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How to Keep an Invisible (aka Remote) Audience Engaged



If you've been in the workplace for 15 years or more, then you know that the amount of time spent in meetings has multiplied over the years. As the pace of work picked up, companies found it saved time to get people together so information could be passed along quickly and decisions could be made more efficiently. And, we probably abused the effectiveness of meetings a bit because today people say they spend too much time in meetings. A recent survey found that middle managers spend 35% of their time in meetings and upper management spends 50% of their time in meetings. In addition, people spend up to 4 hours a week preparing for status update meetings.

In the last few years, we've seen another trend in meetings. More than ever before, managers rely on remote meetings to pull teams together and to review progress. A recent survey revealed that 83% of HR professionals said telecommuting would be more prevalent in the next five years. Bottom line, the medium is here to stay. Here's how to make the most of it.

In every workshop, I'm asked about remote meetings, and I know that managers are looking for simple tools to improve this setting. But, there is no simple solution. The remote communication environment is one of the most challenging situations for clients, so they seek our advice.

Imagine this: You have scheduled a one hour meeting with a group of people who will draft a timeline for a major project you are leading. With the major contributors in the discussion, you plan to get agreement on key milestones for the project and buy-in on deliverables. Picture yourself at the front of a conference table looking out at a group of people who all have their backs turned to you. That's the invisible audience. You can't see them, so you have no idea if they are engaged in the discussion or even paying attention.

My informal poll of clients illustrates the worst behavior from the invisible audience. When I ask for a show of hands of people who give 100% of their attention to a remote conversation, not a single hand is raised. It's just too tempting when you're invisible to multi-task on calls. We also lower our expectations of what we will get out of remote meetings. So, you're dealing with a less attentive audience with lower expectations for takeaways. I'd rather speak to a live audience rather than deal with those dynamics any day!

Remote meetings are NOT as effective as live ones, and good managers should be very aware of that dynamic. There is no substitute for getting people together for connection and engagement. But, you can alternate live versus remote discussions to maximize time and costs. Remote meetings can be used effectively as check-in points or discussion vehicles for specific issues. The critical skill is to learn how to keep the focus narrow, to demand participation and to deliver specific takeaways from every call.

Consider these concepts to improve. We call them the 3 P's of Remote Meetings.

PREPARATION

When you're dealing with an unfocused audience, you need to be crystal clear about the objective of the meeting and what you're trying to accomplish. This often calls for more preparation and advance agendas so that listeners understand their role in the meeting.

Keep the objective narrow. Most people are accustomed to ineffective remote conversations, so they'll be skeptical at first. You'll need to earn their attention, and you'll get there by setting realistic goals for the call and reaching those goals on every call.

So, consider the example again of the manager who has scheduled a meeting to draft the timeline of a major project. Initially, he has scheduled one hour and is planning to get agreement on key milestones for the project and buy-in on deliverables. In a remote meeting, he can't accomplish both. He would be better to schedule two thirty minute calls and set only one objective for each call.

If you lead a lot of remote calls, focus on facilitation skills and learn how to solicit verbal responses to keep all participants involved.

PARTICIPATION

Even though we are poor listeners on the phone, we would rather participate than waste valuable time listening half-heartedly. The multi-tasking symptom is a learned behavior and one that you can break your listeners of with a little effort. Early in the call, you need to signal to a group that you want their full participation and that you plan to call on them throughout the discussion.

We coach managers to use polling or easy response questions at the start of the call to give everyone a "voice." This can quickly engage all the listeners and start everyone on equal footing with the discussion. Polling means ask for a one word or phrase response to a question. This helps the leader read the audience and understand their initial perspective on their topic.

Back to the example of the manager who schedules a remote meeting to draft the timeline of a major project. He could begin the call by asking each participant to weigh in on the following question. "Based on your role in this initiative, are you most comfortable with a timeframe of three months, four months or six months?" By asking each person on the call to respond with three, four or six, he will quickly see where the most pressure will be for the project and whose challenges need to be addressed first.

Calls that engage all listeners in conversation within the first 2-3 minutes yield higher participation overall. Construct an agenda that encourages input throughout the call. Continue to engage participants with questions and reactions. Vary the way that you pose the questions such as fill-in-the-blank statements, open-ended questions or a "top three" list of something.

PRESENCE

It can be challenging for remote participants to stay engaged when 80% of messages we receive come from body language, something that is hard to pick up on during a remote call. When the audience can't see you, they can only engage by hearing you. The voice has to express confidence and commitment to lead the discussion. The pace of the voice is a critical part of presence. It impacts how well the listeners hear your thoughts and allows the meaning of the words to sink in. The rate should be slower in the beginning to help participants engage in the conversation. Voice energy establishes your level of commitment to the topic. It also creates urgency around reaching a takeaway for the meeting. It actually takes more energy to communicate by phone than it does in person because there is no one in the room to help you gauge reactions.

FINAL TAKEAWAYS

Remote calls can be effective if you set narrow objectives, drive participation and deliver clear takeaways. The invisible audience is less vested in remote calls, but you can move them from low expectations to active participation. As part of our 2015 workshop curriculum, we have added an Open Enrollment Workshop on [Effective Remote Meetings](#). This virtual workshop puts participants through a simulated meeting and then takes the group behind the scenes to see how to implement the three P's above. We also work with teams to tailor remote meeting formats that work best for your needs. You'll find a description and our public dates on our website. As telecommuting increases, so will the frequency of remote meetings. It's time we all learn to lead them more effectively.



Sally Williamson & Associates
3050 Peachtree Rd NW Suite 520
Atlanta, GA 30305
404-475-6550
www.sallywilliamson.com

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