

RESULTS-BASED FACILITATION IN VIRTUAL SETTINGS

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

OVERVIEW

Working effectively in an online environment requires a new approach to the design and facilitation of virtual meetings. This Results Count® tool adapts the six core Results-Based Facilitation™ (RBF) skills for meetings held online. RBF helps leaders design, lead and contribute to meetings that effectively move groups from talk to action and hold participants accountable for advancing the work.

This list of adaptations of the RBF competencies seeks to reinforce the fact that moving conversations and meetings online is not a simple matter. What's different when groups meet and work in an online environment? Many things, it turns out.

First, without the same visual cues, meeting facilitators and participants lose much of the information that helps them interpret interactions and conversations. Online, we miss people's full-body movements, such as posture and gestures, that provide signals as to how they are feeling and reacting. Even facial expressions may be hard to read if the onscreen image is small or pixelated.

Second, participants' attention can easily wander, whether the camera is on or not. Neurologically, the gallery view with its unconnected images hinders participants' ability to pay full attention. In a sense, online participants are continuously multitasking. Compensating for limited information inputs and distractions tires out participants in virtual meetings.

Finally, online, we lose much of the informal interactions and social connections that happen in and around in-person meetings. This is a significant loss because these threads of connection enable participants to engage in tough conversations.

This tool, released during the COVID-19 pandemic, could be applied whenever in-person meetings shift to an online format.

RBF COMPETENCY ADAPTATIONS FOR VIRTUAL SETTINGS

I. HOLD ROLE

TRADITIONAL DESCRIPTION

- Be aware of and make choices about roles that contribute to achieving results.
- Use B/ART, which stands for Boundaries of Authority, Role and Task, to help you explore how you can be effective while still respecting the constructs of the organizations and groups involved. B/ART analysis helps individuals and groups define the work they can do, understand group dynamics and achieve meeting results.
- Hold a neutral role, which includes creating space for meeting participants to speak without regard to your personal preferences or other factors that can skew participation and appreciation of points of view with which you disagree.
- “Give the work back” to the group for problem solving and decision making. By focusing on meeting results, enable the group to make choices about the content and sequence of its work.

CHALLENGES IN THE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

- Technological demands can deplete participants, deflecting their attention toward technical or administrative tasks rather than holding their roles as “adaptive leaders” — i.e., leaders who are aware of the impact of values, habits, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors associated with taking action to improve results.
- During times of crisis and in the “work from home” context, boundaries between [person and role](#), and [role and system](#), are weaker than usual. In addition, people are not just “working at home” but “at home during a crisis trying to work.” As a result, “person” is highly activated for everyone right now and in ways that can undermine participants’ ability to stay in “role.”
- Holding yourself and others accountable for commitments is more difficult when work primarily occurs in a virtual environment because people are “out of sight and out of mind” from one another except for meetings.

GENERAL GUIDANCE

- If participants are new to virtual platforms, consider offering a brief tutorial and/or dry run 15 minutes before the meeting begins. A 15-minute pre-start can also provide everyone with an opportunity to make sure video and audio connections are functioning, allowing you to start the work of the meeting on time.
- Encourage everyone to turn on their video cameras during the check-in, check-out, breakout groups or decision-making points. Likewise, encourage participants to turn their cameras off during journaling or library time. Otherwise, let people set their own boundary about their cameras.
- Make sure to track participants joining by phone, too, and adjust accordingly. For example, if fewer than half of participants are on video, you will need to rethink the use of many of online functions, such as breakout rooms.

ADAPTATIONS TO HOLD ROLE

1. A brief centering exercise (such as deep breathing) at the beginning of the call will help participants settle their “person” and focus on the work.
2. In some ways, it is even more important that you hold the neutral role, because as the facilitator or host you are controlling the space. Almost by default, your voice will be the one people will listen to most.
3. You can activate people into their “role” by using the check-in to invite everyone to name the specific aspect of the role they are holding in the conversation.
4. You can hold your role as facilitator by being explicit about how you will facilitate online (how you will call on people, how people can raise hands, how you will or will not use the “share screen” function, how you will use the “chat box”) and by reminding participants of these norms throughout the meeting.
5. Remember that while virtual meetings are tiring for everyone for reasons already mentioned, facilitating online depletes the facilitator most of all. Use breaks to recharge and to help yourself stay in your role.

II. HOLD CONVERSATIONS

TRADITIONAL DESCRIPTION

- Listen and demonstrate openness, curiosity and attentiveness, enabling you to frame dialogues that achieve meeting results.
- Use “context statements,” “effective questions” and “listen fors.” In RBF, context statements provide a focus and a boundary for conversations; effective questions engage people in sharing information and listening to one another; and “listen fors” indicate that a neutral facilitator is listening for participants’ responses and their connection to the result.

CHALLENGES IN THE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

- Leaders are less able to read body language and nonverbal cues over video and cannot always see all participants simultaneously on a single screen. Even when they can see all of the participants, the “gallery view” splits attention and introduces a world of distraction with each little box.
- People are more easily distracted online than in person, and it is easier for people to “go offline” and do other work during the meeting.
- There may be either more cross-talk or more silence, depending on how well the group knows each other and the strength of the effective questions.

ADAPTATIONS TO HOLD CONVERSATIONS

1. Before you schedule your virtual meeting, consider the size of the group and who needs to be in the conversation. Smaller is better online.
2. Avoid using full group mode for large groups for long periods (over 30 minutes at a time), as it is hard for large groups to engage in extended “discussions” online. Full-group mode for over eight or 10 participants (the number that might fit around a table) is best used to share information, introduce and/or synthesize discussions or engage in very focused decision making.
3. If the option is available to you, take advantage of breakout functions in virtual platforms to create more intimate and manageable conversations.
4. Use context statements, effective questions and listen for rigorously and repeatedly to create verbal guideposts for participants.
5. Make sure your effective questions are simple and clear; use plain language. Make all effective questions available visually — in the chat box or in a shared slide.
6. Ask your effective questions one at a time rather than listing them in sequence.
7. Because wandering attention is an inevitable effect of online listening, work to amplify what people say. Use repetition, summary and synthesis regularly, and let the group know you are doing so. This practice will let speakers know that they are being heard and engage the rest of the group. It will slow things down, but it’s a “slow down to go fast” adjustment.
8. If there are more participants than you, the facilitator, can see in a gallery view, toggle between the screen shots of participants to keep them all in mind. If you call on people to engage them, pull from different screens.
9. As the facilitator, you may need to call on people to talk or establish a queue for participants to speak. This approach can prevent people from talking over one another and avoid lulls in the conversation, as participants wait to see if someone else is going to begin speaking. Remember that the participants, too, cannot easily read body language in virtual meetings.

III. HOLD GROUPS

TRADITIONAL DESCRIPTION

- Support groups in having focused conversations that move to results.
- Use a flipchart to display the group’s work.
- Sequence topics.
- Summarize content.

- Synthesize conversations.
- Check in and check out.

CHALLENGES IN THE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

- There's no central flipchart, which is especially challenging for visual learners and for making complex group decisions.
- People can hold less content in virtual environments than in person and may feel less connected to one another, experiencing a more limited sense of “group-ness.”
- Leaders or facilitators cannot easily gauge or see everyone's reaction to a proposal.
- It is easier for folks to “fade away” a bit when conflict or disagreement arises. Moreover, a fragmented, narrowed view of the group can make it harder to assess group dynamics, particularly when multiple breakout groups are used.

ADAPTATIONS TO HOLD GROUPS

1. Take time at the beginning of the session to help participants enter the virtual space and feel grounded. This may be done by taking time with the check-in, inviting people to close all their other apps and browser windows or offering a very short centering exercise.
2. Set working norms at the beginning of the meeting — for example, keeping oneself muted unless speaking and the use of the chat box. Communicate a system for wanting to speak — for example, by writing “hand up” in the chat box or, if available in your platform, virtually raising a hand.
3. Be clear when there is an expectation that everyone participates — certainly for the check-in and check-out, as well as other times when each person is expected to respond to a question or offer a reflection or idea. Calling on individuals or establishing a queue for speaking may help move the conversation along, rather than waiting for people to decide to speak.
4. Throughout the session, make and offer observations about the patterns of participation, such as: “about half of you have spoken so far...” Communicate your stacking of speakers often — for example, “Next we'll hear from X, and after them Y and Z.” This will help the group cultivate a view of itself as a group.
5. Include at least a 15-minute break for every 60–90 minutes of work.
6. Communicate the sequence of topics the group will be working on (verbally or through a shared agenda or slide), and reiterate the sequence often, using the chat box if the sequence is changing in real time.
7. Take time to check in to ensure closure before switching conversations. Invite reflection (analytic) and ask participants how they are thinking and feeling about the discussion.

8. Experiment with a range of check-in options: give prompts and have folks write in the chat box (particularly useful in managing time with a larger group); conduct more extended check-ins in breakout rooms; or arrange for check-ins by phone ahead of the meeting. If you assigned prework, build a check-in question around it. And as always but more importantly than ever before, use the check-in to launch the work of the group.
9. Instead of using a flipchart, set up Google Doc or use the virtual whiteboard feature to track notes in real time. Try out tools like *Padlet* or *Miro* to experiment with more options to display work in real time. *Google slides* also allows for a *closed captioning* option.
10. With breakout groups, ask participants to take notes on the preset Google Doc or other shared tool and be prepared to report themes or highlights with the full group.
11. Use the chat box to articulate summaries.
12. Keep synthesizing high-level ideas and use simple language; vary between providing synthesis and asking the group to build a synthesis of the discussion.

IV. HOLD 3R MEETINGS

TRADITIONAL DESCRIPTION

- Use the 3R framework (relationships, resources, results) to design and facilitate meetings that move groups from talk to action. The goal is that participants “come with meeting results in mind and leave with action commitments in hand.”

CHALLENGES IN THE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

- A single facilitator will have to both manage the technology and help structure and resource the conversation, creating a heavy burden and competing demands.
- Participants will experience competing demands to achieve the desired meeting results, even if it’s just level of attention or personal obligations in the “at home” setting.
- It is difficult to retain complex sequences of ideas online because of depleted attention, fatigue or mainly deriving meaning from the spoken word. As a result, participants may have less patience for multiple results or layered agendas.
- The virtual environment requires much advance preparation, and facilitators are somewhat constrained in their ability to “redesign” conversations on the spot to meet participants where they are.

ADAPTATIONS TO HOLD 3R MEETINGS

1. Keep the meetings as streamlined as possible with a realistic amount of content. If email or one-on-one conversations could work instead, use them. While virtual platforms can facilitate productive and creative exchanges, people’s attention is more diffuse and repetition and careful attention to agreements takes more time.
2. Organize a team to hold the meeting, consisting at a minimum of a facilitator, a co-facilitator and a note taker. The co-facilitator can manage any slides or materials shared with the whole group; track the chat stream and synthesize verbally or in the chat box itself; track the “raise hand” function; and create a stack of participants who will speak.
3. If possible, add a fourth team member to support the technology, opening the virtual room, managing break-out rooms, and attending to any glitches with connectivity, sound or video feed. At the start of the meeting, prioritize and ensure alignment around the top meeting results. Use the check-in purposefully to begin work on the result. Reinforce progress and the individual meeting results throughout the session.
4. Use the share screen function or share a meeting mini-workbook or worksheet ahead of time. This can help participants follow the agenda and stay focused on the related result.
5. Keep notes or document a sequence of proposal-based decision making as you might on a flipchart with the share screen function. (Overuse of this technique, however, can tax the attention span of session participants.)
6. When a question or topic sounds as if it should be an offline or separate conversation, name it as quickly as possible. Ask, “What questions would benefit from two minutes of the group’s attention?” to make sure these topics are surfaced, even if they can’t be resolved on the current call.
7. Use planned and impromptu breaks to allow the facilitation team to redesign and refine materials as needed. (To allow for this function, make the breaks longer than usual — 20 to 30 minutes.)
8. Add a column to your annotated agenda specifically for “tech” and identify related tech needs for each section of content and who will hold that role.

V. HOLD MENTAL MODELS

TRADITIONAL DESCRIPTION

- Use a repertoire of tools to achieve meetings results.
 - Use proposal-based decision making to move from talk to action.
 - Use conversations to develop convergence.
 - Name and address barriers to convergence.

- Make and help others make action commitments.
- Be and help others be accountable for action commitments.
- Observe and respond to groups dynamics.
- Assess and address conflict.

CHALLENGES IN THE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

- It's harder to "read" people's level of agreement or resonance with a proposal.
- People may be less likely to engage with conflict or disagreement virtually unless they know and trust each other. Virtual platforms make it harder to connect and build trust.
- It is harder to assess group dynamics in general and particularly difficult in breakout groups. Visual media can enable racialized projections to go unchecked.

ADAPTATIONS TO HOLD MENTAL MODELS

1. Make prework standard to help activate people in role. Highlight specific effective questions that relate to the meeting content and desired results. Before the meeting, you could conduct a brief survey around a particular issue or decision to be made and start the meeting by sharing top-level results.
2. Use breakout groups for more concentrated work and deeper connections. Announce that you plan to pop in to as many breakout groups as possible.
3. Normalize the role of conflict and acknowledge the "artificial" nature of the virtual setting and how it might make a "spirited exchange" difficult. Invite the group to share what might enable them to voice disagreement.
4. Seed action commitments early in the call, setting the expectation that the meeting will lead to action commitments. Invite action commitments at the end of each segment and prompt participants to post these either in the chat box or the Google Doc, if you are using one.
5. Use proposal-based decision making, putting proposals in the chat box as they are developed. As proposals become more refined, you can use polling to get a sense of the group's reactions. Use breakout rooms to enable smaller groups to think through proposals for presentation to the full group.
6. Because the concept of "mental models" is so abstract and the online environment lends itself to the concrete, you will have to emphasize this idea explicitly. To this end, you can invite the group to do the following:
 - a. Discuss mental models early on in the meeting around something the group can relate to but has low stakes — for example, mental models about virtual meetings!

- b. Name mental models as they arise, either in the chat box or note-taking document. And normalize reflection on these “balcony moments.”
- c. Do group-as-a-whole analysis to uncover equity issues, patterns and mental models.
- d. Notice and name racialized projections and mental models as they arise, and invite balcony reflection from the group and prompt participants to note mental models.
- e. Make sure facilitators attend to patterns of whose voices are dominant and whose are diminished or absent.

VI. HOLD ACTION AND RESULTS

TRADITIONAL DESCRIPTION

- Make a difference in programs and community populations.
- Be accountable for contribution to results.
- Use RBF skills to work collaboratively to accelerate progress toward results.

CHALLENGES IN THE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

- In virtual meetings many people are engaged with partial attention, making it hard to maintain accountability.
- You cannot easily have side or informal coaching conversations to activate people further in their roles.

ADAPTATIONS TO HOLD ACTION AND RESULTS

1. In preparing your agenda, think through the one-on-one conversations you need to have before the meeting to activate people’s contribution.
2. Send meeting slides, workbook and/or worksheets ahead of time and resend as part of the meeting follow up.
3. Consider recording your meeting, with the permission of the participants, for those who are absent.
4. Set up an action-commitment chart in a Google Doc or spreadsheet that can be populated in real time as the meeting progresses.
5. At the end of the meeting — almost as a closing ritual — review the action commitments with the group. You can use the share screen function to project the chart you have been building or read aloud the action commitments. Reinforce the action commitments by including a prompt to “share your most powerful action commitment” during the check-out.

6. Share the notes and action-commitment documentation with everyone as quickly as possible, even in a raw form.
7. Follow up with everyone by email to hold accountability in making progress on action commitments.

RELATED RESOURCES

[Leadership Video: Get Results by Understanding Person-Role-System \(click here\)](#)

[Six Results Count Skills for Leaders Responding to COVID-19 \(click here\)](#)

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TIPS FOR USING VIDEO CONFERENCING SOFTWARE

- Encourage participants to use gallery view to see everyone's faces at key points in the agenda.
- Ask everyone to mute themselves unless they are speaking. Hosts can mute participants.
- Use the chat box function to amplify dialogue.
- Use the breakout group function to create smaller discussion groups. Experiment with assigned and random groups and groups of various sizes.
- Use the share screen function to project a worksheet or workbook, but don't overuse it.
- Layer in other programs (e.g., Google Doc, Padlet) or use the whiteboard feature to create real-time documents and visualizations.
- Use polls, if the function is available, to get a sense of the room quickly or to support proposal-based decision making.
- Use the raise hand function or physical raising of hands to stack speakers.
 - Features available vary based on video software account type. Premium accounts may offer more features than basic ones.
 - [How to Keep Uninvited Guests Out of Your Zoom Event](#), an article from the Zoom blog, offers precautions from "Zoom bombing," which have been vicious and racist.