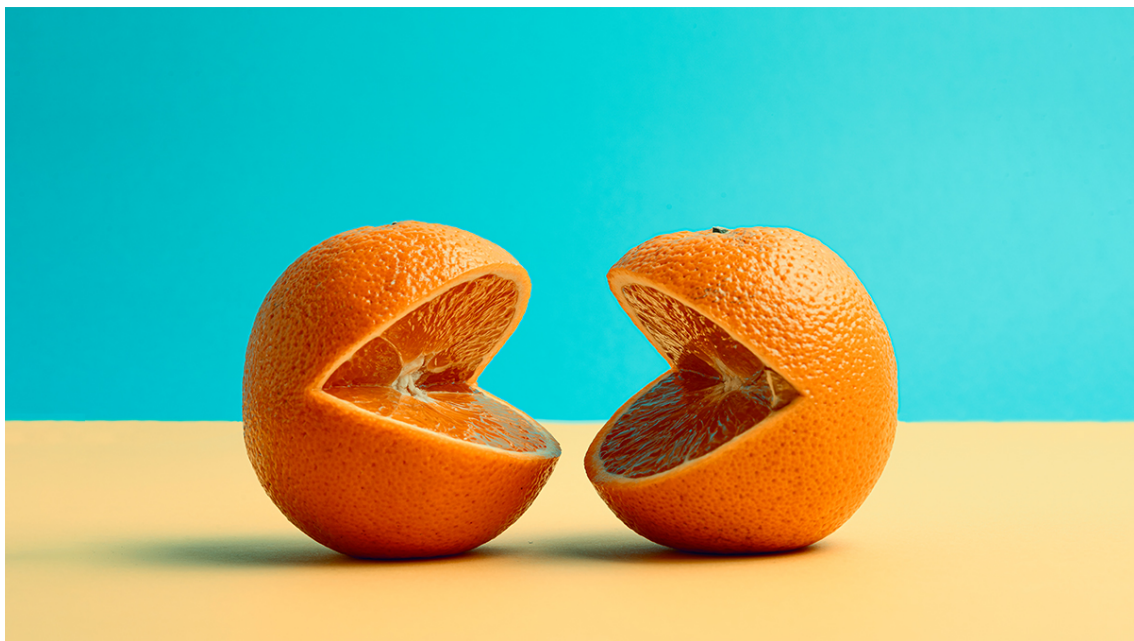


Collaboration

Make Time for Small Talk in Your Virtual Meetings

by Bob Frisch and Cary Greene

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Summary. Before Covid, executives often had the chance to casually chat with colleagues while they grabbed coffee before a meeting started. Today, as participants' windows pop up on the screen, it's either talk to everyone or don't talk at all. As a result, Zoom etiquette... [**more**](#)

It was an unusual confession from a CEO. “During my last staff meeting we must have spent 40% of the time talking about nothing,” Jorge said. “We were just hanging out, shooting the breeze, like the old days. It was one of the most enjoyable, productive calls we’ve had since we shut the office.” But afterwards, he went on to say, “a few people complained.”

On a call shortly after, Rose, the company’s president, added her perspective. “I was not happy, and neither was our CFO, so I talked to Jorge about it,” she explained. “Maybe he’s got time on his hands, but I’m on Zoom 12 hours a day. Frankly, if I’ve got a half hour available during the day, I’d rather walk out of my home office and spend the time with my husband and kids.”

Although tension always exists between time spent on the substance of a meeting and time spent socializing, most recurring meetings reach a natural balancing point — at least until the equilibrium is disrupted by a change in circumstances or in the personalities involved. Having to meet via Zoom (or one of the other platforms that now constitute our virtual conference rooms) has tipped that balance.

The loss of small talk seems to be a challenge not only for Jorge and Rose, but for many executives. We’ve identified two common causes:

“Gathering time” is gone. Pre-Covid, executives often had the chance to casually chat with colleagues while they grabbed coffee before a meeting started. Once at the table, these one-on-one or small group conversations sometimes continued for a while longer, perhaps spreading to the larger group before the meeting got down to business.

Today, as participants’ windows pop up on the screen, it’s either talk to everyone or don’t talk. As a result, Zoom etiquette seems to call for meetings to get underway either on schedule or shortly after the relevant participants have signed on, depending on the culture. But

the best opportunity for a team to “shoot the breeze” without impinging on meeting time — those few minutes of pre-meeting gathering time — has vanished.

Zoom fatigue is rampant. Both Jorge and Rose are energized by their jobs and the success the team has had in adapting and pivoting through Covid. But like many executives, they’re exhausted from the back-to-back, morning-to-night, continuous flow of Zoom calls.

Many managers find themselves depleted of energy before their workday is over. It shouldn’t be a surprise that prolonging a call unnecessarily might strike these folks as irritating, especially when they know that the moment they leave the meeting they’ll be free to spend time on the other, sorely needed side of the work-life balance.

But making time for small talk is important. Jorge rightly believes that continuing his team’s extraordinary level of performance depends on maintaining and growing the culture he’s spent the past few years instilling in the company and among his team. Jorge’s concerns are centered on creating, maintaining, and deepening individual and group relationships. He knows that quickly integrating new members into the team requires more than a series of background briefings. It involves getting to know the other members as people as well.

Those moments, for Jorge, surface during or after unstructured conversations. There’s a virtue to “hanging out.” It’s the chit chat, the side conversations that lift emotions and promote well-being. It’s one way we strengthen and deepen relationships and is critical to building high-performing teams.

How to Reintroduce Small Talk into Your Meetings

While we can’t solve the problem of finding a virtual replacement for a round of golf, an afternoon’s sail, or a long dinner with a few glasses of wine, we have come up with a few ways to help reinstate this important component of your meetings.

1. Make small talk an agenda item, not an afterthought.

Jorge didn't have any plan in place when he allowed a large part of his meeting to devolve into a conversation about nothing. It just happened. And the fact that it was spontaneous, while energizing and enjoyable to Jorge, turned it into an imposition for Rose and others.

Were he to do it again, Jorge might inform the team of his intent to deliberately create space for more personal, informal interactions as part of their virtual meetings. While this may seem paradoxical — planning and scheduling the casual and spontaneous — creating expectations and setting boundaries will increase the team's comfort to embrace the change.

2. Start team meetings with an individual check-in or individual icebreaker.

An activity or ice breaker at the beginning of a meeting is a timeless way to connect participants. Over the years, groups attending regularly recurring meetings, like Jorge's weekly staff meeting, often abandon icebreakers as unnecessary.

In a virtual world, beginning meetings with an icebreaker is a first step to reintroducing small talk.

One client asked each individual to take a minute and share what had been happening in their lives, both professionally and personally. She went first and modeled the tone and candor of the exercise, explaining that a loved one was ill and describing how it had affected her. Others followed suit and immediately the group felt more connected and comfortable with each other.

Alternatively, inject some fun at the beginning of their meetings. One CEO asked each team member to send along a baby picture of themselves. At the beginning of each meeting, the CEO shares one picture and asks each team member to guess who it is. This often leads to laughter and some good story telling — pretty good results for an investment of two to four minutes.

3. Introduce agenda items designed around opinions and conjecture.

Put your team on a level playing field. Occasionally bring up a discussion topic on which most people will have an opinion, use polling to get your team's individual views on the table, and then let the conversation meander.

Instead of a “conversation about nothing,” Jorge should swap in a topic designed to collect opinions on broad themes or focused on creative brainstorming. These are still “talking about the business,” but at a much higher altitude than the transactional, day-to-day agenda items. And because they're opinion based by design, it becomes hard for any team member to claim special expertise that overrides the opinions of the others.

A question like “When do you think the next indoor sporting event or concert with over 10,000 spectators will be held?” has, at the moment, no right answer. Fifteen minutes discussing the range of views among Jorge's team on this or a comparable topic would make a great start.

4. Leave unstructured time at the end of team meetings.

Another way to open up an opportunity for informal chatter while accommodating Rose's concerns for efficiency is simple — leave the choice up to each participant.

If Rose knows in advance that Jorge may choose to use 15-20 minutes of unallocated time at the end of his next staff meeting just to chat as a group, she can decide for herself whether to hang around. Unlike when the open conversation happened at the beginning, Rose will no longer feel ambushed, trapped on the call with no idea how long it will take to get back to business. If she needs to move on, she'll just move on. And Jorge will have an even more convivial group, knowing that everyone around the table knows they too can drift out of the conversation when needed.

Small talk is a big deal. It's time to bring this missing piece of your team's culture to the virtual world.

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