Engaging staff at virtual team meetings – tips and tricks

For remote teams, Zoom meetings are a lifeline for maintaining connection. This document is intended to provide tips and tricks for participating in and hosting small team meetings, with a focus on encouraging personal engagement. This is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to using Zoom – you can find more detailed resources on using Zoom via the IS&T information page.

While this document is geared towards managers planning and hosting team meetings, the final page can be used separately for team members participating in team meetings.

Agenda and meeting planning

***Accessibility*:** Make sure your meetings are fully accessible to your team members. Ask if there is anything you can do to make participation easier (this may mean scheduling meetings at a different time, providing any visuals ahead of time, or using or not using the chat function on Zoom). It may help to review the resources listed on the Disability Access Services page to consider what your team members might require.

***Set expectations*:** Share any expectations for the meeting in advance, such as asking team members to mute themselves when not speaking. It could also mean setting an expectation that team members refrain from checking their phone or emails during the meeting.

***Maintain effective meeting best practices*:** Effective meeting best practices and standard routines are even more important for a remote team. If your team has standard meeting norms, maintain them even while meeting remotely. Learn more about best practices in this learning bundle.

***Make time for informal connections*:** Build in time for informal socializing occasionally – end a meeting early if you can to give participants time to talk informally, or schedule a 15-minute coffee break.

***Check-ins*:** Institute check-ins at the beginning of Zoom meetings. You may want to use a prompt question that can give people something specific to respond to; you could use the same prompt or change it from week to week (see Appendix for ideas). People may be slower to respond to virtual check-ins—be patient as you wait for responses. It may help to call on people (ideally, if you do this, you would give them the option to opt out of responding).

Also recognize that a team meeting is rarely the best place for someone to give their manager honest feedback about how they're doing. You could say something like "It's important to me that you're healthy and satisfied with your well-being. I want to know how I can help you. That only works if you are willing to share, but you don't need to share that here if you don't feel comfortable. If you don't want to share here, please know that you can contact me outside of this meeting at any time."

***Plan to stick around*:** Plan to linger in the Zoom meeting for 5-10 minutes after the meeting ends, and let your team know you will stay available. This signals to team members that it's okay to stay and chat informally (with you and with each other) after the session.

Using technology to build and maintain connections

***Video*:** Encourage team members to use their cameras if they can, as seeing each other can be a vital part of maintaining connections across distance.

- If people turn their videos off due to unstable connections, ask them to try disconnecting from the VPN before meeting. Disconnecting from the VPN sometimes help with Zoom connectivity.
- Some people may be uncomfortable with the video on – it may actually make it harder to engage with the meeting – so you shouldn't require video. You will come to know the preferences of your team.

***Do more with less*:** Limit the technology. The more technological bells and whistles you use, the more team members will focus on that and the less the focus will be on connecting with each other. You also want to make sure that you're only using features you feel comfortable managing. In a small team meeting, for example, you likely don't need to use the "raise hand" feature in discussions, and you probably won't need to use PowerPoint slides.

***Gallery view*:** If your team is small enough (less than 20 people), staying in gallery view on Zoom allows all the team members to see each other, as they would in an in-person meeting. Unless your agenda calls for it, avoid sharing screens or using spotlight view.

***Poll*:** Use the poll function to give people an opportunity to respond to a question without putting themselves on the spot or in the center of attention (note that responses will not be truly anonymous unless you set the poll up to be anonymous).

Participating in team meetings on Zoom

***Before the meeting*:** If you are early to the meeting, try chatting with colleagues who have also arrived early. Some teams make it a practice to spend the first five minutes of each meeting in informal conversation. Imagine you're in the elevator on the way up to the conference room – or around the water cooler filling your cups before sitting down at the table!

***Zoom backgrounds*:** Zoom backgrounds can be used to hide the room behind you (giving your pets and family members privacy, and also hiding any clutter), and they can also be conversation starters! Consider switching your background up from meeting to meeting or on a semi-regular basis. Be sure to consider the appropriateness of your background, given the meeting setting and participants. Images of campus and other MIT backgrounds are available online: https://alum.mit.edu/mit-themed-zoom-backgrounds.

***Video*:** It can be really helpful to see each other's faces, especially in physically distant and sometimes difficult times. If you can, keep your video on – the more people who do it, the more comfortable it is! If you can't have your video on, add a profile picture to Zoom, so colleagues can at least see a photograph of you, which is a personal touch.

If you are willing to share your video, but uncomfortable seeing yourself on screen, you can opt to hide self-view. Instructions are available via Zoom support: https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/115001077226-Hiding-or-showing-my-video-on-my-display.

***Check in with your colleagues*:** Need to step away for a minute? Turning the sound off because there's construction outside your window or a dog barking in your living room? Connection unstable? Let your colleagues know (you can use the chat function, if you don't want to cut into the meeting), so they aren't wondering.

Appendix – Check-In Prompt Ideas

- What is one word to describe how you feel today?
- What is one thing that has surprised you about working from home?
- What is a new habit you are trying to cultivate?
- What is a habit or ritual that you are maintaining to help feel normal?
- What is your personal weather forecast?
- Share a rose or a thorn (something good or bad that you are experiencing)?
- What are you binge-watching or listening to?
- On a scale of 1-7, how are you feeling today? *(This one can be either a poll question or a conversation starter.)*