




How to keep engagement high in the virtual during a crisis

Sharing best and proven practices

 Quick read

The current situation with social distancing is forcing us to go virtual. And although meeting effectiveness and engagement was already a hot topic, we now see that it becomes even more important when we go virtual. Let's face it, we participate in far too many meetings where we talk, agree and align only to repeat it in the next meeting.



There is little preparation, accountability and or engagement to celebrate a sense of accomplishment. And the fact that we are in too many meetings often limits our time to actually get stuff done, delegate and empower. Especially when we are in crisis mode. In search for new ways of collaboration in the virtual we can take a more holistic perspective on how we want to transform our collaboration.

How do we keep triggering intrinsic motivation?

The three levers for thriving at work, energy, learning and desire to act, are even more paramount when we work in the virtual. They are the necessary ingredients to focus, collaborate and take ownership. The implicit assumption being that we need to double our ability to trigger intrinsic motivation of our people. How do we create

opportunities where people engage wholeheartedly? Taking every opportunity to energize our colleagues, create a safe learning environment where people take ownership to do what is necessary instead of what they're told to do. To share some best practices, we summarized the effectiveness of working in the virtual during crisis with the following formula:

Level of engagement when working virtual during a crisis



Clear leadership + Engaging ways of working
+ Be freaking personal

Limiting beliefs + Breaking formation

1 Clear leadership

In times of crises we need to be very clear as leaders. This doesn't mean that we need to know it all or need to be strong or push for perfection. It means that we need to lead from within, beyond the expectations of others, listening to inner voice. We need to be clear on what needs to happen in line with our purpose, culture and long-term strategy by involving everybody, increase personal development by showing vulnerability and reframe the way we systemize success. So, what do we need to do? Here's some proven practices when facing crises.

Stand up

In times of crisis it's ok to be afraid or uncertain. It will take courage to stand up and act. Don't think this crisis is going to pass. Don't wait for others to tell you what to do or not to do. Be empowered to take decisions on counter measures. You are needed to make a difference in the lives of your loved ones as well as in your company. What do you need to stand up? Often it requires some soul work to reconnect to what you stand for.

Face the brutal facts

Don't deny the challenges or downplay them. They will not go away unless you and your team start acting. Be clear on the problems and challenges and be factual. You cannot change anything if you don't know your actual situation. And try to get to the core of things, separation symptoms from root causes. It is far more effective to base your changes on root causes.

Prioritize

When in a crisis, the number of problems increase drastically, as do the number of opportunities. We cannot fix all problems and take on board all opportunities at once, so we need to get the team involved and prioritize the actions that need to be taken. To support your team, it helps to ensure clear goals connected with the long-term strategy. Next to that a decision-making framework with criteria on how to take decisions. And of course, you need to decide when your team is unable to prioritize actions.

Focus on reflective action

When in crisis we tend to, get busy, try and fix everything and feel good about it. We call this the action bias. While the intention is good, more can be accomplished when we learn while doing. Reflection helps us to make sure we're taking the right action and learn about the effectiveness of previous actions. This will bring more of the desired results.

Empower and appreciate your colleagues.

It seems logical to empower people to act and why is it that leaders tend to take over when in crisis. Be very clear to your people and involve them strength based in solving the crisis. Most people will thrive in a bad situation when they know they can make a difference, have a positive outlook and feel that they are valued for it. In crisis we often spend a lot of time on what's not working, what's going wrong instead of recognizing and rewarding what is going well and be clear on what else is expected.

Clear roles & responsibilities

It is critical that we clarify who will be taking what responsibility in leading the team out of crisis. This point helps to keep focus. Blaming, naming and shaming is often easier than taking responsibility. Because with responsibility comes accountability. Complaining is criticizing those who cannot do anything. This has a negative effect on the most important asset in times of crisis: trust.

2 Engaging ways of working

We need to cultivate engaging ways of working. If not, people tend to take a reactive observer position. This implies engaging them even before the meeting starts. Here are some ideas to keep your virtual meetings engaging:

Appoint a coordinator

Appoint a coordinator who supports the leader with technical navigation and in designing for and coordination of interactivity.

Co-create the agenda

Involve people in co-creating the meeting agenda up front, to make sure it's relevant for them. Besides what we suggested about a really personal start, we would also encourage you to make a short table round on expectations for the meeting.

Start with a 'walk in'

Start virtual meetings with a 'walk in' period of 10 minutes, where people can start connecting before the meeting starts.

Be clear on process and preparation

In the virtual you need to be even more clear on goals, process and desired outcomes; what do we do when and why? And also, be more demanding on keeping the process. Be clear on pre-work, this stimulates thinking before the meeting. A lot of meetings tend to become boring, because people are thinking too much while talking.

Organize collaboration space

Create a virtual space where people can upload, share and review the teamwork. This allows you have shorter meetings by focusing more on alignment and decision-making.

Stimulate interaction

We tend to limit interaction in the virtual, we suggest the opposite by being very interactive, making jokes and invite everybody to the discussion by using their names. And make sure everybody has the camera on. We want everybody to be fully present. Blur the environment to make it calmer.

Capture actions and decisions

Capture the essence what is discussed immediately in notes, via a visible document or via a virtual whiteboard. It helps to keep the overview.

Plan breaks

Make sure you have enough breaks, if not people tend to escape. Staring at a laptop all day has that effect on people :)

Minimize PowerPoint

Try to minimize presentation mode. It blocks the visual connection with your colleagues even more than in the live settings. What works is having a flip over behind you to summarize or present things.

Small works better

It has been proven to be more effective to shorten big plenary meetings by framing an assignment and then start parallel processing in subgroups. So, counter the law of diffused responsibility (when everybody is responsible, no one feels it) by addressing more topics in small breakout groups.

Use different tools to engage

Use every possible feature in your virtual meeting space like polls, chats and breakouts. It engages people and makes it more fun to collaborate.

Check out

End with a round asking about the increase in level of energy, learnings and desire to act.

3 Make it freaking personal

First, when we work in the virtual, we need to take extra time to connect, share real stories of meaningful moments. So, a meaningful check in becomes even more important. People connect through personal stories, so take the time to share them. Looking at the crisis we're in right now, give people space to share their fears and insecurities, but also their hopes and ideas. We started our virtual meetings with 2 questions: What are your fears and insecurities? What do they trigger in you to humanize the world around you? (linked to our purpose humanizing the world we work in) It really helps to be more present in the meeting and it increases the level of connection.

Secondly, people act based on emotion, so they need to feel what needs to be done. We need to make whatever is addressed freaking personal. The way to do this is to help them live through or experience whatever topic is on the agenda.

Storytelling really helps here; it helps the listeners to empathize and experience whatever is happening. You might share a story, analogy, infographic that captures the problem and creates an emotional reaction. For example:

John could share a story about a real client and her needs, provoking energy and a desire to act in the group. He could share an infographic or a beautiful photo, triggering creativity, learning and desire to act.

The idea is that everybody needs to personally empathize with the topic or challenge before addressing it in a meeting. And as leaders we need to develop our storytelling ability even further to trigger this in a virtual setting.

4 Limiting beliefs

The way we look at things always become true; we all know this self-fulfilling prophecy. And sometimes the way we look at things become the very reason why it will not work.

So firstly, what are our limiting beliefs when it comes to the virtual. We hear things like:

- We cannot really connect.
- We should avoid difficult conversations.
- Real interaction is not possible.
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If we really believe this it will not help us be successful in virtual collaboration. We should maintain a positive attitude towards working in the virtual. We know from experience that far more is possible than we thought.

But also looking at dealing with a crisis, what often limits us is what we believe is possible. It's our own experience that prevents us from looking outside of the box and be creative. But also looking at all the possibilities that arise along with the crisis. The speed of change often leads to new elephant paths, bureaucracy seems to disappear, and solution orientation is increasing drastically. And as we know growth follows attention, so let's choose wisely what gets our attention. 'Anything you resist persists'

5 Breaking formations

When in crisis good teamwork often leaves the building. And a crisis demands that we fly in formation. And especially in the virtual we need discipline in our way of working to make it effective. We are all responsible for playing our part, for honoring our way of working and taking accountability for results. If there are tensions, ensure that people address them one on one to resolve them, don't waste time allowing the atmosphere to deteriorate. And as a leader it is important to tighten discipline, not loosen it. We are not allowed to break formation for together we get further, although alone we go faster.

So being clear as a leader, cultivate an engaging way of working, making it personal to connect will help you increase engagement in the virtual during crisis. Making sure colleagues keep formation and broadening our beliefs of what we think will work, will undoubtedly change the way we work now in the virtual, but also when we return to our offices once this pandemic is over. •

Hij besluit dat te doen met behulp van een infographic die de creativiteit, het leren en het verlangen om te handelen triggert. Hij deelt de infographic al voorafgaand aan de vergadering. Iedereen heeft hierdoor de tijd om persoonlijk in het onderwerp of de uitdaging te verplaatsen. Tijdens de vergadering is het voor John nu veel gemakkelijker om ideeën op te halen bij zijn collega's.

Bovendien moeten we als leiders ons vertelvermogen nog verder ontwikkelen om in een virtuele omgeving effectief te triggeren. Lees de aparte blog over het vertellen van verhalen.

4 Beperking van geloofsovertuigingen

De manier waarop we naar de dingen kijken, wordt altijd waar: we kennen allemaal deze self-fulfilling prophecy. Soms wordt de manier waarop we naar de dingen kijken, dus juist de reden waarom het niet zal werken.

Onderzoek je beperkende overtuigingen

Wat zijn onze beperkende onze beperkende overtuigingen als het gaat om het virtuele? We horen uitspraken als:

- We kunnen ons niet echt verbinden.
- We moeten moeilijke gesprekken vermijden.
- Echte interactie is niet mogelijk.
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Als we deze uitspraken echt geloven, dan vinden we dus altijd een reden voor het uitblijven van succes in de virtuele wereld. Ook als we kijken naar het omgaan met een crisis, zijn onze ideeën over mogelijkheden beperkend. Het is onze eigen ervaring die ons ervan weerhoudt om buiten de gebaande paden te kijken en creatief te zijn.

Focus op mogelijkheden

We moeten een positieve houding aanhouden ten opzichte van het werken in die virtuele wereld. En kijken naar alle mogelijkheden/kansen die samen met de crisis ontstaan. De snelheid van de veranderingen leidt vaak tot nieuwe olifantenpaden, de bureaucratie lijkt te verdwijnen en de oplossingsgerichtheid neemt drastisch toe. En zoals we weten volgt de groei de aandacht, dus laten we verstandig kiezen wat onze aandacht krijgt. Alles wat je aandacht geeft groeit.

5 Breken van de formatie

Bij een crisis is goed teamwerk vaak ver te zoeken, tenzij men hier goed in getraind is. Terwijl een crisis juist vereist dat we in formatie vliegen.

Stuur op vliegen in formatie

Vooraf in de virtuele wereld hebben we discipline nodig om onze manier van werken effectief te maken. We zijn allemaal verantwoordelijk voor het spelen van onze rol, voor het opvolgen van onze manier van werken en het afleggen van verantwoording over de resultaten. Zijn er spanningen? Zorg er dan voor dat mensen ze één op één adresseren. Los ze op, verspil geen tijd. Je wilt niet dat de sfeer verslechtert. Als leider is het belangrijk om de discipline aan te scherpen, niet los te laten. We mogen de formatie niet doorbreken.

De volgende keer als we Zoomen, Teamen of Skypen, staat er niemand meer op 'mute'. Ook figuurlijk niet: we zijn allemaal verantwoordelijk voor onze bijdrage en onze plek in de formatie. Want al gaan we alleen sneller, samen komen we verder. •

“De kortste verbinding
tussen mensen is
een glimlach”

Ook effectiever virtueel samenwerken?
Kijk op www.thethrive.com voor een aanpak die werkt

