



If Pierre says 'non' one more time...



The title of this Lucid Thought has been on our lips for some months; a reflection on a world of changing work patterns where more and more of our meetings and workshops happen virtually rather than face-to-face.

This is not all bad. In the right situation when working from home you can get so much more done in a day, and it's also greener

(the mileage on our cars is far less than it was) and family friendly as well (we eat together more now when we didn't used to do so very often).

We are fortunate that fast broadband and our technology in general is so good, where sharing desktops with colleagues in different places is easy to do, and where more sophisticated software exists to make virtual facilitation of learning events, or creative sessions a real possibility.

We are reminded though of this saying - **"It's hard to see eye to eye, until you've met face to face"**.

In a virtual world, every word counts was the expression that one of us used having just finished a web-enabled meeting to discuss a difficult technical issue with five other (just as opinionated people) who had never met, and where three out of the five people did not have English as their mother tongue. The telephone debate raged for more than 30 minutes in a frenzy of words, sighs and silence. None of us knew who was listening intently or had left to make a cup of coffee in exasperation! In the end, we were arguing about our interpretation of a particular set of words in a document. It was frustrating, and did nothing to build relationships that were fragile, built only on professional respect, emails and other telephone calls in the first place.

Fortunately, most virtual meetings are not like this. But this one wasn't a one-off and it has led us to think carefully about our own skills and what is good practice in these situations.

On reflection, there are three things we've learned in recent years that we share here to help you think through how you could improve your virtual meetings and workshops.

Firstly, as part of our involvement with the project academy of a large international company, we have been trained in how to facilitate virtual learning. There are some relatively simple and obvious tips that you can learn. Some about how you set up the session; our 'old' disciplines of planning the agenda, clear roles, clear expectations about outcomes (e.g. discussions or decisions), good minutes etc. go a long way.

It's also critical that questioning strategies are well thought through. You may be able to ask an open "what do you think about that?" to a meeting room full of people and cope with the various verbal and non-verbal answers simultaneously but that's obviously not possible on the 'phone. Going 'around the virtual room' asking everyone the same question can work - but gets boring when you've done it a few times. Planning the meeting and varying the approaches to communication really does work - but it takes a commitment to planning that most of us have probably stopped doing for face-to-face encounters. There are people who can train you. We suggest you take a look at Penny Pullan's website www.conferencecallsmadeeasy.com - she has some products that are really helpful.

Secondly, we would encourage you to think about how you speak. We're not talking particularly about accent although there are fans of Peter's southern vowels just as some love Ruth's northern ones! Using plain English rather than dialect or colloquial sayings is important though, or international English when working with people for whom English is a second or even third language. We've found that speed is important; speak too fast and many will switch off and not understand what is being said. Full sentences also help - not thinking aloud with half sentences. This is something you

might get away with when you've got non-verbal cues to help make sense of the situation but completely inappropriate in the virtual world.

Thirdly, there's something about diary planning. One of the great efficiencies of web and telephony enabled sessions is that you avoid the walk, car, train or plane journey to the meeting and as a result save lots of time. One of the potential downsides is that you don't get that travelling time to get your thoughts together, to think through your objectives, to consider the other stakeholders who will be present, to make notes or to rehearse your story. When virtual meetings are back-to-back, all day every day, we argue that much of the efficiency is lost because people are not prepared enough to make the session effective. If your calendar is open for everyone to book in meeting after meeting - make sure you schedule the necessary preparation time you need. Think of it as a virtual journey to the meeting.

Planning and facilitating effective meetings is a core skill in any manager's armoury. We may take the skills for granted when we are on familiar ground. Thrown into unfamiliar territory makes us think again about what it takes to make communication effective and our time in meetings as efficient and productive as it can be. **Maybe it's time to brush up on some basics, and in doing so find ways of making those virtual sessions really work.**

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