Improving Participation

Rules of **Remote** *Engagement* – a 5-part short article series. Part 2.

This article takes a critical look at hybrid meetings, do they work, and what we could do to improve inclusion, and as a result participation, in virtual meetings. Let's begin with a definition – A hybrid meeting is where at least one of the attendees is not in the same room as the rest and, is joining the meeting via video conferencing software e.g., Zoom; MS Teams; Google Meet etc. Although remote working dramatically increased over the year and a half, with infections steadily declining and a vaccine roll-out underway, far more people are returning to office even if it is for a few days a month, making hybrid meetings a more common occurrence. The concern however, whether intentional or not, hybrid meetings tend to regard remote attendees with a certain disfavour, which contributes to a phenomenon now known as 'remote stigma' (also referred to as remote *work* stigma). This is where a remote attendee becomes the black sheep of a meeting, as it is quite natural to better acknowledge the presence of someone in person as opposed to through a screen.

"when even one attendee is remote, we should treat all attendees as if they were remote"

Remote [work] stigma is where remote employees are thought of as less productive or contributing less, or taking the perspective of the employee, it is being left out of important discussions or having access to fewer opportunities, purely as a result of being off-site. In terms of remote attendees, it is the experience of being forgotten.

Full remote meetings in contrast place every attendee on an equal footing, and in that lies the rebut to hybrid meetings, expressly, when even one attendee is remote, we should treat all attendees as if they were remote. That is, opt for remote meetings where attendees join in from their respective offices even when in the same building as opposed to congregating is one space. When this is not possible e.g., where

attendees are sharing a collaborative space for the day, there are still ways enhance the experience for remote attendees and reduce remote stigma:

Before the meeting

It is always been good practice as an organiser to prepare attendees for a meeting but, we have all experienced arriving at meetings not knowing what the purpose of the meeting is nor what is expected of us. The remote working environment has a way of magnifying our shortcomings, as people become more stressed and far less tolerant. To avoid frustrations on both ends we should ensure some basic information is contained within a meeting request:

Purpose of the meeting – using the subject line, title the meeting so it concisely states what the objective of the meeting is;

An agenda – list in order all items of business to be covered during the meeting but, be realistic about how much we can cover in a meeting, considering time and mental capacity;

Preparation – if any attendees need to have completed prior reading, submission of questions or any other preparation, address these attendees and the deliverables (including due dates) explicitly.

During the meeting (meeting decorum)

The meeting must be hosted via a video conferencing platform.

Whether on-site or remote all attendees must connect to the meeting via the video conference link.

All attendees must use their individual devices to access the meeting through the video conference link – no sharing of laptops.

All cameras must be on (perhaps notice of this should be included in the meeting request).

Greet online attendees first.

Don't share screen if you don't have to, and if you do, use a virtual laser pointer to hold everyone's attention.

Avoid side-conversations.

Watch for and acknowledge subtle cues e.g., someone unmuting themselves means they'd like to speak.

Ask for input from remote attendees first.

Plan engagement points for the meeting on advance, and make use of live polls, Q&As and other virtual collaboration tools e.g., MIRO, Mural, Creately, MindMeister etc. to brainstorm and mind map together in real-time.

After the meeting

Make sure to reserve time at the end of the meeting to sum up findings, and discuss next steps and deliverables for the follow-up meeting. This is a critical step in maintaining momentum and participation even after the meeting has ended.

My next article will cover creating new norms and ritual for the virtual office.