**The Gifts and Challenges of ToP Virtual Meetings**

As with all things in life, the gifts of virtual meetings are balanced by challenges. In this balanced relationship, they shape each other. While some things become easier, others become more challenging or demanding for the facilitator.

An obvious gift includes the capacity to build relationships, share ideas and work collaboratively over enormous distances while we reduce our carbon footprint.

A related challenge is the need to continue to develop our knowledge of virtual tools and platforms, and to constantly improve the virtual meeting experience for our participants.

As virtual facilitators, we have the capacity to transform the organizations we are working with to share information and ideas more completely, to decide and implement more successfully and to move through changes more creatively.  Being aware of some of the gifts and challenges of virtual meetings can help us intentionally utilize the strengths of the virtual environment as we all learn to interact in this new way.

**Gifts:**

1)  More focused and successful meetings, not delayed by distance or weather, and not confined to stuffy meeting spaces. Participants can be in comfy clothes, a comfy environment, and not be hassled by the many stressors that can interfere with their productivity.

2)  Engagement of participants in meaningful dialogue and efficient decision-making. Using ToP methods significantly improves the virtual meeting experience for all participants.

3)  We are all learning to communicate in new ways.  We are learning to listen better to others and share our own ideas more succinctly. We use guidelines for encouraging all to participate and no one to dominate.  We are building respectful ways to interact and work with each other.

4)  Some virtual platforms allow for small groups to dialogue in breakout sessions. There is more freedom to talk and explore ideas together, and the results can be shared in the full group later. The capacity to build on each other’s ideas is enhanced.

5)  Virtual tools that enhance the meeting experience can be difficult to replicate in a face-to-face meeting.  Some tools include the use of emoticons, polls, and chat pods that all allow for side-conversations and reactions that do not disturb the larger flow of the action in a virtual meeting. More creativity can flow when participants can react in the moment.

6)  Potential for faster turn-around on documentation.  Often times, the participants are generating their own ideas into virtual formats that can be highlighted and copied, and quickly dropped into the final documentation. While saving time for the facilitator, it also provides the participants and the client their work in a timely manner, so that it can be acted on promptly.

7)  An enlivened virtual meeting space can capture the attention and motivation of participants. The use of images can enliven the virtual environment and communicate messages in more subtle ways.  Images can communicate a sense of belonging, a shared commitment to a larger purpose, and a deeper understanding of the topics at hand.

**Challenges:**

1)  Clear and succinct invitations to the virtual meeting space ease the way for comfortable participation. Oftentimes the facilitator needs to provide help with understanding the meeting time (time zone translations if needed) and a direct link to the virtual meeting room. The facilitator may need to clarify any pre-work required, including the expectations for acquiring headsets or uploading appropriate software prior to the meeting. A special orientation to the software may be needed to ensure the participants can connect their audio and understand how to participate with the virtual tools provided.

2)  Audio in real-time communications is affected by the hardware and bandwidth available to each participant.  It can ruin an otherwise well-planned session if participants cannot hear, be heard or there is noisy static and other distractions. The virtual facilitator needs to prepare participants with clear instructions on their headset and participation requirements to ensure everyone has a valuable meeting experience. Global meetings have exponentially more challenges to handle the variety of ways in which participation is maximized.

3)  The more important the meeting, the more important the preparation.  Most virtual meetings require more prep time than face-to-face meetings. Clarifying again and again the client’s needs and intentions, getting their documents uploaded well in advance of the session, and preparing them for their role in the virtual meeting is essential.

4)  Utilizing ToP session design tools will help you think creatively and proactively about ways to intentionally enhance the meeting experience. The ToP emphasis on participation methods can push the limits of some virtual tools, yet make the participant experience more rewarding.  Using the ToP principle of getting all of the voices into the room is very important, especially at the opening of the meeting to help participants connect with each other’s voices. Without eye contact and body language, communication is more challenging. If the group is small enough and bandwidth adequate, you can use web cams to visually see each other during the session.  Since bandwidth is often inadequate, you need to think of other ways to build a sense of relationship and trust. A PPT slide with everyone’s photos is one helpful alternative.

5)  Asynchronous communications can be limiting, and are often not as engaging, while they do allow contributions to be made 24 hours a day.  Asynchronous tools can be a valuable addition to a virtual team’s work environment, if the facilitator knows how to maximize the ways in which they are used.

6)  Participants can be tempted to “multi-task” and may be very successful at it while in a virtual meeting.  The facilitator’s task is to plan ways to keep participants engaged and making their best contributions to the virtual meeting.

7)  Co-facilitation is valuable in any participatory facilitation, and can be critically necessary in the virtual environment.  Typically, there is a role for the lead facilitator as in any session. Additionally, you may need one or more co-facilitators to handle a variety of tech support issues that will come up, to make the experience as seamless as possible for the participants. Co-facilitators often use a "back-channel" for their communications, to avoid alerting participants to various challenges. Using a script is a valuable tool for working with co-facilitators, keeping the layouts, breakout rooms, powerpoints and other items moving in sync.  Also, at any point in time, the lead facilitator may lose connectivity and a co-facilitator needs to step into the lead role. Working on a series of sessions together, the co-facilitators often alternate roles.

The Virtual Facilitation Collaborative (VFC) has learned these lessons well and encourages all to keep them in mind when facilitating virtual meetings. Our VFC is currently composed of Nadine Bell, CTF; Kathy McGrane, CTF; Catherine Tornbom, CTF; Sunny Walker, CTF; and myself, Cheryl Kartes, CTF.  We have supported other ToP Facilitators globally in learning virtual tools, both through periodic "JAM sessions" to explore new virtual tools, as well as through direct coaching and co-facilitation.  We encourage everyone to give it a try!

Cheryl Kartes, CTF and ToP Mentor Trainer

**Note to readers from VFC:**

*One of the questions ToP Network members have asked themselves since the beginning of the network is, “how do we market and build our individual consulting businesses as ToP facilitators and trainers?"*

*Our answer to that question emerged gradually as we worked with each other over the past three years. The very premise of the virtual realm is to provide opportunities to connect and work together in ways that were previously limited to face-to-face meetings. This is what motivated the initial foray into virtual by Network colleagues three years ago and what continues to motivate the VFC.*

*The values of the ICA and ToP Network embedded in our Mission Statement:*

***Demonstrate the power and productive potential of virtual connections by assisting groups in a virtual setting to build community, hold relevant conversations and make well-reasoned decisions that lead to inspired action.***

