



This section is set up to provide a ready-made Brown Bag Session for you to use with employees and/or managers. Use as is, or adapt this information for a general employee group. You may reproduce as many copies as needed.

Unexpected Ways to Make Online Meetings More Engaging

Y*ou can't run a good virtual meeting without engaged participants—and with much of the U.S. workforce working from home, knowing how to grab and hold their attention is Job One. Howard Tiersky shares some simple “plot twists” to keep an audience on the edge of their seats.*

It's not easy to keep participants engaged in meetings, even when you're sitting across the table from them. But when everyone is sitting in their individual houses—often with spouses, kids, and barking dogs in the next room—it's even trickier to pull this off. With much of America working from home, Howard Tiersky says it's crucial to make “meeting engagement” a priority.

“You want people on the edge of their seat, listening, questioning, offering up ideas,” says Howard Tiersky, co-author with Heidi Wisbach of *Impactful Online Meetings: How to Run Polished Virtual Working Sessions That Are Engaging and Effective—Zoom, Webex, GoToMeeting, Skype, Google Hangouts* (Spiral Press, 2020, \$14.99). “You don't want them emailing, checking Facebook, or just being a passive listener.

“The good news is, there are some simple things you can do that skyrocket engagement,” he adds. “Some of them are common sense. Others may be kind of surprising.”

In his book, Tiersky offers a wealth of tips for making online meetings as impactful as possible. He also refers readers to his website, impactfulonlinemeetings.com, so they can be notified of book updates and also access other helpful supplemental resources.

The following are some practices that will keep employees focused and tuned-in.

Ask participants to share a funny or embarrassing story. Introductions are necessary when meeting attendees don't know each other well, but exchanging names doesn't go far enough. Help participants get to know each other better by sharing a brief fun fact or a funny story. According to Slack's *Ultimate Guide to Remote Meetings*, “one study found that workers who shared a funny or embarrassing story about themselves with their team produced 26 percent more ideas in brainstorming sessions than workers who didn't.”

EXERCISE: *Ask participants to share a funny story. If you like, start with one of your own to get the ball rolling.*

Turn on the video setting in order to squelch multitasking. Encouraging or even requiring participants to turn on their video cameras immediately makes them more engaged because they can be *seen* and therefore their reactions are part of “the show” versus



Brown Bagger

something private. Also, they're less likely to multitask (which is an engagement killer) since they can be seen by others.

Assign roles to participants so they're not just "webinar watchers." Seek to involve as many participants as possible with presentation roles in a meeting. "Sometimes we even do this 'on the spot,'" says Tier-sky. "For example, at a meeting to review selected customer feedback that had been received on a product, we put the feedback on a slide, picked three participants, and asked them to alternate between reading the 15 to 20 lines of feedback to the group. No rehearsal needed."

EXERCISE: *What roles could the participants in YOUR webinar play? Assign some roles now! Bear in mind the exact number will vary depending on the size of your gathering. Involvement is the key, and not specific numbers.*

Work together on a "deliverable." For instance, you're probably familiar with a SWOT analysis. (If you're not it stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.) Instead of *presenting* a completed SWOT to your meeting participants, put a link to a blank SWOT slide in Google Slides and ask them to simultaneously work on filling it in. In under two minutes, you will have a completed SWOT that represents the collaborative efforts of the group. This can also

be done with a wide range of other types of documents: idea lists, project plans, lists of competitors, etc.

EXERCISE: *Ask participants to fill in a SWOT that applies to them and their organization. Ask them to do so quickly, in under two minutes. When in doubt what to write they should "go with their gut" as the saying goes.*

Compel attendees to use the chat feature. You can increase participation and get feedback by asking your audience to enter something into the chat. Ask a question like, "What do *you* think is the most important aspect of our customer service?" Then ask everyone to quickly go to their chat and enter a one- or two-word answer. You then not only know they are "still there," but you are engaging with them and getting some feedback. You are in a dialog with your audience.

EXERCISE: *Encourage participation at this point in your online gathering – especially if there has not been any yet.*

Conduct a spontaneous poll. Most online meeting platforms have the ability for the host to conduct a multiple-choice poll to all attendees and then show a graph of responses. If an important issue comes up spontaneously that you want to poll, send a private text to a person who is “on point” to support presentation needs and ask them to quickly create the poll. (It only takes 1-2 minutes.) Ask them to text you back when it’s ready. Keep the discussion going while you wait and then when you get the message that the poll is ready, let the group know you’d like to poll them on the topic—that will be the cue for your support person to put the poll up on the screen.

“You will look like a magician since you ‘just happened’ to have a poll ready to go on the very topic that came up spontaneously on the call,” says Tiersky. “It’s good if your participants think you are all-knowing; they are less likely to try to multitask without being noticed.”

Hold breakout sessions. In most meetings of more than eight people, usually most of the talking is done by just five to seven participants. This is one reason why during live workshops Tiersky often breaks larger groups into breakout teams, so they can come up with ideas, work on prioritization, action planning—whatever the work is—in smaller groups and then come back to the larger group and report on the work they did. (Several of the major online meeting platforms including Zoom and Google Hangouts now offer breakouts.)

“We give each team clear instructions for the work they are to do, in writing, and then usually give them 20 to 40 minutes to do it,” he says. “A compressed time frame forces the group to organize quickly; get to work; and focus on progress, not process or perfection. I’ve been amazed over the years that sometimes when clear instructions, a small team,

and a tight time frame are combined like that, you get work done in a half hour that might have taken days, weeks, or months if done ‘the usual way.’”

EXERCISE: *Depending on how much time you have, strongly consider conducting a breakout session(s) here. Otherwise, make it a priority for the next meeting.*

Summary

Don’t be shocked if you find people love working together virtually, says Tiersky.

“It’s not unusual to find that you get more done than ever before,” he says. “Great things can happen when everyone is present and focused, even when it’s from the comfort of their own homes. When the pandemic is over, you may not want to go back to the old way of working.”

Howard Tiersky is a successful entrepreneur who has been named by IDG as one of the “10 Digital Transformation Influencers to Follow Today” and by Enterprise Management 360 as “One of the Top 10 Digital Transformation Influencers That Will Change Your World.”

Howard Tiersky is the founder of two companies that enable large brands to win in the digital world, FROM: The Digital Transformation Agency and Innovation Loft. He has worked with numerous clients to create highly engaging online workshops, seminars, conferences, and other types of collaborative experiences. His dozens of Fortune 1000 clients have included Verizon, NBC, Nutrisystem, Viacom, Avis, Universal Studios, JPMC, NFL, Facebook, Spotify, and Amazon.

For more information, visit impactfulonlinemeetings.com.

Etiquette for Teleconference Meetings

In order for a teleconference to run smoothly, participants must follow certain rules of etiquette. Consider the guidelines below for your teleconference – especially for first-time participants.

Be on time, and stress the importance of being on time to other participants.

If someone does arrive late, don't immediately cut into the conversation to introduce the newcomer. Wait until there is a pause, and then simply say something like, "Sorry for the interruption, but it seems that John Doe from Chicago has joined us."

Choose a location with little background noise.

If some background noise is unavoidable, use the mute button when you're not speaking. Simply turn off the mute feature when you want to contribute to the conversation.

Select a phone with an attached headset.

Cellular and cordless phones often add annoying static to the call. Speakerphones can also be a pitfall because they tend to pick up a lot of background noise. In addition, speakerphones can make it sound like you're speaking into a tunnel, worsening the feeling of remoteness to the meeting.

Turn off the call waiting feature.

Everyone in the conference can hear the "beep" as someone tries to reach him or her

on the other line. Again, this is distracting and annoying.

Identify yourself before speaking.

It's essential to be clear who is doing the talking, especially if: A) The meeting is NOT being recorded; B) Someone is taking minutes.

Address people by name.

Again, this is important to keep everyone on the same page who is doing the talking. If participants have to guess, their attention will turn to trying to figure out who it is, and not on the message the person is trying to convey.

NEVER put your phone on hold.

This forces the participants left on the call to listen to the music the phone plays for those on hold, which as we all know can be very aggravating! If you absolutely must step away from the phone, put it on mute.

Sources: Marty Brounstein, consultant, trainer, and author of "Communicating Effectively for Dummies" (a Wiley Brand).

Susan Friedmann, president of The Tradeshow Coach, an organization that works with national and international exhibitors in planning trade shows and other special events.

Dirk Zeller, CEO of two nationally known companies, Real Estate Champions and Sales Champions.