

Tips for Facilitating Virtual Conversations

Adapted from Rabbi Leora Kaye and Abby Levine's fabulous list

Warmups . . .

Projecting Positivity and Calm

In all human interactions, and even more so virtually, participants pick up on the atmosphere and feeling of a space from the leaders. Prepare to project positivity and calm by thanking people for their contributions, repeating back questions or comments, smiling, and reminding participants of the goals and agenda of the conversation.

Consider How You Present Yourself

People will be looking at you for much of the meeting, so you may want to give thought to how you present yourself. Is it a casual meeting or is formality important? Remember that the camera often emphasizes elements that may, in person, seem more subtle. Also, there is a lot going on with multiple screens and folks who may not be used to using the technology. You may want to stay away from jewelry, busy fabric patterns or other visually distracting elements.

Think About Your Background and Your Framing

It is important to think about where you set yourself up. Take time to create the atmosphere you want to share because people will be looking at you in this environment for the whole call. Do you want a bookshelf behind you? Judaica? Something neutral? Personal? Best not to have anything either too plain or too distracting, or any objects that are cut off above you or on your sides.

Frame your shot thoughtfully. Too close to the screen feels aggressive and overly intimate, while too far away, or with lots of space over your head, feels too distant. Practice a bit - what looks right to you will look right to your community.

You're Great!

Remember, you are a good teacher/leader/organizer! This is a new medium, but not a new role - you can do this and you can do it well.

On the call . . .

Actively Welcome

When possible, welcome participants by name. If they don't show up on the screen with a name, you can ask "who is the 202 number?" or another prompt that will let them know you see them on the call.

In large groups, repeat a welcome message as people join the call. The welcome message should include a friendly reminder to mute themselves and anything else relevant.

Moderate Introductions

Set a positive tone from the start by calling on people to introduce themselves verbally.

At the end, ask if there is anyone you've missed so no one is left out. If your group is over 20 people, you may want to ask people to introduce themselves by chat rather than by voice in order to move the agenda forward.

Encourage Use of the Chat

Depending on the purpose of your call, the chat box may be a great way to keep people engaged during the conversation. The chat is also a great mechanism for collecting questions. Sometimes there is the option for private chat for people who want to ask questions privately to the question-collector.

Use Break Out Groups

Breaking out into pairs or small groups is possible on many platforms and is a very useful tool for building relationships, getting deeper into particular topics or questions, and increasing interactivity and connection. Before sending people to groups, repeat the question several times for small groups and let them know how much time they will have so everyone will come back together on time. Broadcast questions and time frame to the small groups once they have formed. As the host, you can also visit the small groups and check in with them to answer questions and support their conversations.

Get Creative

More is possible on video than you think. Even though everyone is glued to their screen, you can find creative activities to keep people engaged. Singing, stretching, simple games, 'show and tell' and other activities can keep people engaged. Folks may never have been in each other's homes and this is a great time to invite people to show off a favorite plant or photo that they may never have shared with one another.

Tech considerations . . .

Check Both Audio and Visual

Call in from your phone as well as using your computer. If something goes wrong with the internet or computer and you no longer have visual capacities, you can still hear and be heard in the discussion. You may suggest this to participants as well.

Designate a Tech Support Person

Have someone available by phone or on Zoom to help people who are having technical issues. Announce their name and phone number at the beginning of the call and write their information in the chat so people can access it. When possible, you can also send out the contact information ahead of the call. Check your email as the call is getting started for emails from people who are having trouble getting on and connect them to the tech support person.

With these tips and more, you are well on your way to becoming a pro at virtual events and meetings!