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## Five tips for a successful virtual coffee catch-up

Experts say there is a craft to mastering the art of virtual communication - and that goes for the humble coffee catch-up too.



Ask Stef Bradley about her secrets to a successful virtual coffee and the KPMG partner channels the advice her father would give her before a date.

Stef Bradley recommends having three conversation starters.

Always have three conversation starters just in case there's an awkward silence.

*"I used to have to think about these conversation starters and they would be tested with my dad,"* Bradley says.

*"I always think about that more and more in the virtual world."*

In the shift to remote work during COVID-19, professionals have had to adapt their communication skills as meetings have moved to video platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

The office that workers once knew is unlikely to make a comeback any time soon and the same can be said for in-person meetings.

While the shift to online meetings has been a game-changer for some, experts say there is a craft to mastering the art of virtual communication – and that goes for the humble coffee catch-up too.



How do you have a successful virtual coffee meeting? Take three tips. Les Hewitt

Although video meetings have been touted as far more efficient, they have their limitations. One of the biggest challenges is that it is much harder to read non-verbal cues such as body language over video.

### 1. Before you even meet ...

It can be useful to establish why you're meeting and provide a topic of discussion in your meeting invitation, says Jane Gunn, partner in charge of People and Change at KPMG Australia.



If it's more formal, it can be helpful to provide a short agenda to guide the discussion.

Fiona Roberston, leadership specialist and author, suggests going one step further and sending a 30-second introductory video before the meeting, especially if you haven't met before.

*"Just to say 'hey, I'm me, really looking forward to seeing you'," she says. "That way people know what they're in for. That saves the sniff test at the beginning."*

Just because you're catching up from the comfort of your bedroom or living room, doesn't mean you should treat it any less professionally than an in-person meeting, says leading body language and speech expert Michael Kelly.

He says ensure you have the basics down-pat before the meeting. These include dressing professionally, using a non-distracting background, directing extra light on your face, ensuring the camera is at eye level and putting a "do not disturb" sign on the door.

## **2. Make a connection**

Regardless of whether the meeting is for business purposes or a social catch-up, Gunn advises starting the conversation by making a human connection to help engage everyone.

*"Engage in small talk," she says. "What is your cat's name? How are your kids? Allow it to become a human connection rather a transitional, leadership interaction."*

Robertson concurs.

*"Always seek to connect before you convince," she says. "Particularly at this point in time when we've all got kids and pets and real lives that we haven't been able to hide. I think people really appreciate being able to meet the real human a little bit more than might have once been the case."*

## **3. Follow the leader**

If you've ever been in a virtual meeting with lots of participants, you have probably experienced the frustration of people interrupting or talking over one another.

Gunn recommends being clear on who is facilitating the discussion.

KPMG's Jane Gunn says it's important to make sure everyone feels included in a virtual meeting. Richard Thorek

*"It's even more important in a virtual meeting because everyone is effectively at a distance," she says.*

*"Leadership is vital especially if it's a 'social connection only' purpose meeting. Who is responsible for making sure everyone contributes?"*

Gunn says it is important to know who is on the call and ensure everyone is involved. If you need to, write down everyone's names.

Put a tick next to their name when they make a contribution.

Gunn suggests making use of commentary tools – or even just the "group chat" functionality – where people can contribute.

*"They can also record a comment or insight without having to actually speak," she says. "The main aim is to ensure everyone has a 'voice' – including more introverted participants."*

#### **4. Don't be anywhere else**

Distractions are abundantly obvious during virtual communication, say experts.

*"DBAE - don't be anywhere else," says Kelly. "It's so basic but it [works] because we all daydream, so you can even put a post-it note on your monitor and that seems to [help you] focus in the moment."*

#### **5. K.I.S.S (Keep it short and slow)**

Robertson recommends keeping a lid on the length of a coffee meeting, especially in the virtual world.

*"Human brains are not designed for interacting over screens, we're designed for face-to-face, so there's a whole lot of stuff that your brain does when you're in physically in proximity to another person," she says.*

*"It does all this stuff without us even being aware of it and when you're on the other side of a screen, brains get very confused because they see a person there but they can't do what they normally do and that's one of the reasons why Zoom meetings are so exhausting."*

*"It's like your brain is sending out a Bluetooth signal and hitting a brick wall. It's all much more stressful than if you were face-to-face."*

Kelly says: *"Being succinct is the currency of video meetings and that extends to coffee meetings."*

Robertson says it's also important to slow down – especially when communicating virtually.

*"Ask more than tell and allow silence to do more of the work because people need time to think and the social cues of who can talk when are much less obvious. Just slow the whole thing down."*

#### **Bonus tip: Keep smiling**

*"Smiling releases endorphins and makes everyone feel better connected," says Gunn.*

Kelly agrees energy is a vital component to a successful – and memorable – coffee meeting.

*"Energy is the secret sauce of virtual communication. Your energy is more memorable than your words."*

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