

Tips for Connecting Through Technology by [LLC](#) (Leadership Learning Community) and their Community of Leaders

Back in March, around 140 of you showed up to a Virtual Peer Learning Session to share and learn about virtual strategies that could be applied to leadership development. There were lots of creative ideas, resources and recommendations about fostering relational virtual environments. We've **synthesized the notes** from the session here.



LEADERSHIP LEARNING
COMMUNITY

Facilitating Online Spaces



Many of the recommendations for facilitation were basic good facilitation practices with creative advice about how to replicate these practices in online spaces.

- **Introductions and Check-ins:** If the group is over 40, you can have people check in using the chat to get a sense of who is on the call and then put people in smaller groups to have authentic check-ins in spaces more supportive of vulnerability. A chance for meaningful check-ins is especially important in a rapidly shifting and stressful environment.
- **Creating Community Agreements:** It may help to use a starter slide that people can add to in the chat, and verbally to create a space that will be conducive to participation in groups being formally convened.
- **Centering/Mindfulness Practices:** Breathing and grounding practices are even more important in virtual spaces to help people settle in, and in response to the environmental stressors. There are a lot of breathing and mindfulness practices, it is also possible to use poetry. Here is a [great resource](#) shared by Claudia Horowitz.

- Pay attention to energy and the need for movement: It is hard to sit in front of a screen, and folks participating in the session have likely already had a lot of screen time. There are fun way to energize people with movement, stretches, music and a dance party (singing does not work well because of delays). Here is another [good resource](#) shared by Claudia Horowitz and Sage Hayes.
- Multiple Styles of Learning: Can still use art and share, imagery, music, movement, use multiple senses (e.g. bring in scents - lavender, rosemary that people have available to them). Have people draw an image and share it by holding it up to the camera.
- Breaks: Even in a two hour session, people may need to get up and move away from their computer.
- Reflective Time: Time for journaling and turning away from the screen can help people process based on personal styles.
- Be comfortable with silence and space: Create space for quieter people to speak up. Also encourage the use of the chat for people who are more reluctant to speak up. Enjoy the quiet moments.
- Provide Real Time Data: Polling features and slido can be used to gather information about the group, how they feel about something, to brainstorm and vote on ideas (slido) as ways to keep the group engaged and to understand the group.
- Fun and Playfulness: Virtual bingo - how many plants you see in the background or family and pet sightings.

Technology



Helping Staff and Participants Adapt to the Online Environment

- Be prepared to provide support to people learning new technologies. Important to train facilitators and program staff in good online facilitation.
- Have people come 20-30 minutes early for orientation and troubleshooting if they are new to the technology.
- Create a fun learning environment: Technology is a 21st Century leadership competency and we are always in Beta.

- Have tech stewards available on the call: They can use the chat to help people who are having problems or call them on their cell phones while the meeting continues.
- Assign people to monitor the chat and bring comments into the discussion.
- Use Google Docs to capture and help people track in real time.

Technical Tips for Virtual Meetings:

- Mute everyone as they come on
- If using Zoom, coach people on pairing phone with personal ID if they are not using computer audio

Tools for Virtual Collaboration

- Video Conferencing: Many of the people on the call were using Zoom, and felt it was the best choice given its price point for the functionality. Zoom has responded to COVID 19 by removing some of the length and number restrictions for free accounts.
 - Zoom: Video Conferencing
 - Adobe Connect: Video Conferencing
 - Cisco WebEx: Video Conferencing
 - GotoMeeting: Video Conferencing
 - Google Hangouts: Video Conferencing
 - Skype: Video Conferencing
 - Blackboard Collaborate: Virtual Classroom
 - You may want to do webinar trials comparing functionality/cost
- Coordination/Project Management
 - Asana:
 - Trello:
 - Monday
- Communication among participants
 - Slack: Group Messaging
 - Group Text Messaging
 - Hustle-texting tool
 - Facebook Groups
 - Jive Platform
 - Discord
- Resource and File Sharing
 - Google docs
 - Dropbox
 - Box
- Calendaring
 - Google Calendar
 - Calendly
 - Doodle
 - [When2Meet](#)
- Polling/Group Surveying in Real Time
 - Slide.io
 - Google Forms
 - Poll Everywhere
- Collaborative visual organization

- Mural: Collaborative Online Whiteboard
- Miro
- Whiteboard
- Google Jamboard
- Padlet
- Idea Flip (<https://ideaflip.com/b/wd573cgmx9m/>)
- Lino: <http://linoit.com> - free sticky note and collaboration app

Challenges and Remedies Where Possible



- Differences in internet access
 - Rural access
 - Privilege and financial access: Do you have an equity fund that could be deployed to help address financial issues with access?
 - People at home with children or other caregiving responsibilities: Be flexible about participants moving in and out of the meeting. Welcome kids and make space for them to say “hi” on video.
- Multiple Styles of Learning: Incorporating multiple styles of learning can be more difficult in virtual spaces, but it can be done. See the facilitation section for suggestions.
 - Visual Thinker
 - Kinesthetic learners
- Building Virtual Community
 - Trust
 - Confidentiality
 - One participant raised a question about what needs to go on behind the scenes to build trust and relationships in online communities: Some of the advice offered has been to support affinity groups, not to over-engineer connection, to allow more time and more one on one in virtual spaces.
 - Who gets heard and how to bring all voices forward: In facilitation it’s also important to have open conversations about power or who may be dominating the online space - just like face-to-face.

- Internship Placement: Are there options for virtual internships, especially with organizations that are still operating but have had to move to online spaces?
- Loss of retreat-like environment that allows people to step away from their day to day work and lives: This is hard to replace, and the online environment is not like being out in nature, though leadership programs can couple sessions with offline experiences, e.g. during COVID, having people take a solo nature walk or having paired Facetime walks in nature and lots of journaling/reflective practice.

Creating Optimal Virtual Leadership Development Experiences

Affirming and maintaining strong elements of your face-to-face work/culture

Relationship and Community Building: The components of relationship building that were part of your face to face work can be recreated virtually with creativity in large groups, small groups, and one-on-one interactions.

- Check-ins: Make sure that you are creating opportunities for people to know who is in the group and learn something about them.
- Community Agreements: Co-create a space where they will feel comfortable participating.
- Small Groups: Make sure there are dyads or small groups that support more intimate connection opportunities when bringing large groups together by using breakout rooms.
- Storytelling: In small groups
- Context: Have people share things from their home/place that are meaningful to them, or share in the chat what they love about where they live. Provide opportunities to meet others in the household or pets. Use FT dyads to take a walk and share your neighborhood. (Much of this is better done in small groups)
- Informal Connecting: Make sure that participants have each other's names and contact info so that they can arrange times to connect informally one on one or a small group happy hour. (Don't try to over-engineer the way people connect)
- Affinity Groups: Help participants form affinity groups around areas of common interest or shared social/racial identity.

Leadership Delivery Restructuring

Timeline and Structure of Delivery: Many leadership programs have had concentrated periods of delivery, over several days to a week, when participants are brought together for an intensive program. This will not work in virtual realms and the reasons for concentration may no longer make sense without face to face opportunities. This new reality led to several suggestions:

Overall Program Pacing and Delivery Components:

- Delivery Timeline: Spread delivery of content out over a longer period of time. Some folks asked if they could do a couple of three hour blocks in a day. It may

be helpful to ask why this would be better than distributing shorter sessions over days or weeks.

- Preparation: Think about how to engage participants before sessions to make the most of online time, e.g. send content out in advance, collect questions from participants with a registration form to customize the delivery.
- Work Outside of Group Sessions: Think about delivery opportunities as time spent in group sessions, and work between group sessions including coaching and/or peer learning groups meeting on their own schedules.
- Community of Practice Approach: Some leadership programs formalize a Community of Practice approach. After new content is presented participants talk about how they will apply the concepts in their work. They are accountable for reporting back to the group at the next session.

Cohort Formal Sessions:

- Duration: Advice was to keep formal group sessions short, ideally no more than 90 minutes, 2 hours maximum. Be sure to use good visuals.
- Balance of Presentation/Engagement: Best practices of the group suggest that it is important to mix large and small group work, keeping content presentations to a minimum, e.g. 20-30 minutes of the entire time. (Most of the video conferencing platforms recommended below have the capacity to move people into small group breakout rooms.)