

Adapted from “10 Critical Insights for Successful Online Gatherings,” March 17, 2020, ejewishphilanthropy.com, by Lisa Colton, Emily Goodstein, and Miriam Brosseau, <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/10-critical-insights-for-successful-online-gatherings/>

As we begin to use various online tools to study, meet and connect with one another, here are some things to think about:

For group leaders –

1. **Mute** is your friend. Ideally, people know how to do this themselves, but because many people are new to this (and working from home may present new audio issues), you may have to be explicit and teach people. Generally for 6 or less we leave phone lines open, for 5-15 we allow people to arrive unmuted and chat a bit, and then when we start the agenda of meeting verbally ask everyone to mute themselves to minimize any background noise or feedback. For large groups, you may want to consider setting up your meeting to “mute on entry” and then verbally invite people to unmute to talk at any time. (Make sure to encourage people to jump into the conversation to minimize how much the mute function makes them feel restrained.) Seasoned online meeting folks toggle that mute button on and off constantly. If you are using Zoom and you’re the meeting host, you can also mute people individually if you sense their background noise is becoming an issue. It’s fine to say out loud that you’ll play this role, and acknowledge if you mute someone they are welcome to unmute themselves to speak up too. It’s about communal quality of life, not a gag order.
2. **Chat** is an extra bonus of online meetings. When used liberally and purposefully, it makes a 2 dimensional conversation become 3D. Passive participants can now also be active, and sharing of information and links is very easy. Teach people how to use the chat and practice getting comfortable with it. Use it to do a check in or introductions when people arrive. Ask questions and have people answer in the chat (and verbally acknowledge and integrate, even call on someone to expand on what they posted), encourage people to use it. Chat is also a great place to post the meeting agenda (if one exists) for all to see when the conversation begins so folks don’t have to go digging in their email for it. It’s not interrupting (when used well), it’s deepening.
3. Recognize that this is a **new environment** for many. As a leader, think about how to invite people into the space and orient them to the new method of interaction.

4. **Intentionally set the tone and culture.** When you arrive at an in-person gathering there are a multitude of cues that tell you about the culture of that group. How formal is the dress? How is the room setup? Are you greeted with formal handshakes or exuberant hugs (remember those)? So too with online gatherings you need to pick a tone and culture and then give people plenty of cues about it. Some of this norm-setting can happen in advance – the tone of your emails (“Looking forward to seeing you from the waist up – totally acceptable to be in fuzzy slippers under your desk!”); the emotional tenor; and being explicit about your tools (use of mute, chat, etc. from above).
5. **Connect** with your people. In person, we get a chance to connect and catch up. Online, it’s very easy to just jump into the agenda without this interpersonal layer. However, when we’re online all the time, and further isolated in the rest of our lives, this interpersonal layer becomes even more critical. Consider adding a personal component to the meeting agenda, especially during these next few days and weeks as we all settle into this new normal. There is nothing wrong with five minutes of a 60 minute meeting used to intentionally check in about where participants are in their hearts and heads. It’s also OK to put boundaries on that check in so the conversation doesn’t descend into the news cycle and anxiety-provoking updates. An example might be “What’s something you’re doing to take care of yourself physically during these times?” or “What’s a new connection you’ve made this week that may not have happened if not for these unusual times?”
6. **Passing the mic** is different online. In person, we have a lot of cues about taking turns speaking. Eye contact, leaning forward, raising your hand a few inches off your knee, etc. Online, we lack that body language, plus a fraction of a second delay in audio means we often end up talking over each other, or stuck in a polite “no, you go ahead” “no no, you go.” As a good online host, you can help avoid this by calling on people, posting an order for comments or check ins in the chat, and paying particularly close attention to faces and behavior. If someone unmutes and mutes, unmutes and mutes they probably have something to say but don’t want to interrupt or cut someone off. At the next pause, ask them if they have something to add.

For video chats –

1. Think about what is behind you, what is your backdrop?
2. Make sure your face is well-lit and there is not too much light behind you (which will put your face in the shadows)
3. Think about the angle of your camera. If you have a laptop on a low desk, you're likely looking down into it, and others are seeing you against your ceiling. Try placing a book underneath your laptop to raise the camera to eye level.
4. You have the ability to "mute" yourself. This limits any background noise from interfering with the group chat. You can "unmute" yourself to make a comment to the group. If you don't know how to do that, ask your group leader. Also, group leaders may start a meeting with all participants muted.
5. The group leader may choose to enable a "chat" function, which will allow people to type their comments and questions and have them seen by all participants. Ask your group leader if you need help using this feature.
6. Taking turns speaking, "passing the mic," is different online. In person, we have a lot of cues about taking turns speaking. Online, we lack that body language, plus a fraction of a second delay in audio means we often end up talking over each other, or stuck in a polite "no, you go ahead" "no no, you go." Your group leader will help.