GLOBAL PRAIRIE

Making the Most of Virtual Meetings

*The current global situation has nearly everyone working from home, from those who've been doing it for years to those who are brand new to the concept. As a global consulting firm with nine offices around the world, Global Prairie has been connecting and engaging a wide-spread workforce ever since we first opened our doors in 2008. In this primer on **Virtual Meetings**, we've gathered best practices on maximizing productivity and engagement when conducting virtual meetings. Here, we define meetings as routine group updates, team project sessions, and other forms of teamwork that take place in 90 minutes or less. Longer-form sessions, designed for more in-depth collaboration, are covered in our **Virtual Workshops** guide. For more help managing team collaboration in remote work environments, contact us at info@globalprairie.com.*

Planning Ahead

→ *Keep it short and sweet.*
With inconsistent working hours to accommodate time zones and family needs, as well as more distractions when working from home, it's important to keep today's virtual meetings as succinct and efficient as possible. There's no reason to default to 30- and 60-minute blocks if the same goals can be accomplished in less time (15- and 45- minutes might work best!). The shorter the session, the more likely your attendees are to be focused and engaged throughout.

→ *Make sure you have the right attendees.*
While this is a good practice for all meetings, it is especially important in a virtual setting to make sure you are using everyone's limited time as wisely as possible. The ideal attendee list consists of those who have information that needs to be shared, those who need to participate in any decisions being made, and those who will directly support next steps. One sign that you may have more people than you need in your meetings is complete silence from several attendees, in which case you can reconsider whether they all need to join future calls. The exception to this is all company or all team announcements that you want everyone to experience at the same time, in the same way.

→ *Hit the ground running.*
Ahead of the meeting, be clear with your team on the objectives, the agenda, and what success will look like. If you expect

them to come to the meeting with ideas or related information, send a briefing with enough time to prepare and be clear about your expectations. This ensures all attendees are prepped for an engaged and productive discussion.

→ *Anticipate and minimize typical hiccups.*
As the meeting organizer, a few extra minutes of preparation will ensure efficient use of everyone's time:
- If you're using any tech or tools for the first time or will need people to have access to out-of-routine items, send links and instructions well in advance.
- Provide instructions in the invitation for how you would like people to engage (audio only, join the web link with video, etc.).
- The day before your meeting, double check that any critical attendees (i.e., key decision makers) are still available and plan to attend. If not, and the goals of the meeting can't be accomplished without them, reschedule.

→ *Follow up is key.*
With everyone working remotely and jumping from one call to the next, it's more important than ever to document and distribute a recap report on the session's outcomes and any follow up action items for the team. We recommend designating an individual to join the call specifically to fill this need and being clear about those expectations.

Rules
of Engagement

→ *Be a courteous attendee.*
Showing up prepared, being on time, and actively contributing is always good professional etiquette, and with virtual meetings this individual behavior can really make or break the success of the session. When possible, attendees should start dialing into the call before the start time. If you're going to be a few minutes late, let the group know and be clear about your preference for them to wait or begin without you. Communication is key when colleagues can't see that you're stuck in another meeting from across the office.

→ *Stick to the schedule.*
If you've only blocked 30 minutes for a call, you should assume that 30 minutes is all the time your attendees can commit. If it appears that a meeting might run long, flag the concern as early as possible and consult with the team to understand how everyone can adjust. Plan your agenda with cushion to allow for unexpected delays, and with enough time to wrap up thoroughly at the end.

→ *Get personal.*
Video is a great way to connect, engage, and stay focused, and we recommend using it whenever technology allows. That said, tell your team members that it is ok to participate on video the same way they would in the real world. They don't have to be sitting straight up, smiling into the camera and making intense eye contact for an entire 60 minutes, which would be unnatural and also exhausting to keep up all day long. If they would normally move around, grab water, pace the room, etc. that should also be acceptable virtually. When participants do choose to dial-in with audio only, you should assume they opted for the visual break and accept that decision.

→ *Allow for catch-up time.*
With the current work-from-home situation, virtual meetings provide a great opportunity to make sure your team is connecting and doing well. When the meeting begins, start with a quick roll call so participants know everyone who is with

them in the meeting. Then, plan to spend the first 5 minutes or so of each call to casually catch up and ask how everyone is doing.

→ *Encourage participation.*
Don't be surprised if some people are more reluctant to participate on the phone than they have been historically in person. While we all adjust to working from home and collaborating virtually, it will take time for some to get comfortable holding the floor. You can encourage participation by calling on specific attendees whose opinions might provide an interesting perspective, in addition to posing open-ended questions to the group. If you'd like to hear everyone's thoughts on a topic, be clear that you'd like to go around the room. You can also rotate the meeting leadership role as appropriate, to develop these skills across the team. Always reinforce participation by thanking attendees for their thoughts and contributions.

→ *Use the mute button sparingly.*
The mute option can be a helpful tool for virtual meetings where information is being disseminated to a large group from only a few key speakers. But in a more interactive session it causes lags in the conversation ("I forgot I was on mute") and missed opportunities to build off each other. While we don't discourage use of the mute button completely, we do recommend leaving it off if the meeting is expected to be collaborative and the ability to build on each other and keep momentum and energy in the conversation is critical.

Sources: Global Prairie, Harvard Business Review, Forbes, The Verge, Collaborations Superpowers