

Toastmasters' Guide to Successful Online Meetings



You know the feeling. Five minutes after joining an important online meeting, you've turned your attention to a webpage or your emails. Why are you and so many online meeting goers so distracted? And more importantly, how can meeting organizers help their online attendees stay focused?

It can be a challenge to hold the attention of an online audience, but it isn't a lost cause. Let Toastmasters show you how to plan and deliver an online meeting that fulfills your goals, meets the needs of your attendees, and keeps them motivated and engaged.

1. Start at the beginning

Before you set the schedule, be sure a meeting is the best way to meet your goals. If your goal can be better met by sending a quick note by email or through a messaging app, do that instead. Everyone on your team will appreciate that you respected their time. However, if you need a quick decision, the necessary discussion is complex, a few team members need the face time to be heard, or you need time for a more human connection, then a meeting is your best option to accomplish your goal.

2. Plan in advance

Just like in-person meetings, team members need notice of any online meeting. Send calendar invitations to your attendees and include a complete agenda. Preparing an agenda and providing it to your attendees lets them know



that you value their time and that you are prepared. It will also help you clarify your thoughts and organize your topics for discussion. Be sure you are including only those team members who really need to be there. You can always add a non-required attendee as optional to give them the choice of attending a meeting they might find beneficial in some way.

Along with the agenda, include any necessary links, such as the link to join your online meeting, in the invitation. This will eliminate last-minute confusion. Be sure all team members can access necessary meeting applications and have a reliable way to contact you before and during the meeting if they have to.

3. Check your equipment

Make sure your equipment and environment are ready and up to the task. Even with daily use, it may have been a while since you confirmed that your webcam is working well and angled for an optimal attendee experience.

- ▶ Inspect your webcam. It may seem simple but be sure your lens is clean. Is it the best webcam you have access to? Consider upgrading to high definition for better detail.
- ▶ Confirm your camera angle. Make sure it's focused so you are visible in the center and that the angle isn't too high or too low. The camera should be at eye level.
- ▶ Look around. If you can, set up your physical environment so it is clean, free from distraction, and can be used as your background. If you are unable to use your physical background, choose a virtual background that is professional and appropriate.
- ▶ Update your application. Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Slack, and other meeting applications all need to be updated periodically to function well. Be sure you have the latest version before you begin your meeting.
- ▶ Check your lighting. Have the main source of lighting behind the webcam to illuminate you; avoid having light pointing directly at your camera. Consider investing in a high-quality light intended for online meetings.

4. Know the application

The best time to practice and confirm your comfort level with the functionality of your chosen application is before your meeting. Even if you will have help to facilitate your meeting, be sure you know how the application works so that if your facilitator loses internet access, has to step away, or has some other issue that causes them to be unavailable, you can continue on without a problem.

Meeting applications or platforms can be quite simple or very complex. The list below provides suggestions of items to look for on your chosen application. Think about the kind of meeting you want to run and always remember that the simpler, the better.

Familiarize yourself with how to:

- ▶ Access/change any settings you may want to adjust
- ▶ Enable or disable the chat function
- ▶ Enable or disable the ability to poll your attendees
- ▶ Turn your own camera on and off
- ▶ Mute and unmute your own microphone
- ▶ Set up and control a waiting room, if applicable
- ▶ Allow waiting room attendees access to the meeting

- ▶ Mute attendees
- ▶ Explain to attendees how to mute and unmute their own microphones
- ▶ Explain to attendees how to turn their own cameras on and off
- ▶ Use breakout rooms, and assign attendees to those rooms, if applicable

5. Before you begin your meeting

Remember what it was like to attend a meeting when everyone was together in an office? Usually, when a meeting was about to start, attendees moved from one place to another to convene. That often involved a short walk with conversation, a change in environment, and sometimes a quick stop for a beverage or a visit to the restroom. With online meetings, people often stop working on one project, or close out of one meeting, and go directly into another, without any break or change in scenery.

Your brain and the brains of your team members likely need a little more preparation for an online meeting to be a success. You might want to consider a few ways to shift your focus from one activity to the next as you prepare to start your meeting; be sure to share these ideas with attendees:

- ▶ Send a fifteen-minute reminder that you are looking forward to seeing your team, and include a topline of your planned discussion
- ▶ Take that beverage/bathroom/walk break to help you focus and prepare to be at your best
- ▶ Close out of unnecessary internet tabs or programs to avoid distractions
- ▶ Put unnecessary applications and alerts on mute
- ▶ If you are sharing space, let others in your environment know that you are about to start a meeting and be sure they have what they need so they won't disrupt you
- ▶ Manage pets and other potential noise makers to the best of your ability
- ▶ Encourage team members to take these same actions if they can

6. Once your meeting starts

Be present. Avoid distractions, but if something happens that diverts your attention, excuse yourself and explain to your attendees; rejoin the meeting as soon as possible.

Nothing says that you value the people on your team like your full and undivided attention. That means you stick to your agenda and follow through with your plan, making sure to:

- ▶ Start on time
- ▶ Join your meeting with your video on so that everyone can see you
- ▶ Greet your team members as they arrive
- ▶ Engage attendees during the meeting
- ▶ Ask questions
- ▶ Set the ground rules for communication whether that is open conversation in a small meeting, raised hands, chat, or another agreed-upon format for contributing
- ▶ Listen when others speak

- ▶ Acknowledge others when they are waiting to contribute
- ▶ If possible, record your meeting so that anyone who was not able to attend can review the discussion; ensure that all attendees know you are recording
- ▶ Take notes or ask someone else to take notes of any action items
- ▶ List any action items and who is responsible for completing them
- ▶ End on time

7. Follow up after your meeting

Everyone on your team should know exactly what is expected of them before the meeting ends. However, following up is still essential, whether it is a quick thank-you and a copy of the notes from the meeting for everyone's records, or an invite to the next meeting, along with task assignments for every attendee. This is your opportunity to close the circle, recognizing the time and effort your team members contributed to making your online meeting a success.

The bottom line? Creating a positive experience before, during, and after every online meeting should be your commitment. This will build an environment that values the contribution and time of every team member, keeping online meetings truly in focus.

Ready to test your online meeting skills in a supportive environment? [Find a Toastmasters club that meets online!](#)