

Quick Guide: Fostering Inclusive Virtual Teams

For many of us, COVID-19 has prompted us to shift to virtual team meetings as our new workplace norm. Meeting virtually can present several challenges for all us; such as awkward moments, interruptions, voices not being heard, technical glitches, and miscommunication. These challenges can impact team cohesion and engagement. Here are some strategies that you can use right away – either as a meeting participant or as the meeting leader – to increase a sense of inclusion in your virtual team.



1. Scheduling

Goal: To accommodate attendees' different schedules/time zones and network bandwidth.

Strategies:

- a. For recurring meetings, consider rotating meeting times or offer different times for the same meeting topic to accommodate all attendees.
- b. Confirm that attendees have sufficient bandwidth for the meeting tool. Make accommodations as appropriate, e.g. attendees join a Zoom meeting with their phone instead of a computer, remove a section in the agenda that can easily be communicated via email instead, or provide a recording of the meeting.

2. Meeting Preparation

Goal: To ensure access and preparation for attendees.

Strategies:

- a. Inquire if attendees have requests for accommodations in order to prepare and participate in the meeting.
- b. Send agenda and any related documents to attendees at least 24 hours beforehand.
 - Shows consideration for different time zones, busy schedules, and language and work style differences.
 - Gives people whose first language is not the dominant language time to digest the materials and think about their responses.
- c. With the agenda, assign different people to facilitate different topics to assure more evenly distributed engagement. Ensure there are opportunities built into the agenda for collaboration or input.
- d. Consider what, if any, visuals during the call may help attendees understand the material being discussed. If you intend to share visuals with the 'share screen' option, use 12-point font size or above.

3. At the Start of the Virtual Meeting

Goal: To build rapport among the attendees.

Strategies:

- a. You can edit your profile name to include your pronouns. Example - For a Zoom meeting, “rename” yourself: Louis Brondell (they/them). Doing so will help set the tone for inclusion and may encourage others to add their pronouns.
- b. To engage larger groups at the start of the call, use a poll that attendees can answer in the chat function (e.g., type into the chat where you are calling from today).
- c. For smaller groups, dedicate time at the beginning of the call for each person to introduce themselves—if it is a new team use an ice breaker to get the call going.
- d. For smaller groups and recurring meetings, start the meeting 3-5 minutes before the start time. Take a personal interest in all attendees— greet each attendee as they join and allow time for them to greet each other and build rapport for the meeting.

4. Establish Ground Rules

Goal: To encourage interaction and engagement, and to set expectations.

Strategies:

- a. Share this perspective with the group at the start of the call: In an ideal meeting, no matter what the size, all attendees participate, contributing diverse points of view and thinking together to reach new insights.
- b. For larger groups, open the call with the agenda, objective, expected outcomes, and interaction options. Consider typing out those items on a PPT slide that you screen share so attendees can read that while they wait for the meeting to begin.
- c. Acknowledge the current climate of added stress and uncertainty (many of us are working remotely for the first time, juggling unexpected work-life demands). Encourage everyone to be gentle and patient with each other as we may have personal stressors that are affecting how we communicate; let’s agree to seek clarification of each other.
- d. Ask attendees to speak clearly and at a reasonable pace, listen attentively, be mindful of pauses, and not dominate the conversation.
- e. Ask attendees to raise their virtual hand (for example, Zoom's “raise hand” feature). For large meetings, ask the attendees to use this tool to indicate when they have a question or input and the host can then call on them directly.

- f. Invite questions via both voice and instant message, but ask that all mute their lines when not talking to reduce background noise and interruptions.
- g. Incorporate slides or interactive elements such as polls or whiteboards, especially for large groups, encouraging all attendees to participate and be engaged.

5. Embrace Silence

Goal: To give time for attendees to gather their thoughts and to expand space for more attendees to speak.

Strategies:

- a. Count to ten silently before summarizing and moving on to your next topic, this may prompt team members who need more time to speak up.
- b. The pause allows for those personality styles with a preference for introversion or from a more hierarchical culture (not comfortable speaking up to those they perceive as the authority) to jump in with something they're thinking about or want to suggest.
- c. A pause allows non-native English speakers time to think of the words they want to use or translate from their own language before they speak.
- d. It is particularly helpful if the pause follows an open question: "What are your thoughts?" Instead of a yes or no question which is always easy to answer with a "yes."
- e. Incorporate time in the meeting for attendees to answer a question by taking a minute to write down their own notes. This allows for people to write in their preferred language and gives introverted thinkers more time to gather their thoughts.

Adapted from:

- *Melissa Lamson, "LinkedIn's Top Secret to Successful Virtual Meetings," Inc., June 21, 2016.*
- *Deloitte, "Empowering professionals to work differently: Virtual meeting guide, COVID-19 Response," 2020.*