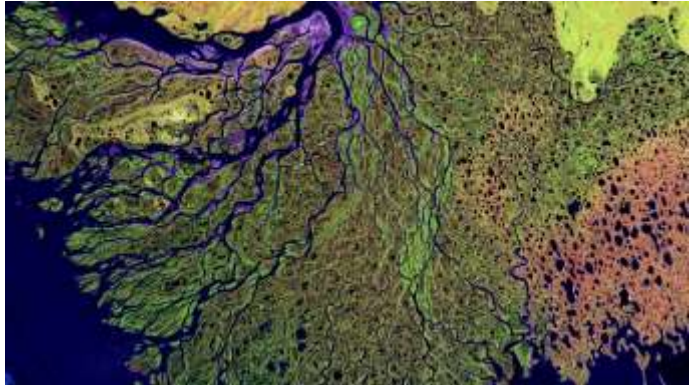


Outside the Agenda | Open Meetings during the Pandemic

In this time of crisis and distancing, we need to continue to connect in ways that are meaningful. Give yourself and your team permission to have an open-ended discussion meeting by phone or video without a set agenda.

There are other benefits and reasons to facilitate a more open conversation. This may be an opportunity to bounce ideas with multiple people in the room for new ways to serve clients. All levels of staff can be asked for their creative solutions to problems during an economic crisis for the organization. There may be a tough topic or issue that is new (like working from home or a new company direction) and everyone is wrestling with what it means.



Here are some tips for facilitating a meeting that doesn't have a set agenda:

- 1. Be clear about your intention for a *facilitated* conversation.** Most of us would not be interested in a free for all discussion with no direction. Humans are purpose-driven; establishing the purpose of the meeting shows respect for everyone's time and need to connect and contribute. Examples: *How do the new distancing guidelines affect your day to day work? What does sheltering in place mean for work with our clients?*
- 2. Enable small group conversations.** This will help "grease the wheels" for people who might be less inclined to talk in the larger group. Several platforms for phone conference calls and video meeting rooms allow you to put people in chat rooms for periods of time. Give them an open-ended prompt to share with each other for 5 minutes at the start of the call. Examples: *"What is uppermost in your mind right now? What would you like to bring to the group to discuss?"*
- 3. Create the agenda together.** The conversations that take place when you're deciding on topics are as valuable as the discussion itself. As people suggest topics, you as facilitator can name themes and ideas and check in for agreement. You are responsible for keeping the group's purpose, so you may decide not to include a suggested item that may be better handled with a smaller group or at another time. Being upfront about your reasons shows respect for the person while attending to purpose of the group.
- 4. Be transparent about how you're going to facilitate.** Let people know that you will invite them to "step in" and "step out" of ways of participating that may be based on culture, personalities, and power structures within the group. For example, you can say that you

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would like to hear from frontline staff first as they are less likely to speak after management speaks.

Speaking with love and humility, you can tell those who have contributed a lot that you are leaving room for others to speak. You can interrupt a dominant talker out of care for the purpose of the group by saying that you want to understand and then repeat back to them what you heard. This may attend to their human need to be heard and to contribute. If you choose to move on, you can remind them of the purpose and needs of the group and ask them if they mind letting it go.

5. Practice appreciation. Appreciation relaxes us and feeling that we matter increases our generosity and creative capacity. From the Nonviolent Communication field, there are 3 steps to create an authentic appreciation statement.

1. This is what you did.
2. This is what I feel.
3. This is the need of mine that was met.

Model this method in the group discussion. You can also do this as part of a closing activity; invite members to offer appreciation for others' comments or ideas. Many times these heartfelt appreciations are what people remember the most.

6. Facilitate with a friend. At GLP we use this tip all the time. Even for a more open-ended conversation, it will help you to have a support partner to help with technology and keeping up with agenda items. If you are new to facilitating online meetings, give yourself some grace, things will go wrong, and you will learn from your experiences.