VIRTUAL WORKSHOPS

MAKING SENSE OF 2-D COLLABORATION

The COVID-19 crisis is impacting every part of our lives. For millions of knowledge workers, one of the biggest changes has been in how we collaborate.

Just last month, we spent a good chunk of our days solving problems by talking, sketching, and feeding off one other's creativity and energy. Today, we're trying to do the same thing by reading grainy faces in thumbnail windows and battling with the mute button.

Collaboration is essential to our business, and our work often puts us in big rooms for long sessions with multiple teams. We've now run a number of these workshops virtually and have learned a lot about how to keep people engaged, open, and working well, even though we can't be together.

The 10 simple tips on the right are things we believe might help any business that depends on collaboration to survive and grow. With so much unknown right now, our creativity and collaborative spirit has never been more important.

#1. Moderators become directors. The dynamic energy of an in-person workshop doesn't translate virtually. Moderators need a firmer hand in directing the session, driving clear questions and managing contributions to avoid chaos.

#2. Plan ahead. It can be more difficult for disconnected people to come up with inputs from scratch. Self-populate workshop documents and key questions beforehand, and have people react and make comments about your assumptions. This will speed up exercises and keep people on task.

#3. People's faces make the meeting. Going on mute and avoiding video makes it easy to check out, multi-task, or stay passive. Workshops need engaged, attentive participants to give the sense of collective contribution. To that point...

#4. Replace body language and nonverbals. Effective communication is 90% non-verbal, which is difficult to interpret on a screen. To avoid the speaker feeling like a bad stand-up comedian, ask the audience to give physical feedback to presenters such as a "thumbs up" or hand raise.

#5. Take breaks. Lack of physical connection means attention spans are cut in half. Now add in home distractions like kids and significant others, pets, or the news on TV. Use 10- to 15- minute breaks every 60 to 75 minutes. Give people time to stretch their legs, turn the camera off, and catch up on whatever they would like. It will lead to a more productive and engaging session.

#6. Two is better than one. Running a workshop solo is hard enough in person. It's nearly impossible virtually. You need a partner who can help clean up and organize inputs while you're explaining the next exercise.

#7. The Backchannel. No workshop ever goes perfectly to plan. Pivots are an essential part of moderation. A backchannel platform like Slack will allow you and your partner to make decisions on the fly without disrupting the workshop flow.

#8. Use dynamic technology. Google Docs and polling platforms can help replace the in-person experience of a workshop. Watching people's inputs build on a page at the same time creates a sense of collaboration, while polling helps arrive at consensus without draining precious time.

#9. Treat presentations like billboards. Screen sharing makes busy, dense slides nearly impossible to digest properly. Use more slides with less content so you can move at pace and hold attention. Imagine you're doing 70 mph on the highway and see a billboard. That's how much content you need on each slide.

#10. Break your plan. Every agenda point needs to be firmly managed and time-boxed. But know unexpected things will happen. Technology will fail. People will get frustrated. That's OK. The job is to steward the meeting to an agreed-upon decision point. Build in more flex and be ready to think on your feet.

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