**Virtual Facilitators … Don’t Say Hello, Hello, Can You Hear Me?**

Starting off a virtual meeting by saying, “Hello, hello can you hear me? “is not the best way to kick off a meeting. Sometimes even after you have practiced with your presenter, the inevitable happens and no one can hear you.  Panic sets in and you quit thinking rationally and lose your focus.  It has happened to all of us.

I spend an average of 21 hours a month on conference calls.  That translates into 8 days per year, or 6 months out of the last 20 years. Some may say, that is way too many calls and do you really need them all?   So far the answer is yes, but how do you know?   A virtual facilitator knows to measure the outcome of a meeting and not the "activity". To gain significant outcome, you need to plan the meetings and the participation methods by spending time to "design the meeting".  We need to make the virtual meetings just like a face- to- face meetings with all of the benefits and outcomes.  Here are some tips I have found to help assimilate a face -to -face meeting.

**Don't use all of your technology at one time.**

Using all of your technology is like wearing all of your new jewelry at the same time.  If you are using a “screensharing” function, think about what it is going to add to the meeting?  What would happen if you didn't use it?"  If that answer is that the participants would not get more out of the meeting, then don't use it.  Maybe the purpose of your meeting simply requires a phone line.

**Don't under use technology.**

Use available technology to its fullest when it adds to the meeting.  If your webinar service offers a choice for dialing in or VOIP, let your attendees choose what they want to use.   That is unless you have a good reason to restrict them to dialing in. Perhaps they are expecting an important phone call and would prefer to use a headset and VOIP for the audio. Savvy users will wonder why you are restricting their participation.

**Offer training.**

Offer training to your participants.  Ask them to tune in early to test their audio or set up a separate test run. If you are facilitating a meeting, spend time practicing with your presenter. Practice with them in their location from which they will be participating if possible.  Otherwise, the Internet at their home office may work fine on the practice, and then on the production day the Internet at the hotel isn't quite so fast. Teach the participants virtual etiquette, such as how to raise their hand to talk.  I practice my skills as often as possible.  Some of the meetings I have facilitated are study groups, committee meetings, world-wide virtual graphic facilitator training/sharing events, presentations to students, and standard board meetings.

**You are NOT alone.**

When you are ending a virtual meeting, be sure everyone has "left the room" before you strike up a conversation with a person outside the meeting.  I like to see who "hangs on” at the end.  Many times, people forget to close their connection and you may be carrying on a conversation that you don't want overheard.

**Be a participant and a facilitator.**

Open another computer to show what the participants are seeing. Be sure and mute the speakers or you will get feedback.   It helps to see what "they see”.

**Make it interesting.**

If you are screen sharing, make it interesting.  Don't consider it simply a power- point presentation delivered over the Internet.  Use pictures as graphic icons to make your point.  Use chat boxes to create dialog among the participants during the meeting.  Many times we go to a meeting in person, and when asked, "What was the best part of the meeting, the response is, the people I met while there."  You can meet new people at a virtual meeting and even allow two participants to chat amongst themselves that isn't interruptive to the presenter.  Use polls if the information is relevant to the meeting.  Don't use a poll simply to use a poll.

**Make it a dialog, not a monologue.**

If you are going to have a presenter talk, and people simply listening, then I would suggest that you simply record your voice and send them the recorded version.  At least you will be making the most of their time and yours.  A reason for a virtual meeting is to "Share" information.  Sharing indicates that both parties benefit.   You need to allow the participants to express their ideas and questions as much as they need to hear what you have to say. Build a dialog into your meeting.  Consider running your meeting like the "Tonight Show" with dialogs .  Use a panelist approach for multiple presenters.  Be inclusive by asking questions of those that are not speaking.  If you know there are ideas brewing under the surface, ask them to write out the answers to a thought provoking question in a chat or discussion box.

**Not yet - not yet.**

Think about your face- to- face conversations.  How can you best replicate them on line?   When having a face- to- face conversation, one person doesn't talk for 30- minutes straight and then say, "Ok, your turn.”  You don't keep talking and not answer questions or allow others to speak.  We do that all the time in a presentation or meeting.  Our presenter, states, Questions will be taken at the end. "  Why is it that a presenter or meeting facilitator cannot handle a dialog?  Is it because they are afraid of getting off track, forget where they left off?  If you are truly talking about what is important to everyone on the call, you will find a way to return to your point at hand.

**Work on your presentation skills.**

Even though you are facilitating, you are still talking.   Have you ever counted how many times you say, "and, or, sum, er, huh, or other waste words".   We, as facilitators are great people connectors.  We connect people together and help direct them from point A to point B.  If we can talk to be understood easily, it will make that journey a lot more fun for all. I encourage you to seek out your local Toastmaster organization.  It is a great way to learn to formulate your thoughts, and words.  All meetings and presentations need to have a beginning, middle and an ending.

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