

Blind Trust: Techniques for Working in the Virtual World

How often have you experienced an austerity program in which the first cut is travel? Leaders then champion teleconferences or video conferences as the viable alternative to face-to-face meetings.

Or virtual meetings may be standard in your position; your clients may be on the other side of the globe.

Virtual mediums offer key advantages in addition to saving costs:

- Ability to pull in stakeholders from many geographies and time zones.
- Bringing in experts, for even a few minutes, who might not have been able to join your face-to-face meetings.

- No need to manage jetlag, missed flights, or other travel troubles.
- Quick starts and crisp endings.
- Efficient use of time.
- Audio and video recordings that allow retracing of what was said and how we got to that point.

For these advantages to become reality however, leaders must use a specific set of facilitation skills, skills not always required for a face-to-face meeting.

Facilitating in a virtual medium is quite different from facilitating a face-to-face medium. Leaders must recognize the vastly different system with different social dynamics. Failure to recognize and manage these differences results in a waste of the meeting time. Refusing to facilitate online meetings could cause you to sabotage the goals you had for that meeting.

Virtual Mediums vs. Face-to-Face Meetings

While there's ease and time-savings in choosing virtual meetings, overlooking these four important factors might do a disservice to your business needs.

TRUST

Building trust is crucial when creating strong teams. Regardless of ongoing studies, a large challenge constantly circles back to creating trust. It often comes down to perception, and without certain cues, they can go unnoticed. Trust has been called the “glue of the global workspace.”¹

Competence, reliability, and authentic integrity are all crucial when you're working to build trust. There's a piece of the subconscious that questions the reasons somebody is helping us. Are they only doing it for their personal gain? To get beyond that, expressing our purpose and who we are isn't simply a matter of word choice.

There are key indicators such as tone of voice, visual cues, or even a lack of response that can create misfired communication. Trust builds social capital and encourages knowledge sharing, positive collaboration, and coordination. It's the critical contributor in creating team effectiveness.

As noted by authors Jarvenpaa, Kroll, and Leidner², “Trust is important in any type of team, but it is a critical enabling condition in virtual teams.”

Did you know that in studies of knowledge sharing teams, the absence of trust is a huge barrier to knowledge sharing?

Unfortunately, it's harder to develop this crucial element in virtual settings. It's been shown that FTF teams develop trust the fastest. Why is that? The lack of visual cues creates an environment that slows down how we form impressions of other team members.

However, while FTF teams may begin with higher levels of trust, trust in virtual teams can develop over time and match that of FTF teams.

Trust stems from an individual's perceptions of others' competence, reliability, integrity, and willingness to authentically help beyond the desire for personal gain.



SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

A second key difference between virtual mediums and FTF meetings is the opportunity to build social connections. While it might seem trivial at first glance, these social connections are vital to building team bonds.

Virtual meetings are “affect limited,” meaning that it lacks the cues that convey warmth, humor or sarcasm. VTs are more task-focused than socially-focused. Now, for those who prefer to keep a hard line on task-focused talk, this might come as welcomed news.

However, social connections help during periods of conflict by creating a foundation that enables good debate and conflict resolution. As one member of a virtual team put it: “When there is a crisis, social connections create the reserve.”

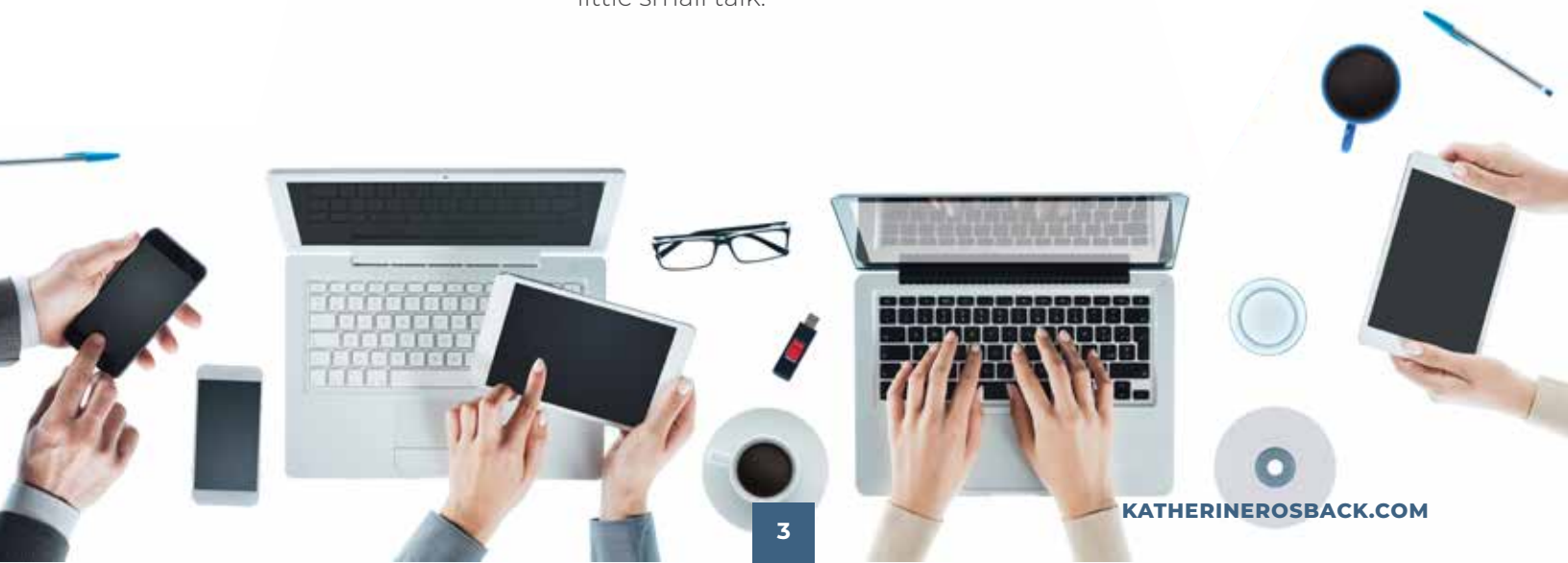
Interesting enough, improved social connections don't have to be created face-to-face. Authors Byron Reeves and J. Leighton wrote about this topic in their book *Total Engagement*, a report on research which was conducted using avatars:

“Our laboratory research shows that there is primitive engagement behind the fun – the hearts of the people that control avatars beat faster, the areas of people’s brains that regulate social interactions are more engaged, and people care substantially about how their avatars are treated – even though all of the action is in a virtual world. As a result of this intensity, avatars create the emotional and social connections necessary for the most valuable business conversations – those where innovations are first cooked up and debated, passions are exposed, and people win, lose, or accommodate via personal connections.”

Byron Reeves and J. Leighton, *Total Engagement*

FTF meetings interject familiarity among team members. This helps overcome difficult conversations. “The chief difference between a proximate team and a virtual team,” writes author Duane Windsor, “is that the former features daily face-to-face interaction, whereas interaction in the latter must be intentionally created.”

As an example, compare the opening of a FTF meeting versus a VT meeting. The FTF often starts with small talk as the meeting participants arrive. “How was your weekend?” “Hey, were you able to get the funding for that project?” The VT team meeting starts with the cryptic announcement of one’s name, followed by the beep of the next participant entering the meeting. There’s very little small talk.



VISUAL CUES

FTF meetings produce three times as many actions/time units as the groups that communicate electronically. Three times! Do you want to know why? It's quite simply our ability to see. Our brains are overwhelmingly wired for sight.

The lack of FTF nonverbal cues can pose big challenges to both group leaders and group members. Having no visual cues, team members are less able to make inferences to other team member's knowledge. Because of this, they are less able to anticipate another's response.

Why is this a problem? It creates a challenge in virtual teams. Turn management is now an issue, where it wasn't in the FTF meetings. Studies show that participants *are one third as less likely to talk* in a VT meeting than in a FTF meeting.

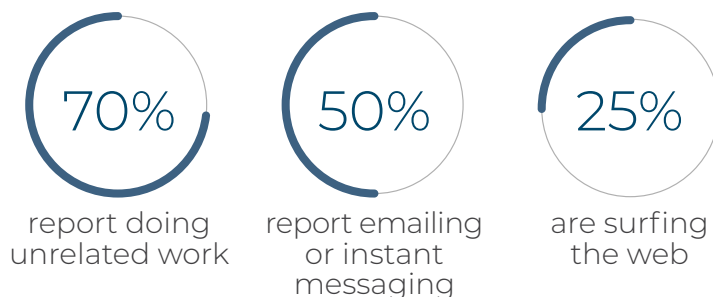
Think of the last meeting you attended. Now think about the flow of the talk. How did you know when it was your "turn" to speak? How could you tell that others were about to speak? By seeing.

Lacking visual aids, people are less likely to raise objections or disagreements, even if they have them. Virtual mediums also favor vocal factors. Participants with extraversion tendencies tend to have a higher participation rate.

But here's the biggest challenge with the lack of visual cues: our brains are wired for sight. When participants lack visual stimulation, it takes much more energy on the part of their brains to maintain attention and focus.

Think of it this way, if you have a meeting where five participants are in the room and three are calling in, you're asking those in the room to run a mental 5K race, while those calling in are being asked to complete at 10K.

People might be walking by their caller's offices, have easy access to the Internet (if one is sitting at the computer), or maybe activities outside the window easily grab the attention of the caller. A 2004 survey of 385 respondents showed the ease in which their attention is taken:



CRICKETS CHIRPING

Who hasn't experienced the sounds of silence on a teleconference? Consider situations where either a question is asked or the speaker completes his presentation. What about when the facilitator rolls out the ill-fated and highly ineffective question, "So, does anyone have any comments?"

You hear nothing but crickets.

Lacking visual cues, it's difficult to know what one is thinking without checking body language or noticing their team member's eyes. These gestures help clarify pieces of information we rely on. In essence, everyone is sitting in a communicative vacuum.

We are quite literally, blind. The errors in assumptions begin to mount.

The facilitator (or speaker) might assume silence means that the other participants have nothing to say, and that is a completely wrong. Silence on the part of the participants can mean:

- I agree
- I strongly disagree
- I am indifferent
- I did not notice your question
- I did not realize that you wanted a response

Silence does *not* equal consent (despite what is written in the ground rules).

VISUAL CUES *continued*

The eye wants to be entertained. While lacking stimulation, it's easy to be drawn elsewhere. Attention is indeed scarce and fleeting. Paying attention, as the phrase implies, extracts a cost. Those lacking visual cues are paying a higher price.

Lastly, by not having the visual cues, our meaning-making processes are lacking. The actual picture of what a participant “looked like”—their facial expressions, their skin color, the tension (or not) in their neck, or the look in their eyes—we tend to make it up. We're not sure, so our brains fill in the blanks.

Recall a time when you talked to someone for some length of time. When you finally met them, did they meet your expectations? No! We're often “surprised” at how they look. Why the surprise? Your brain has been busy forming images all on its own. It created expressions each time they spoke or made various statements—and was likely wrong.

How does this undercut trust? Knowledge sharing or effective debates are crucial, and without the proper cues, we're likely to create false impressions.

Think about the last time a team member made a sarcastic or humorous comment. How did you know it was sarcastic or humorous? What told you that it wasn't a serious challenge? Maybe they had a gleam in their eye or gave you a quick smile. Auditory cues in this instance also helped you understand they were joking.

But it's easy to misinterpret cues when you don't have the visual to go along with the auditory cue. And if you don't respond, those non-verbal challenges create problems just as easily.

Without conventional FTF cues to validate impressions, teleconference participants tend to harden their judgement about the intentions or motives of their silent partners. This makes it difficult in achieving a collaborative environment.



RECOMMENDATIONS

So, appreciating the necessity of meeting in the virtual world, what can be done to improve the communication?

- 1. Address people out by name—ALL the time.**

Ask "I'm interested in hearing everyone's thoughts on Stephan's proposal. Let's start with Tim and then I'll follow this list of names on the screen. What are each of you thinking as you listen to the proposal?"
- 2. Create cone-heads** (if an avatar is not available).

If you have some people in the room and some calling in, write the caller's names on flip charts or on a white board to remind others that they are "present." One clever team facilitator writes their names of cones and places the cones by the speaker phones. Another uses empty chairs in the room to signify their presence.
- 3. Intentionally create social connections (and trust).**
 - If the team will be working together for some time, work to create the mall talk, find ways to share personal information.*
 - Hold a communication planning meeting and discuss what all see as good communication practices and shared examples of such practices and the values the underlie them. Establish group norms concerning communication.*
 - During the meeting, frequently validate the different perspectives.*
 - Take time to clarify contributions.*
- 4. Become their eyes.**

Fill in the visual voids for people who are not in the room. For instance, you could say "When you said that, Paul, I noticed looking around this room that there were several concerned looks." or "Betsy, I'm wondering what everyone's expression was when Dana shared that feedback. Could you look around your room and tell us what you are seeing?"
- 5. Remember that you're competing for their eyeballs.**
 - Instead of just relying on their imagination, use the laptop screen to give your participants something to look at. And, when you do, use colorful graphics and keep the pages moving. This often will necessitate someone to control and capture notes on the screen in addition to someone facilitating. The act of facilitation should not be subjugated to capturing notes and working with graphics.*
 - Because you are in a competition, don't assume that you always have the caller's attention. Therefore, frequently summarize the discussions. Help with possible lack of understanding by repeating what you have heard. "So let me make sure that I have heard you correctly. Tatiana, you are suggesting that we _____."*
- 6. Shorten speeches.**

Give the long distance runners a break! It is very taxing for a non-stimulated eyeball participant to keep the focus. Ask presenters to pause for questions at 3-5 minute intervals. As a facilitator, listen for natural breaks in the conversation to draw others in.
- 7. Change the questions to stop the crickets.**

Rather than asking "Does anyone have any questions?" state "Let's see what questions are out there. Joe, how about we start with you and then I'll follow the call-in list shown on our screens." Or "Okay. As Ziyu was sharing her suggestions, I am wondering who has comments about her ideas. Andres, what are your thoughts as you hear this? Bjorg, what might you add to that?"
- 8. Adjust your goals.**

Given that you cannot rely on visual cues, a general rule of thumb is that a teleconference takes approximately 1.5 times as long as a FTF meeting to accomplish the same quality and level of work.
- 9. Don't order chips for lunch.**

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