

# So Far, So Good

If I had been invited to facilitate a virtual event just a few months ago, I probably would have referred the client to someone more experienced in such things or passed on the opportunity completely. At that time, to be perfectly honest, I was neither ready, nor competent in such things. Fast forward a few months and suddenly things look a lot different. I've just experienced one of the most rapid and intense learning curves of my entire life and it's not over yet.

In some form or other, I've been a group facilitator all my life, but only recently have those skills been tested in virtual space. If you are reading this, then perhaps you are a facilitator, teacher, trainer, manager, camp counselor or some other kind of group leader, also wondering how to make the transition from real world group dynamics to presentations in the virtual world. I feel your pain. I've experienced your pain.

Now seems as good a time as any to stop for a second and consider just how far we've come. Here is a collection of powerful insights I've gained recently, and if you are reading this, I imagine you have several more you can add as well.

## **Connection Before Content**

Sequencing is just as important in virtual space as it is in the real world and most of the facilitators I know have a long list of icebreaking and opening activities at their fingertips. Some of these activities can easily be transferred to virtual events, even if breakout rooms (the virtual equivalent of small groups) are required. What I've learned however is that time management is required so that the entire content of a virtual event is not taken up merely by the connection component of the event.

Connection before content? Absolutely, but manage the available time and use technology, like breakout rooms, to assist in this process.

## **Oh My, is That the Time?**

In almost every virtual event I've attended this year, it was immediately apparent which events ran on time and which ones did not. The best events, in my opinion, had a presenter sharing content and at least one additional technician that coordinated such things as breakout rooms, chat and other video-conferencing possibilities. For one person to try to do all these separate things at the same time is a little like juggling three different objects. My recommendation? Divide and conquer. Let one person deliver content while others handle the technology issues, including time management.

## **All the Bells and Whistles**

If I've learned anything about virtual facilitation so far, it's not to get overly enamored with technology and gadgetry. Simplicity is absolutely the best policy. Anything you can do to minimize the total bandwidth of your broadcast helps those of us on the far ends of the world wide web. Put your efforts into the content of your presentations rather than gadgets and gimmicks that take up valuable bandwidth.

## **The Limiting Factor**

In the real-world, one of the limiting factors in outdoor teambuilding programs was the choice of clothing worn by participants. Participants that arrive for a ropes course event in business suits and impractical footwear are probably not going to gain as much as participants that are appropriately dressed for the occasion. In the virtual world, the limiting factor can be bandwidth and internet connectivity. As a virtual facilitator, you can only progress as fast as the slowest internet connection of your participants. Which reinforces the above statement about technology and gadgetry. Simplicity is important. Special effects, cool graphics and other technical wizardry take valuable bandwidth. Use them with discretion.

## **The Size of the Group Matters**

Just as in the real world, the style of a facilitator changes with group size. Fill a breakout room with more than fifty people and I guarantee that some of those folks will never have the opportunity to be heard. Host an event in webinar format, and you eliminate the opportunity for connection between the participants.

I could tell you what my suggestions are for various virtual events, but eventually you will have to decide for yourself, or even more likely, present different activities depending on the size of the group you are virtually facilitating. Just realize that the size of the group matters. If you truly want to create connection and communication between participants, then breakout rooms with appropriately sized numbers are essential.

Teambuilding with two hundred people? Sure, anything is possible. Just realize that facilitating two hundred people is going to feel different than facilitating a group of twelve.

## **What Got You Here Won't Get You There**

The title of this 2007 text by Marshall Goldsmith and Mark Reiter illustrates a key point. The skills required to achieve one level of a pursuit are not necessarily the skills required to reach higher levels, and in many cases, the skills are different for each and every level.

The skills that make teachers, trainers and facilitators competent in the real world are not necessarily identical to the skills required with virtual groups. The good news is some talents transfer directly, such as time management, encouraging participation, organization, leadership. Other skills however, such as the ability to lead a group in an activity when you cannot read their body language, will require a higher level of preparation and mastery. And how do you achieve a higher level of mastery? Read on.

## **Carnegie Hall**

It's like the old joke that asks, "*how do you get to Carnegie Hall?*" The answer (of course) is *practice, practice, practice*. So, "*how do you get to be competent in virtual facilitation?*" Practice, practice, practice. In my opinion, people tend to get better at the things they practice. Practice long enough and hard enough, and you might even become an expert. The bottom line is don't worry. We are all going to get better at this, but understand that there are no shortcuts when it comes to virtual facilitation. The only way to get better at this, is to practice.



## **Find Yourself a Mentor**

Years ago, when I was running 10K races, I learned that it was helpful to train with a partner that was a little better than I was at the time. When I switched from road racing to cycling, it still was true. It turns out the same is true for virtual facilitation. One of the best ways to improve your personal learning curve is to find a mentor and ask for their help. The Virtual Facilitation Practice Group members, the ones listed on the back cover of this book, have all mentored each other during the recent transition, and guess what? We've all gotten better in the process.

## **They Call it a Comfort Zone for a Reason**

I can't even count the number of times I've shared the now familiar comfort zone model with my participants. Facilitators love this simple three-ring model and invoke it whenever we can to invite the members of our group to stretch themselves by moving outside their comfort zone and into their growth zones. Turnabout it seems, is fair game. I don't think there is any question that many if not all facilitators are a little outside their normal comfort zones when it comes to virtual facilitation. That's okay. You are right on schedule, but nonetheless, into the growth zone we go. Kicking and screaming if necessary, but still we go.

Being open to the possibilities of virtual facilitation is part of a growth mindset, according to Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck. For years, we've told our students and participants about this possibility. Now it is time for us to take a healthy dose of our own medicine.

### **Perfection**

Nobody said this was going to be easy or perfect, so stop expecting it to be. The good news is, most of our participants are also experiencing a time of rapid growth and changing technology, so they tend to be a little more forgiving when that new technology breaks down or a facilitator's internet connection fails, or dozens and dozens of other potential shortcomings of the virtual world.

So, stop expecting perfection. Give yourself a break. I'm not suggesting that you should not prepare as best you can, but for heaven's sake, don't be so afraid of making a mistake that you fail to make any impact at all.

### **Making Mistakes is Part of the Plan**

*"I've missed more than nine thousand shots in my career. I've lost almost three hundred games. I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again my life, and that is why I succeed."*

Michael Jordan

Many of us have been facilitating for so long that we've long forgotten what it was like when we first began. We struggled, we made mistakes, and we got better. I doubt there is a single teacher, trainer, facilitator or group leader on the planet that hasn't stumbled as they transitioned from the real world to a virtual one. If you're not making any mistakes, perhaps you're not trying hard enough.

*"A life spent making mistakes is not only more honorable, but more useful than a life spent doing nothing."*

George Bernard Shaw

### **There Is No Way to Put the Genie Back in the Bottle**

Now that a majority of the world has had a taste of virtual meetings and events, it will be impossible to go back to the way things were before. In the future, there will always be the question of whether to gather for an event in the real world, or the virtual one. Fiscally responsible corporations are absolutely going to compare the cost/benefits of meeting in real space vs. virtual space, especially when considering the various outcomes they wish to achieve by hosting such an event in the first place. So, it is probably best to realize that virtual facilitation will be with us for a while, perhaps even forever.

### **A Reasonable Amount of Optimism**

*"My friends, love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair. So let us be loving, hopeful and optimistic, and we'll change the world, together."*

Jack Layton

Optimism during a global pandemic seems strangely out of place. Yet even while the numbers are increasing around us, perhaps even affecting those we personally know and love, there is still reason to be optimistic and even hopeful. For decades I've seen the benefits of good facilitation. That work will definitely continue, albeit in a different form, with appropriate physical distancing. True, the world threw us all a bit of a curve ball lately, but I doubt even a global medical emergency can dissolve the needs of nearly eight billion people to connect. It is hardwired into our DNA, and facilitators are absolutely brilliant in helping people connect. The goal is not merely to survive here, but to thrive. Now get busy. The world needs what we know now more than ever.

## The Best Day of My (Facilitation) Life

On Wednesday August 17<sup>th</sup>, 2005, Allison Phaneuf and I were facilitating a teambuilding event for about thirty participants from a major corporation. It was our third quarterly event for this particular work team. Somewhere, right in the middle of the program, a spark of inspiration ignited within the group. After a particularly insightful activity, Allison and I circled the group and performed what for me was the highlight of my entire facilitation career, a ninety minute debrief that was largely controlled by the group itself. It was magical and I can remember it to this day.

On Wednesday June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020, I had my best day (so far) as a virtual teambuilding facilitator, which is good news, because the previous event had been somewhat of a technical disaster. It was the first time I believed *I can do this*. I'm sure there will be other great moments in virtual group facilitation in the future, but I'll always remember this particular day. Great activities, teachable moments, excellent debriefing after the event. Pure magic.

And what will I take away from these two peak experiences? Well, from my limited data set, always lead teambuilding programs on a Wednesday, that much is certain. Always believe that you can make a difference. Always try to do your best, and remember that even when things go wrong, which they will from time to time, a good facilitator can turn even that into a positive experience.

So, get out there, make mistakes, practice, get better and here's hoping you have a best virtual facilitation day, someday soon.

## A Call to Action

*"At the end of all thought must be action."*

Aldous Huxley

Well, there you have it. My assessment of the current state of virtual group facilitation, but these words are only important if they inspire you to act.

Who knows if or when we'll be presented with another situation like this one. Perhaps not again in our lifetime. So, take this time, catch your breath, re-imagine yourself and the great things you do and get ready to create the future of your own design. Good luck. Godspeed, and remember, facilitators are going to be needed now more than ever as the world recovers and attempts to re-connect. Our comeback is going to be greater than our setback. I believe it in my heart.

Jim Cain of Teamwork & Teamplay is the author of nearly two dozen books filled with team and community building activities from around the world. His real-world workshops are legendary and he is getting better at the virtual stuff with each passing day. For more information, visit: [www.teamworkandteamplay.com](http://www.teamworkandteamplay.com).

