"I See What You're Saying"

Working with Visuals in Virtual Meetings

Virtual meetings make it easy for people located in different places to interact with one another. There is a trade-off though – while we gain in ease of communicating (whether through an audio-conference, a video-conference, or a live webinar), we lose the richness of the multi-dimensional feedback we use in our face-to-face interactions.

This is changing. No longer do we have to put up with the limited channels of communication offered by traditional virtual meetings. We now have the ability to combine various tools to create a richer communication environment, supplementing verbal interaction with visual displays that can reflect real-time developments in meetings.

One way of doing this is to use web-meeting tools to complement the verbal interaction. This provides a visual display that can mimic the role of a flipchart in traditional meeting rooms, such as showing the agenda, capturing discussions and reports, and displaying plans as they are developed. This helps equalize participation, as all participants in the meeting have the same 'view' of information, and increases opportunities for shaping the content of these displays.

What follows is a case study of how we helped one client hold a team retreat, even though team members were in two locations with a six hour time difference.

DR Congo – Country Team Consultations

DR Congo is moving from being a post-conflict country to a more normal set of relations with partners and donors. After some years working in the country, one international agency was ready to develop a medium-term strategy for its work there, moving away from short-term strategies that needed to be more flexible with ever-changing conditions.

The team leader wanted to bring the country team together at an early stage in the strategy development process, in order to discuss ideas about possible priorities and themes. This consultation needed to involve 40 people in Washington DC and 20 people in DR Congo. However, the costs of bringing everyone together for a full team retreat were prohibitive – in addition to the travel expenses, there was also the opportunity cost of 60 people tied up in travel and meetings for the better part of a week.

The alternatives appeared limited. A video conference could be used to connect people, but these typically ended up as one-way discussions, with most of the talking taking place among the people in one location. It was also challenging to hold people's concentration for more than one or two hours, and the strategy consultation would need more time than that.

We helped the team leader see new possibilities. A 5-hour video conference was arranged, mimicking the format of a half-day retreat, and we introduced the use of visual displays to help convey information between the two locations. We recommended the use of a web-meeting tool to help with visualizing all the discussions.

The facilitation team consisted of two people – the facilitator and the recorder:

- The facilitator ran the meeting using traditional facilitation approaches, such as managing time and tasks, and moderating discussions.
- The recorder's role was to capture and visualise all the information, using the web-meeting tool in place of a flipchart.

Two large meeting rooms were booked, one in each location. As they were already equipped with the necessary video conference equipment, we arranged for a laptop and LCD projector to be brought into each room. Each laptop had an internet connection and was opened to an online web-meeting page (we used Lotus Notes' Sametime tool – alternatives include Adobe Connect, Webex, and GoToMeeting).

Using the projectors, the web-meeting screen was displayed in each room along with the video conference, giving everyone a view of other participants as well as the shared display.

The recorder selected the 'share my screen' option in the web-meeting tool in order to display Microsoft Powerpoint. This was used to display information about the Agenda and instructions for Tasks. This permitted people in each location to be clear about what work they were supposed to be doing, and how long they had to work on a task.

When discussion and reporting took place, the recorder moved to Microsoft Word. This format allowed notes to be rapidly captured, allowing all participants to view notes in 'real-time'. When the recorder mis-heard the reports, the report could be immediately corrected.

Over the course of the next five hours, team members worked in plenary and small groups to share ideas. As each group reported, the recorder typed their comments into Microsoft Word, displaying it through the projector to local participants and through the web-meeting tool to remote participants.

Group reporting allow all participants to hear, while the visual display allows all to see the report

By the end of the meeting, participants in both Washington and Kinshasa had many opportunities to interact with each other, sharing opinions and views about priorities for the new strategy. The recorder consolidated all the comments into the document, which was circulated to all members of the country team within a few hours of the meeting's conclusion.

This document and the consultation created a common foundation for the next stage of strategy preparation.

Contact us to learn more about how one of our professional facilitators can work with you, or to find out how to be connected to someone in our broader network of professional facilitators around the world.