtual meetings on [psychological safety](#) — people feeling they can raise questions, concerns, and ideas without fear of personal repercussion.

There are good reasons to worry. Detecting social cues or non-verbal agreement is nearly impossible. Team members may feel isolated without the natural support of an ally nodding from across the table. And distractions (emails, texts, doorbells, children, pets) are everywhere. If virtual meetings are inherently difficult, the current environment — the health and economic threats, the overwork, and the social unrest — makes them even more so.

The good news is that the very technology that thwarts candor and mutual understanding also offers ways to offset these losses. In our work leading hundreds of virtual sessions, we've identified opportunities and risks associated with each of several common tools found in most online meeting platforms:

Hand-raise. Seemingly straightforward, the hand-raise function helps people signal that they want to speak aloud. However, it can easily yield a “false negative.” One of us was present with a manager who said, “Raise your hand if you have personal experience with someone battling Covid-19.” Seeing no hands, he continued, “Terrific, because I'm going to need full effort for the project we're about to discuss.” Unfortunately, two team members taking care of elders who tested positive failed to use the tool — perhaps because they didn't find it quickly enough or they felt reluctant to reveal personal information. When it's vital to have a full set of responses, Yes/No and anonymous poll features may work better.

Yes/No. Typically a green checkmark and red X, this tool allows quick input from everyone. A leader can invite missing participants to chime in, setting an expectation that all voices are needed. The tool's obvious limitation is that not all issues are binary in

nature. For greater nuance in soliciting voice, poll and chat tools provide worthy alternatives.

Polls. Anonymous polls make it easy to express an opinion without fear of being singled out, and the results prompt thoughtful probing to dig into diverse views. This works best when leaders [frame diverse views as a resource](#) before asking: “What are people seeing that leads to this spread?”

Consider what happened in a recent leadership program focused on psychological safety. A senior executive proclaimed: “I don't think we have an issue with [low] psychological safety at our company, but if you disagree, please enlighten me.” Unsurprisingly, no one used the hand-raise or chat functions. The facilitator then quickly launched an anonymous poll: “On a scale of 1 to 5, rate the level of psychological safety in our company.” When a majority of responses were “3”, the executive responded, “Clearly, I need to be less assumptive in my questioning!” At that point, individuals used hand-raise and were willing to speak up with candid views.

In another recent meeting, a manager used the anonymous poll function to ask participants to force-rank the company's diversity initiatives on “potential impact” and “current performance.” This yielded a 2×2 map, identifying High Impact/Low Performance initiatives (“highest priorities”) versus “Lower Impact/High Performance” initiatives. The tool thereby triggered a richer, more candid dialogue, followed by brainstorming and action planning in the midst of national protests on systemic racism.

Chat. Allowing everyone to contribute at the same time in their own words, with their names tagged, the chat function lowers the threshold for participation. At times, however, the sheer volume or length of entries leave some overlooked. Setting norms about brevity can help, but chats also can distract from the spoken conversation. When it's vital that everyone listen intently to what is being said, chat may need to be turned off.

Breakout rooms. Creating smaller virtual breakout rooms during large meetings allows small groups of, say, three to five people to talk more easily without muting and unmuting themselves, providing a more natural conversational experience than large virtual meetings. Breakout rooms, with specific tasks or topics assigned to different groups, provide a psychologically safe space to test ideas and build relationships. When participants return to the large group, they find it easier to report ideas from the small group with the confidence that comes from testing and sharing perspectives in that relatively safer space.

For instance, in one session we led, a cohort of 50 leaders from 50 medical centers convened to share best practices and lessons learned during the pandemic. Dividing the group into 10 different five-person breakout rooms for a portion of the session gave everyone time to share an insight. Then each sub-group nominated one example to be

shared back in the main room. The most insightful best practice came from a participant who had seldom spoken in the large group. The idea was adopted across multiple medical centers.

Video. Seeing faces creates engagement, but too much visual stimuli (faces and backgrounds) can be distracting, and low bandwidth can add to visual disruptions. All this [can thwart our ability](#) to read social cues and stress our cognition in subtle ways. Leaders may want to encourage view options in which one face is center stage while speaking and others recede to the background. Other times, audio-only may be a better option for deep listening.

Separately, seeing oneself on the screen can heighten self-consciousness, inhibiting psychological safety. Selecting “hide self-view” can help (after all, we don't use a mirror during face-to-face meetings).

Audio-only. Mimicking the old-fashioned conference call, audio-only meetings require acute attention and care to avoid misinterpreting silence as agreement and to explicitly ensure participation of everyone on the call. Its absence of non-verbal communication sharpens the need for proactive inquiry to lower hurdles to speaking up, such as, “On a scale of 0-to-10, what do you think about...” or “If you were to force-rank these five items, which ranks first and second...and which rates last?” Further, participants must resist the urge to multi-task, and leaders can be explicit in requesting their full attention, while trying to design engaging, interactive virtual sessions.

Before and After a Virtual Meeting

Beyond the thoughtful use of platform tools, a few simple actions before and after a virtual meeting can help build psychological safety during the encounter.

In advance, team leaders should experiment with meeting tools to understand their uses and risks and plan how they may want to sequence a discussion. In addition, they should consider inviting a facilitator — or a rotating member of the team — to help ensure participation. Finally, to foster engagement in meetings that will seek input for consequential decisions, consider interacting with participants in advance via such means as anonymous polling or one-on-one interviews.

After a virtual meeting, managers can reach out to talk to participants who were quiet during the session. To replicate informal water-cooler moments, managers can use text, phone, or email, to give reinforcing or redirecting feedback.

Teams can be lonely places, especially when you believe others may not support your opinion or come to your defense. Such interpersonal fears are amplified for employees working from home during a prolonged crisis like the pandemic. Building psychological safety in virtual teams takes effort and strategy that pays off in engagement,

collegiality, productive dissent, and idea generation. The good news is that the tools and techniques that engage people — and lower hurdles to engagement — can become habitual and serve managers well today and long into the future.

<https://hbr.org/2020/08/how-to-foster-psychological-safety-in-virtual-meetings>