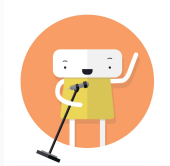# Pragmatic Communication for Remote Teams

We are talking less, so our communication, when it happens, needs to mean more

Our transition from in-person to online changes how we communicate.

In this series, we'll talk about pragmatic communication strategies inspired by our Meetings Done Right inclusion cards.

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Upcoming sessions

The **meeting host** is responsible for using people's time with purpose (March 23)

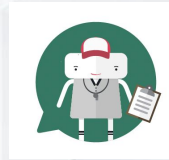A **devil's advocate** creates spaces where teams speak with candor (April 20)

The **parking lot attendant** harnesses the energy in group situations (May 18)

An **attendee advocates** builds healthy conversational environments (June 15)

In my opinion supports all kinds of voices to ensure we are all being heard (July 20)

Together we'll walk through some of TXI's favorite **inclusive facilitation techniques** (August 24)

Remote environments challenge perceptions of "good" communication

We used to think	Now we can see
Social cues and body language were the "secret sauce" for understanding each other	Technology encourages inclusive environment by supporting more communication styles and channels.
We needed to be "in the room" to influence decision making	Async participation de-risks decision making by creating space for thoughtful exchanges
From 9 - 5, our time belonged to the organization	Time used flexibly helps us achieve business outcomes.

Hosting meetings is NOT the same as organizing meetings

Organizers manage logistics

- Send calendar invites
- Track attendance
- Take notes

Hosts manage experiences & outcomes

- What is needed to participate authentically?
- Who needs be here to move forward?
- Did we accomplish what we intended?

All interactions are meetings

Pragmatic Communication Principles

Learn Each Other's Patterns & Preferences

〉 **Decide which mediums are best suited for each type of communication**
Get group consensus on when & where we chat / meet /socialize / decide. Try a team "communication code of conduct."

〉 **Start a Team Calendar**
Transparency around project and organizational meetings helps people opt in and out.

〉 **Agree on Core Hours**
Balance individual flexibility with group commitments.

〉 **Respect a "do not schedule" block**
Create a culture of respecting people's most productive time periods.

Effective Hosts Self-Monitor

Assume preparation takes roughly the same amount of time as the actual meeting

During video meetings, automatically turn on any transcription / subtitles

Deliberately use the last 10 minutes of the meeting to decide & document next steps

Have follow up side conversations transparently

Don't make people guess what will happen when we're all together

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〉 **What's the vibe?**
Share norms & patterns of participation.

〉 **What are we doing?**
Provide details & context from the beginning.

〉 **Why am I here?**
Let people know how they are expected to contribute.

〉 **What outcome are we working towards?**
When we trade time for value, make sure people know what success looks like.

Have Clear Communication Norms

- Using a visual signal to indicate a person would like to speak. At TXI, we do this with the "raise hand" feature.
- Support "standby" modes of participation. People join upon request for a single topic or to answer a question, then jump off a call.
- Define what triggers the jump from asynchronous to synchronous communication. Example: if a chat exchange between designers and engineers is unclear after 2 back and forth replies, we all agree to huddle.
- Decide on whether to use advance scheduling features for email, Slack, Teams, etc. One team member might work atypical hours and appreciate real time asks. Another may prefer to only see these during their working hours to support strong work / life boundaries.
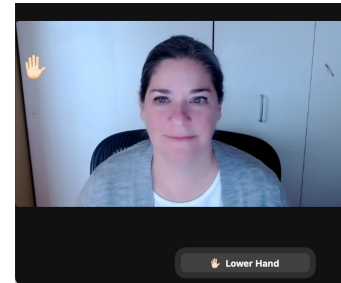
Using gestures and signals to take turns talking

Make it Easy for People to Participate Fully

- Send meeting agendas 3 - 5 days in advance and include links in calendar invites, messages, whiteboard tools, and emails
- Include helpful context that helps people prepare and use time effectively
- Support multiple avenues for participation:
    - async AND sync
    - before AND after a meeting
- Implement follow up "jam" sessions
    - teams have a Zoom session and mute / unmute as they need to pair

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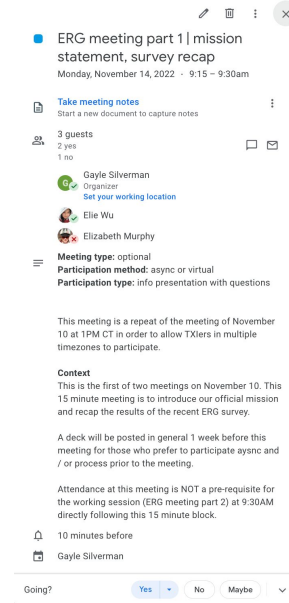
Help People Understand their Role

Reduce ambiguity in decision making by implementing agreed upon guidelines well before a decision needs to be made.

If a person doesn't fall into one of the defined lanes, they probably don't need to be in a meeting, but they do need to understand what is happening.

Role	Decider	Recommender	Consulted	Informed
Product Strategy & Prioritization	Bryan	Patrick	Gayle, Kim, Stacy Libby, Jill, Allie, Rex	Core team
Alignment between Web and Mobile	Christine	Kim	Gayle, Patrick, Cameron	Core team
Technical direction	Bryan	Cameron	Quinn, Rory, Jeff,	Core team
Design	Allie	Rex	Bryan, Kim, Gayle, Libby, Mark	Core team
Research	Casey	Rex	Allie, Gayle, Bryan, Libby, Christine	Core team
Product Owners	Kim	Gayle	Lindsey, Mark, Jill, Abby, Christine	Core team

State Desired Outcomes

People should have a shared understanding of the expected end result of an interaction. Without this, we increase the likelihood that everyone will substitute their own assumptions. No alignment = more friction.

- Is success a
  - decision?
  - recommendation?
  - agreement on next steps?

Remain Curious and Encourage Questions

As the host, it's our responsibility to operate from a place of clarification.

Instead of

- Are there any questions?
- Is that clear?

Try

- What can I add additional details around?
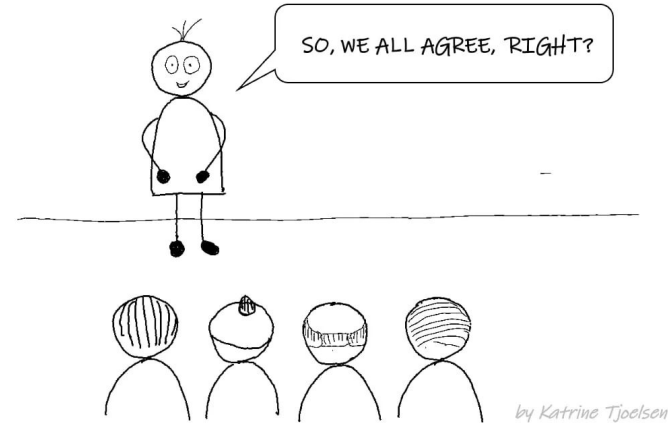- What else can I share to help everyone have the info they need?

SO, WE ALL AGREE, RIGHT?

by Katrine Tjoelsen

Image detail:Katrine Tjoelsen, 2023. 4 Underrated Ways Top Performers Transform Meeting Discussions by Understanding Group Dynamics [Online]. Place of Publication: Medium. Available from https://medium.com/better-humans/4-underrated-ways-top-performers-transform-meeting-discussions-by-understanding-group-dynamics-7cec2b0ea1b8 [Accessed March 16, 2023]

Leverage the Ability to "Say the Thing"

Remote interactions mean that after we drop off Slack or leave a meeting, we don't have additional insight into how people are processing.

Want to know how people felt about an interaction?

Just. Ask.

What this might look like:

- We didn't go with your recommendation. What do you need to feel better about this choice?
- I noticed you didn't raise the points you and I had previously discussed. I'm curious why.
- How did you experience that conversation?

Pragmatic Communication in Practice

Choose Kind Clarity Over Vague Diplomacy

Say difficult things
Don't use remote communication as an excuse to avoid a topic.

Be kind and clear
Don't use fancy language to obscure your point.

Skip anticipatory build up
Don't use a long preamble.

Lower Barriers for Participation

Design experiences that support multiple types of participation.

Unlearn the idea that a "meeting" has to happen with everyone participating at the same time.

Not only does provide flexibility in cases where someone needs to participate remotely at the last minute, it enables people with multiple processing styles to contribute.

Send out Miro boards with instructions designed for async participation multiple days before a synchronous meeting. This works best when we let people know the range during which comments are welcomed and when the window for input closes.

Manage the Conversation or the Tech, not Both

It's hard to do two things at once, so tackle remote facilitation as a team.

The Host keeps participants accountable to meeting goals.

They move things forward. They ask questions. They build conversations.

Audience facilitators (attendee advocates) monitor the group's real time needs.

They watch the chat for questions and raises them to the host. They troubleshoot participant tech issues in the moment. They gently call out when the group bypasses norms.

Calibrate invitations in order to set participant expectations

We intrinsically associate a level of formality and participation expectations with the kind of invitation we get.

Sending a chat or text message the day of and suggesting a quick huddle means something different than a calendar invite we get for a full day workshop 4 weeks in advance.

Be intentional about how you make your ask for someone's time.

Tell them exactly why they are being invited and what their contribution is expected to be.

Be prepared for someone to say "no thank you."

Let people know how you'll be using the first 5 minutes

This one evokes a strong reaction.

Do you start with social time or get down to business as soon as time together begins?

It doesn't matter as long as you're clear in advance what the first few moments of a meeting will look like.

How we can support this choice:

- Explicitly starting a meeting 10 minutes early for chit chat ➡send 2 invites, one for chat, the other for the meeting)
- Adding optional social time at the beginning or end of time together ➡ add line item on the agenda
- Diving right into the topic as the meeting starts ➡ avoid awkwardly saying, let's give people a few minutes)

Share Details and Solicit requests Before Meetings

- What do you need to feel prepared for this conversation?
  - Pre-block attendee's calendars for prep time
  - Send links to any boards, notes, etc.
  - Call out how long reading background materials will take
- Capture pre-meeting questions in shared space
  - Answer whatever you can async
  - Identify questions that won't be addressed and explain why
- Get feedback on the agenda
  - What is missing?
  - What can be removed?

Questions to Answer?

Question	Answer
What is our tech stack?	React Native
Do we need iOS + Android or just iOS?	iOS and Android
Current app still under development, what's the goal for it?	sunset

Tracking "pre-meeting" questions for clarity and planning

Make room for more than one 1 "right" option

What are we wrong about?

What don't we see?

What ideas haven't we considered yet?

View Documentation as a Highlight Reel, not an Audit Trail

Create documentation to solicit advance input rather than track decisions. Example: create an engagement "confab" doc.

Save meeting recordings AND the chats to offer nuance and context to those participating asynchronously.

Document conversations & meetings as if our success is depends on diffusing information to people who aren't "in the room"

Warmly welcome feedback

Instead of

> Was this a good meeting?

> How do you feel that went?

> Do you think we made the right decisions?

> Should we do something differently next time?

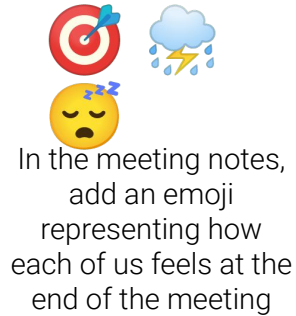**Try**

> How close did we come to achieving our stated goals?

> What one thing resonated most with you?

> How confident are you about where we landed?

> What is one thing we can experiment with next time?

Feedback might look like
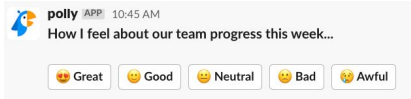
A post meeting
poll

In the meeting notes,
add an emoji
representing how
each of us feels at the
end of the meeting

Before leaving a
video meeting, have
people hold up 1 to
5 fingers indicating
the value of the
meeting

Seek Constraintless Communication

Instead of

> Having a meeting to share information

> Presenting a proposal at a meeting

> Sharing a screen in real-time as you discuss a topic

> Direct messaging a colleague to ask a question

Try

> Recording your presentation (Loom, Zoom, Teams), then scheduling a "live" Q&A session

> Sending a copy 2-3 days in advance and ask for async comments

> Forwarding a link so that people have the option to view on their own device

> Post the question in a chat and ask for feedback within the next hour

Thanks for joining