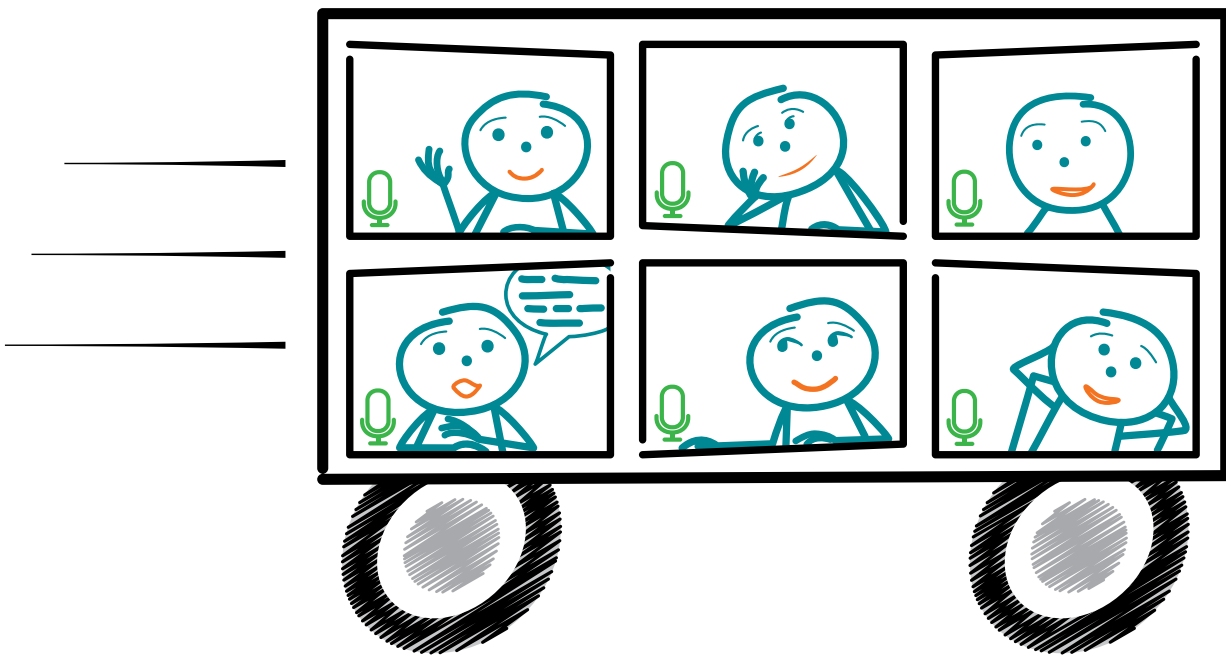


HUM

**Double the engagement
and productivity of your next
online meeting**



**jacinta
Cubis**

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Tim Smurthwaite, always the patient proof-reader.

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Introduction

This book is a visual guide to get your online meetings humming. Inside you'll find practical and easy-to-use tips and tricks that will double your engagement and productivity.

Imagine - people might even look forward to attending your meetings!

How many times have you heard 'I'm so over it' or 'I'm Zoomed out'? This book helps to fix that with a shiny new set of tools that will energise you and your meeting buddies. All with a little creativity and humour.

The pictures tell the story. There will be no misunderstandings or second guesses. You can see the problems and know exactly how to get your meetings working well. Spend more time on the *why* of your meetings and workshops, and less time whinging about what is not working.

Online meetings are here to stay

The arrival of Covid-19 saw a sudden and complete shift to online meetings and workshops. My practice went from facilitating community groups of 60 people over a full day in person, to staggered groups of 20 people in 90-minute sessions.

While we can now meet in person, albeit with restrictions, I don't believe we will return to face-to-face as the default option. With a choice between in-person and online, we will work out, meeting by meeting, what best suits our purpose. But meet we will - decisions must still be made, projects completed, services delivered, and programs developed.

No matter how familiar we are with online meeting platforms; mistakes will happen. New ones added to existing mistakes become bad habits and get embedded.

We will still throw up our hands in the face of technological unpredictability, as gremlins will always be with us. But even in an uncertain world, we can control mistakes and reduce the problems. Some things are easily fixed, while others will take more patience and practice.

When the online environment works, it is wonderful. Depending on the purpose, it can be more effective than face-to-face. When it doesn't work, though, it is tiring, frustrating, draining and humiliating. Ineffective online experiences shut down, rather than enable effective meetings, collaborations, stakeholder and community engagement.

When facilitating, my magic question is 'What's needed now?' It feels like the right question for now too.

We may have tolerated people adjusting to new technology when it seemed temporary, but online meetings are here to stay. For many reasons, they will now be the default choice over meeting and collaborating in person.

We need to do meetings better

Getting used to the virtual working world in the 21st century has parallels with the advent of cars early in the 20th century. It took decades for people to get used to them - not just the driving, but travelling on streets full of people, horses and horse-drawn vehicles, and bicycles.

Henry Ford made the motor car accessible to the mass market, but not everyone had a car. In contrast, it's a fair bet that everyone who works today will participate in online meetings. The change has been global, sudden and swift. No wonder our virtual meetings need a service.

Video meetings have been with us for years, but back-to-back online meetings five-days-a-week is a new experience. Even though we've had several months to adjust, we still see the same problems and mistakes.

Many of the virtual and online issues are the same as in face-to-face meetings. Unclear purpose, poor planning and preparation, distractions, lack of engagement, ineffective facilitation, and communication issues. The sudden and complete switch to an online working environment might just be the trigger we need to fix these long-standing issues. The timing could be exactly right for a much-needed revolution against boring, disengaging and unproductive meetings.

Why am I calling for change?

As a facilitator, I have to be curious. It helps me to follow the lead of the group I am working with, and to ask the right questions to help people do their best thinking. I also carry a practical tool kit that helps groups work better together. You can think of me as your virtual mechanic.

One of the best questions I ever learned to ask in film studies, was 'What does this button do?' It has also served me well in the new reality of online facilitation - juggling screens, buttons, shortcuts and a plethora of online collaboration tools, while focusing on the participants.

Mid-way through the Covid-19 lockdown, I had a particularly challenging online workshop. Afterwards I wrote down all my issues with virtual meetings and how to fix them. That list became cartoons and this book was hatched.

Curious to know how my list compared with others, I asked clients, colleagues, friends and family two questions about online meetings and workshops:



What's your biggest beef?



What's the thing you enjoy, like, appreciate most?

Fifty-five people responded to the survey, with 225 comments - many of them detailed. So I asked data whizz Don Sharples from Altometer¹ for help. His analysis underpins the mistakes, problems and fixes described in this book.

If you want online meetings to be engaging and productive, then this book is for you.

If you love online meetings, then make them better and help others see how well they can work.

If you hate them, fix the things that annoy you.

I hope the cartoons will help dial down your annoyance and dial up your curiosity to try a few fixes in your Zoom, Teams, Hangout, Webex, Skype or other online video meeting and webinar platforms. Some of the fixes are easy, while others might take you out of your comfort zone. I have tried all of them and they work.

Before we dive into the problems, there is some good news. The survey respondents tell me that what they most enjoy about our online working world are inclusivity, flexibility and exploring new technology.

Inclusivity

- Many are delighted that a greater number and broader range of people can now participate.
- Others like that geographic distance is not a barrier to participating online.
- Beaming straight into each other's homes is seen as a plus.
- They appreciate that online spaces remove the challenges that in-person sessions can pose.
- Others believe that the online environment has shifted power dynamics and is more democratic.



*'I like that online gives people more opportunity to share their voice. Some people who have formerly remained quiet and in the background are now sitting on the same stage as the loud one.'*²



Flexibility

- Most like being able to manage their own environment.
- Others welcome the benefits that come from reduced travel time.

- People also like working from wherever they choose.
- Some celebrate the fact that they can wear what they like - as long as it can't be seen on camera.

*'...you can do the ironing whilst you listen...'*³

Exploring new technology

- Some like playing with the visual tools, being able to draw and mark up whiteboards together, in real time.
- Others appreciate that discussions are recorded. The chair, facilitator and everyone can focus more on what's being said. They are engaging, rather than constantly checking that the notetaker got the point. After all, who wants to take minutes?
- Lots of people enjoy the chat function of the different online platforms.

*'I love that people are exploring new options and technology because they have to!'*⁴

At the same time, it is important to understand that not all customers, stakeholders or others in our community feel included. I'm thinking of:

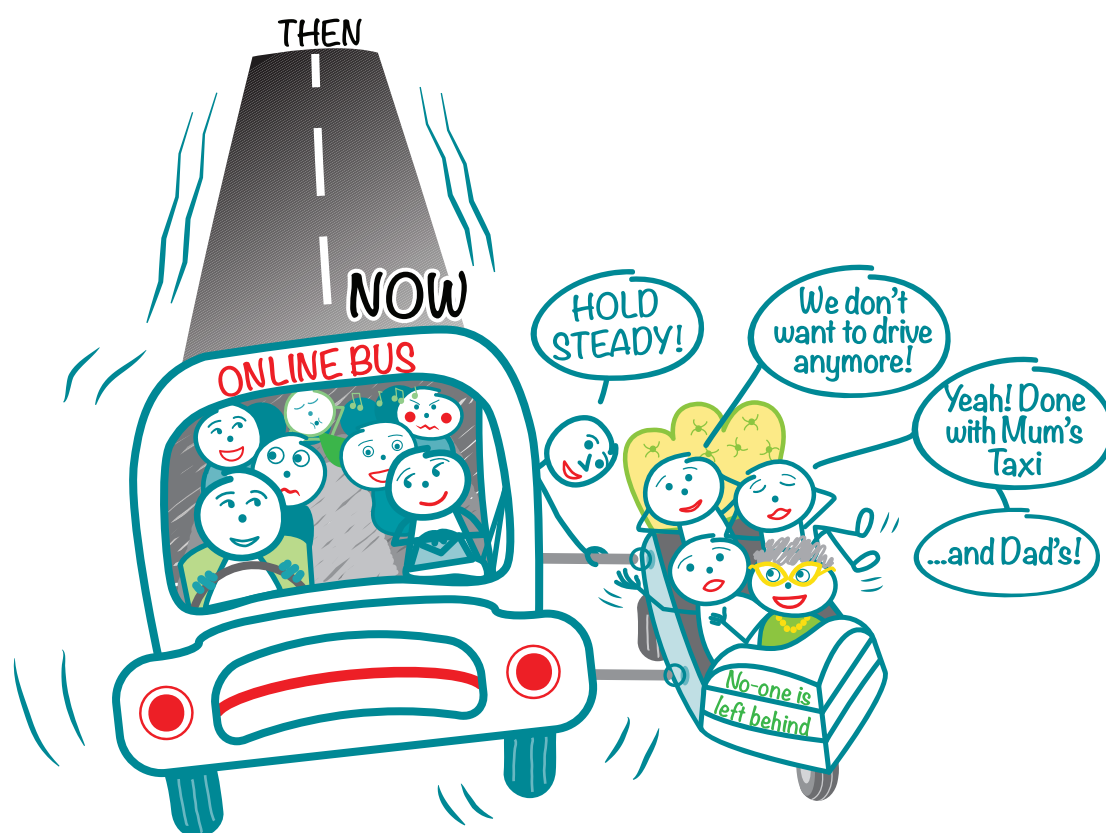
- ☹️ People who rely on public wi-fi when their data runs out.
- ☹️ The 84-year-old who had to give up decades of doing the minutes for her local golf club. It's just too hard online.
- ☹️ Civically engaged older folk who cannot bookmark a site, join a Zoom meeting or know which button gets them into a WhatsApp video call.
- ☹️ People for whom English is second or third language, or do not speak it at all.

As a colleague said 'We're running, and some people can't even walk yet.' It feels like we are all on a bus hurtling along. We need to look around and make sure that everyone has managed to get on the bus.

From a community engagement perspective, there's little value in asking for people's opinions and views when they can't figure out how to read the question or open the poll, let alone vote and type.

At the same time, the bus might also have a comfortable sidecar attached to it to hold all the people who may not want to drive anymore.

We don't know what sort of world may emerge as lockdown loosens. But checking our assumptions about people's comfort and knowledge with online platforms will be key to adapting to it in a way that includes everyone.



Have a little (serious) fun with this book

After you have identified the problems that apply to your online meetings and applied the fixes, here are some ways to embed your new habits.

Bingo for your workshops and meetings

Using the templates at the end of the book, participants tick off the mistakes and problems as they happen. Just like a game of bingo. Then take a few minutes as a group to check what you noticed. If patterns emerge, try the suggested fixes.

You are bound to come up with others and I'd love to add them to the list. Send them to me at jacinta@jacintacubis.com

Be a virtual buddy

Play your own personal bingo, using the same templates. Perhaps you'll discover that you enact some of the mistakes listed in this book and frustrate your colleagues. Can you use any of the suggested fixes? Ask someone you trust to be your virtual buddy and let you know if you act out that behaviour. De-brief with them regularly to see if your fixes are working.

Keep people honest and on track in a meeting

This is for groups who know each other and have a good level of trust. A team, a partnership, or a collaboration. Nominate an arbiter to call it when they see or experience a mistake or problem from the list in this book. Hold up the relevant cartoon, close to the screen. It's a light-hearted way to quickly nip that problem in the bud.

Spark your thinking and add your own fixes

As a group or on your own, jot down other ideas that you know work, or would like to try. There's space after each of the suggested fixes for you to sketch or note any ideas. Again, I'd love to see them. Take a photo and send it to me at jacinta@jacintacubis.com

Getting Down to Business

The most common mistakes and problems fall into four broad groups.

- Purpose
- Adjusting to new technology
- Communication
- Etiquette

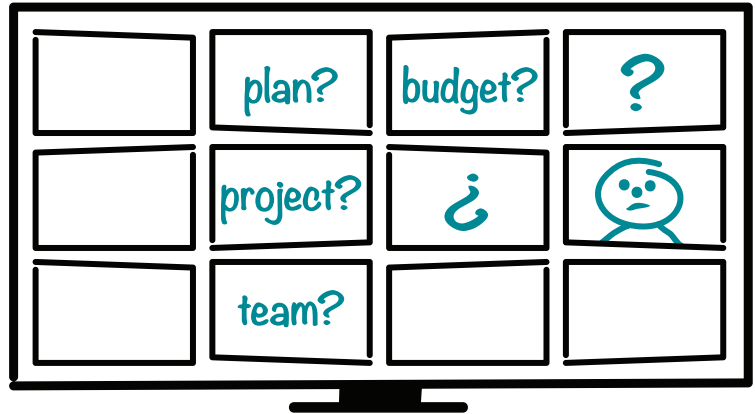
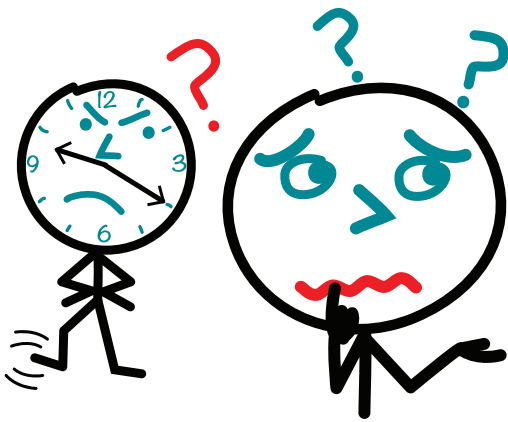
Purpose

Let's start with a question. 'Why are we meeting?' is the first thing to ask when proposing any meeting or workshop.

Is it to comment, connect, communicate, share, track, collaborate, make an announcement, update on progress, or celebrate? Is a meeting, or a workshop, the best forum for the purpose?

The answer could be quick or it may take a while to surface. Does the online platform fit the purpose? Do we even need a meeting? Don't hold a meeting without a clear, succinct, purpose that is agreed and understood by all participants.

#1 Does Everyone Know Why We're Here?



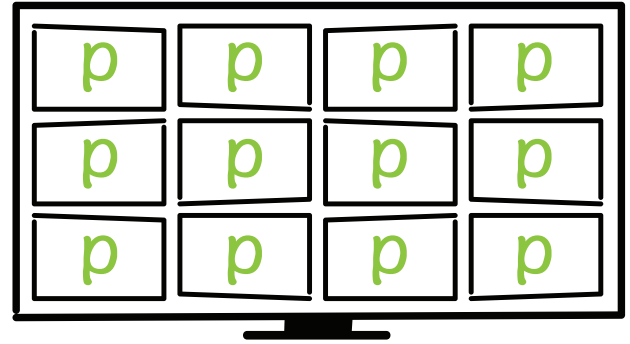
WHY ARE WE MEETING?

PROBLEM

Take a leaf out of Simon Sinek's book *Start with Why*⁵, and ask the purpose of the meeting. If participants cannot answer this immediately and consistently, stop the meeting and sort it out.

*'Like all meetings, virtual meetings need to have a purpose. I don't mind if the purpose is simply checking on people's mental health, but it should be clear why you are getting together. If there's no clear reason, don't meet.'*⁶

Purpose BEFORE meeting



FIX

Nail the purpose and you get skin in the game. Purpose attracts energy, and lifts engagement. Conversations are productive and outcomes achieved. Stuff gets done.

Agree the purpose of a proposed meeting or workshop ahead of it.

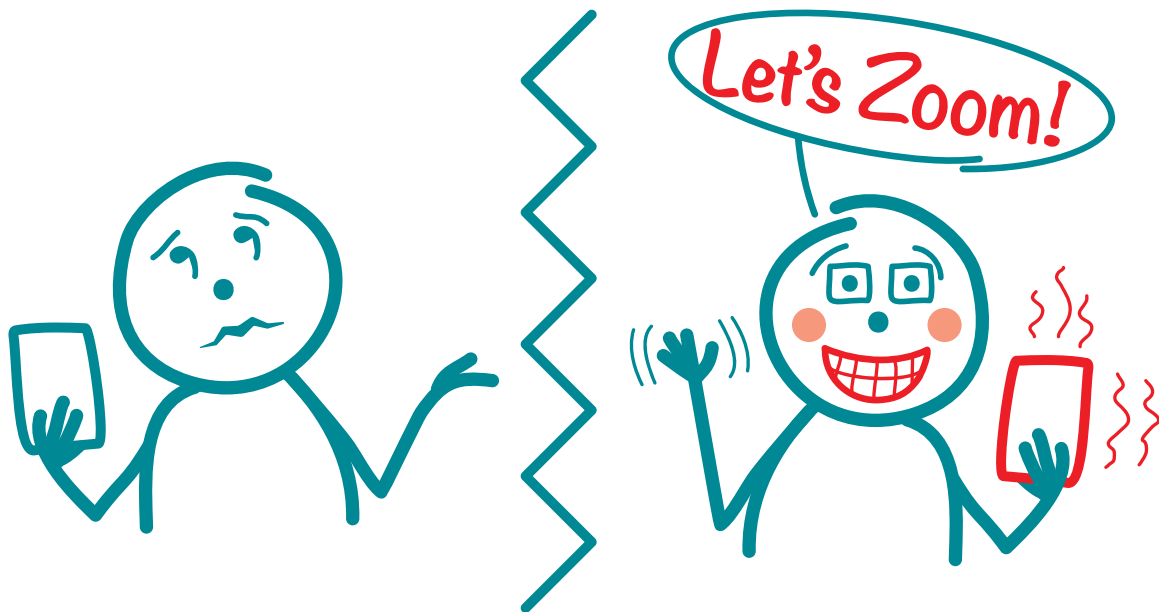
If a group meets regularly for a project, agree a list of expected reasons for your meetings, such as to: share information, update progress, exchange ideas, decide, plan, review progress, set a budget, debate options, brainstorm, check in, connect.

Put the purpose in the subject field of the email with the meeting invitation. If it can't fit in the subject field, revisit it. A succinct purpose is a clear purpose.

Check in on participants' understanding of purpose regularly.

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

#2 Do We Really Need Video?



PROBLEM

*'People are so used to video conferencing it's almost expected.'*⁷

*'Video fatigue is real.'*⁸

*'We tune out after 20 minutes of screen time.'*⁹

It is worse if you work across international time zones. One executive who responded to my survey commented that his diary is back to back, day and night, with online meetings.

We need breaks from the screen.



FIX

As with so many problems, the fix comes back to purpose.

Always ask: What's the purpose of getting together? Is it to convey information, exchange ideas, plan, make a decision, debate options, brainstorm, check in, connect or something else?

Choose the right technology for the purpose.

- Pick up the phone.
- Send an email.
- Start a thread in your preferred communication platform.
- Add your feet if a walk-and-talk works for you and your colleague or client. You can record the conversation if needed, and with permission.

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

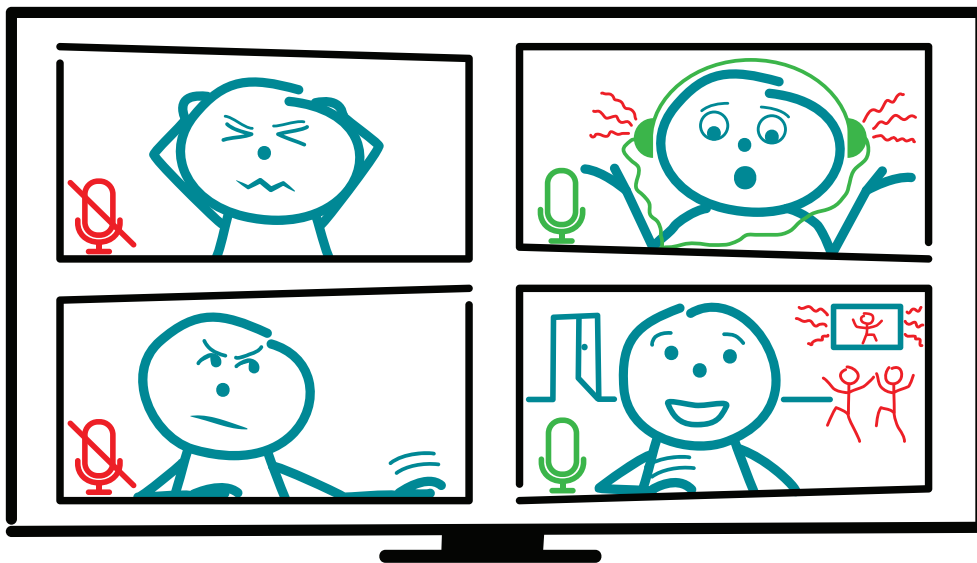
Adjusting to New Technology

Adjusting can feel strange. It's a bit like getting behind the wheel of a car for the first time and turning on the ignition. You've seen it done a thousand times, but you have to experience it yourself to learn how.

We don't have to know how the car works or how to fix it. But if we want to drive, we need to become proficient and follow the rules so that we can share the road safely with other drivers.

Most of the time, we are driving solo and there won't be a reliable co-pilot to set everything up for us.

#3 There's Too Much Background Noise

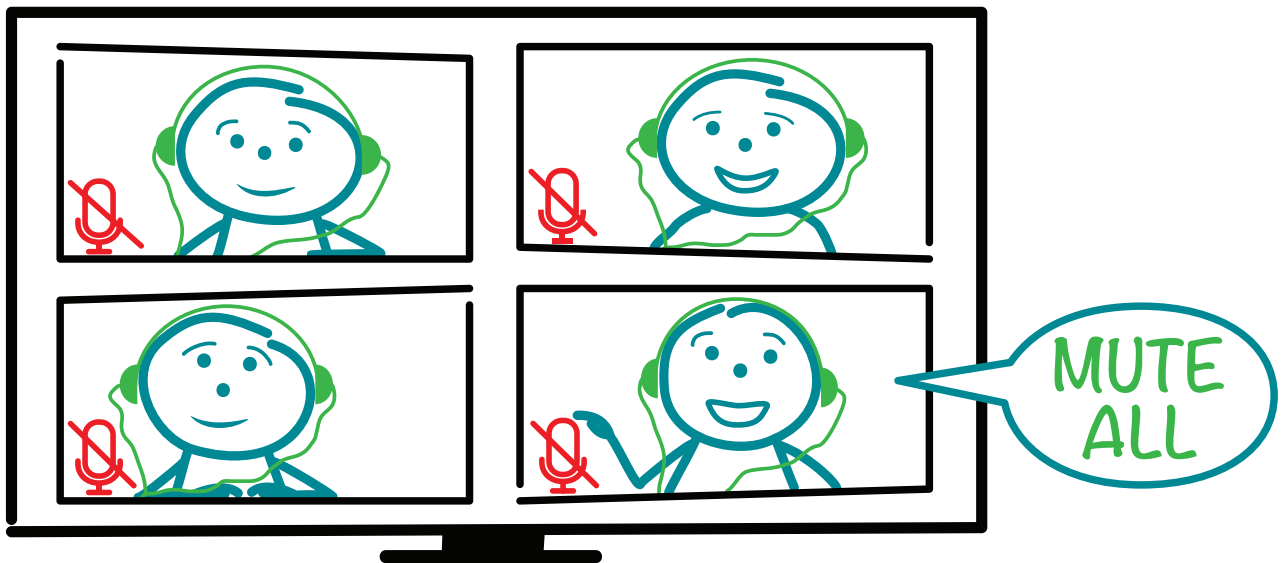


PROBLEM

Video platforms are all about the visual image, right? No, audio is just as important - if not more so.

By the third or fourth video meeting of the day, background noise from other participants seems amplified. It's no longer just an irritant, it's a barrier to listening, communicating, and getting on with the purpose of the session.

It's not just the sound at issue. As one of the respondents to my survey pointed out '*You know that what you are sharing is being broadcast to the whole room of the person without ear buds.*'¹⁰



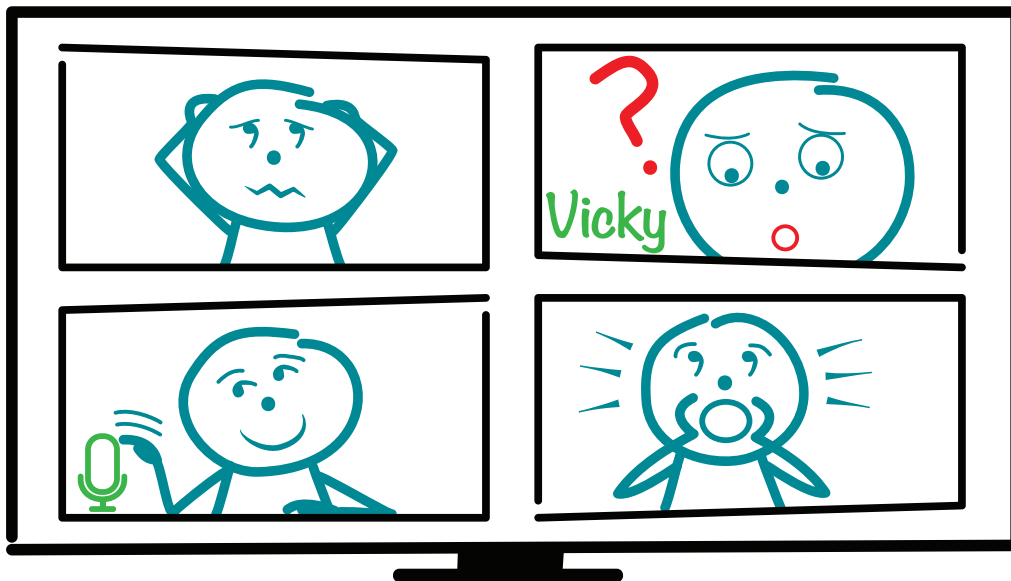
FIX

You prepare your notes and thoughts for a meeting, so prepare your tech too.

- Find a quiet room. We can't all have home studios, so work with what you've got.
- Use headphones, headsets or ear buds. Test them before every meeting.
- If you're the facilitator or host, mute all participants on arrival so that people don't show up with a bang.
- In your own settings, tick *mute on arrival* or the equivalent. *'Every app's a little different, but every app has a mute button. Find it. It's your friend.'*¹¹
- If you hear background noise and the facilitator or chair is unaware, send them a private message in the chat. Even better if you can identify the source of the noise.
- Draw a picture of the mute symbol and hold it up to the screen.

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

#4 We Can't Hear You!

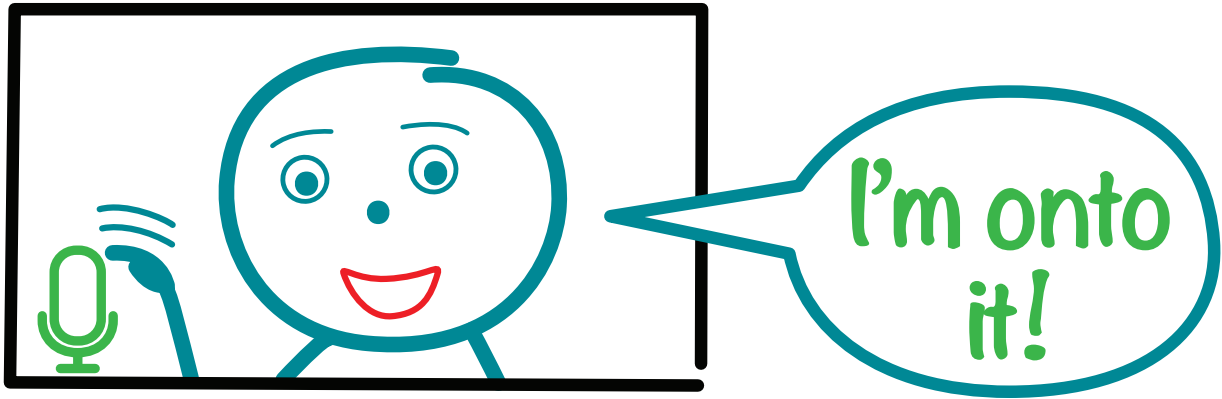


PROBLEM

Having to remind people that they are on mute, seems to be a recurring problem. It doesn't matter if you have been using online meeting platforms for years. We all forget to unmute ourselves. We know what to do, it's just not automatic yet. A bit like the transition from L plates to P plates when we're learning to drive.

We *love* to help in online meetings. We jump to, 'You're on mute Vicky!' a nano-second after Vicky has signalled she has something to say.

A send-up of a Zoom meeting by the New Zealand Police illustrates this problem (and a few others) beautifully. Check it out [here](#).¹²



FIX

Join the meeting early and unmute your mic then.

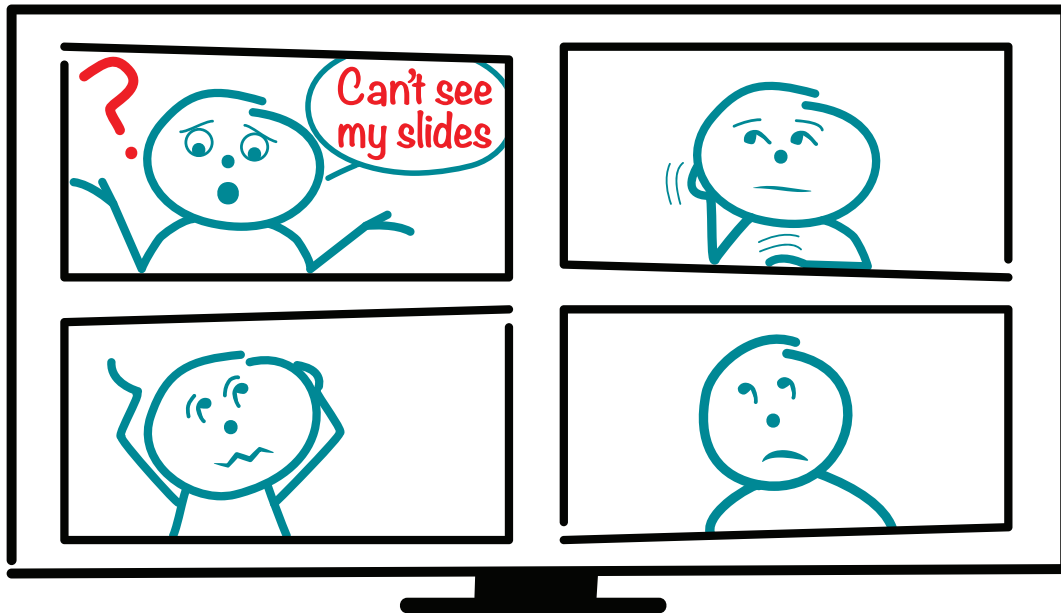
If someone says that you're on mute, smile and point to your left mic button to show you know and are unmuting.

Find the short cut to unmute or mute quickly. On Zoom use Alt+A or the space bar.

Give people a bit more time to prepare to speak than you would in a face-to-face meeting.

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

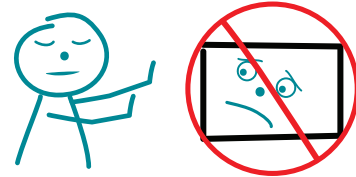
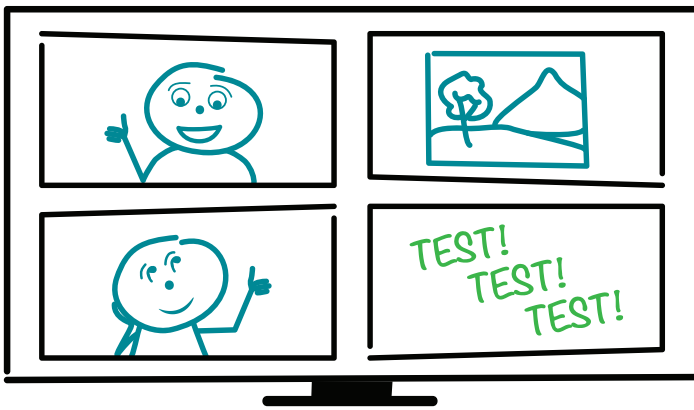
#5 Where Are My Slides?



PROBLEM

'Let's see now. I'll just share a slide...hold on. Oh...no, that's not it. Ah, here we are. Can you see that? No? I can...I wonder what...'

It can become a very slow and painful death-by-PowerPoint in the online environment.



FIX

Test. Test. Test.

With a colleague, a friend or family.

Test on your different devices.

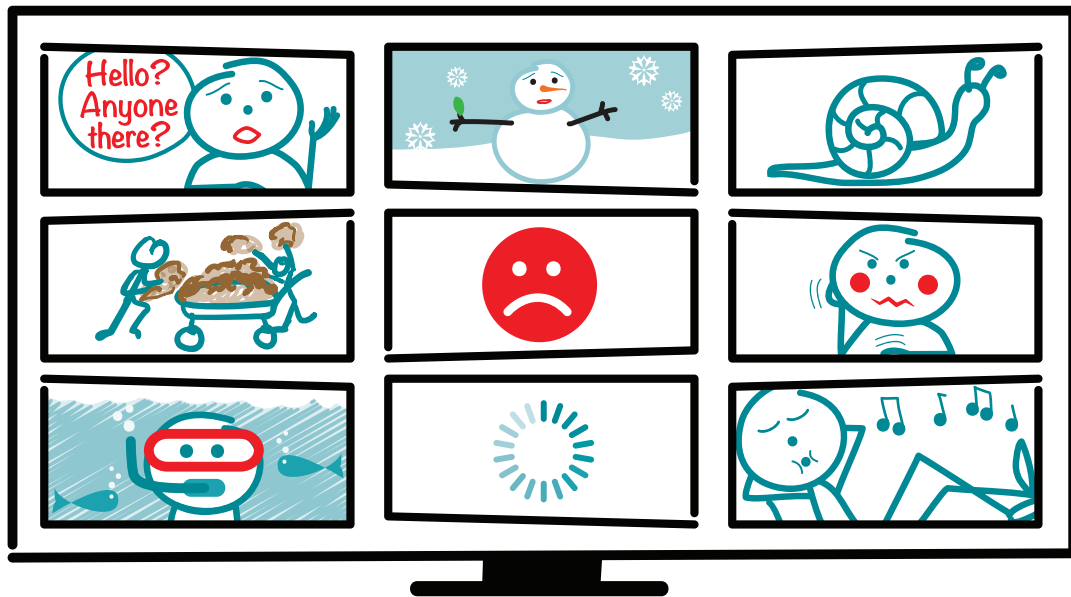
Test again in the pre-meeting chat.

Don't use slides - that's radical I know, but it can be much more engaging to use butcher's paper on a wall or a flip chart, photos and posters.

Distribute any information prior to the meeting for discussion - using online collaboration tools or in person.

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

#6 My Internet Keeps Dropping Out

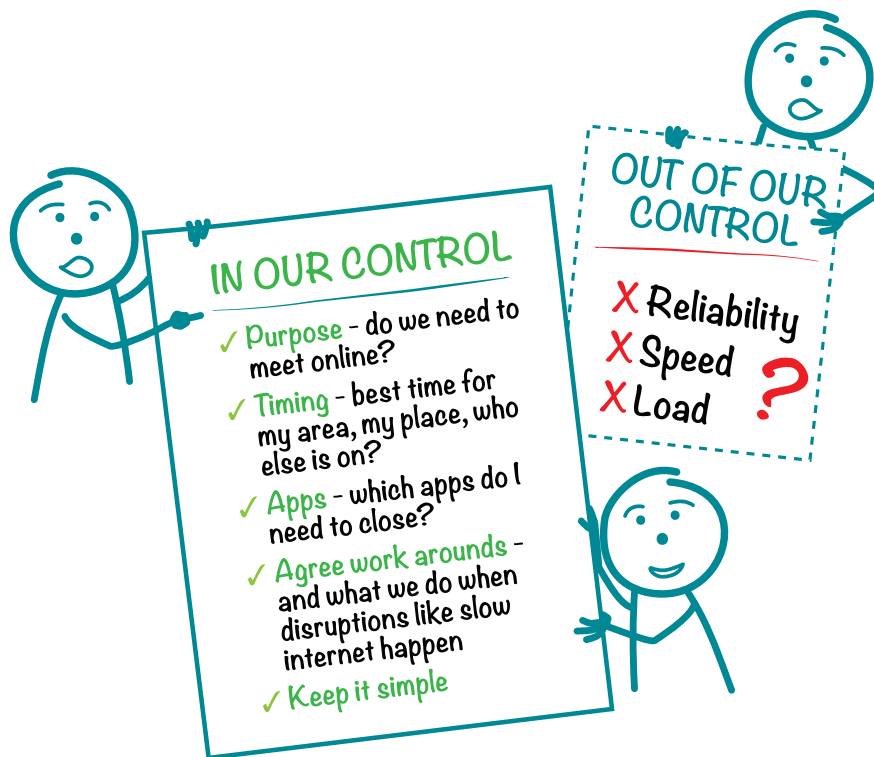


PROBLEM

This was the top complaint for survey respondents.

We have all been there. We are expanding on our point, but nobody hears us. We freeze or sound like we are underwater.

Slow and overloaded internet undermines the efficiency of online meetings, causing grief and frustration all round.



FIX

Close all other applications and programs.

If at home, ask the kids, flatmates or your partner, to have a break from gaming or streaming.

Connect directly to the modem.

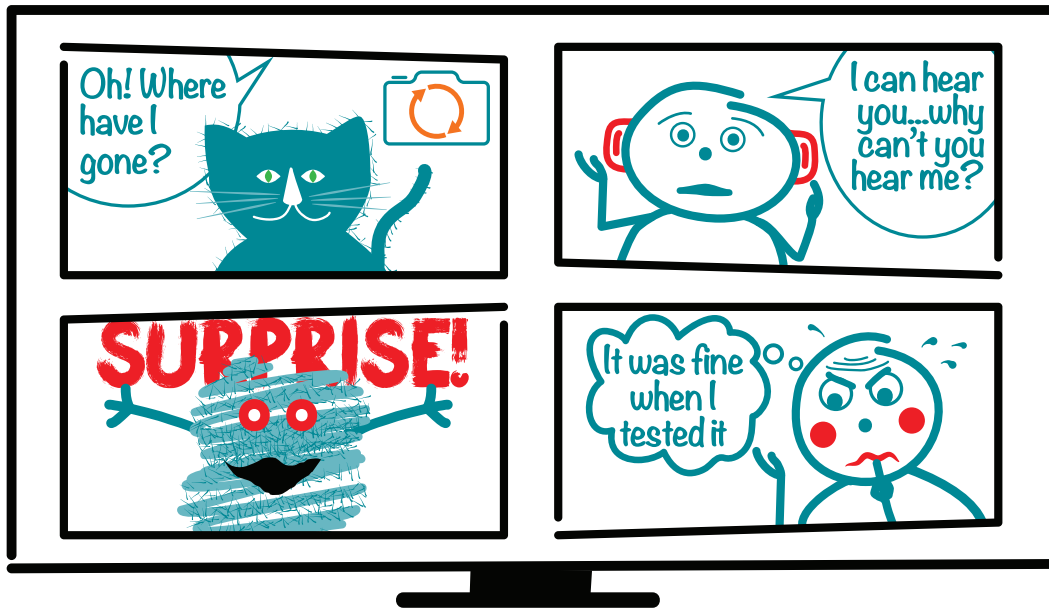
Tether to hotspot on your phone.

Get a dongle.

Agree on work-arounds or follow-ups in *How we Zoom / Teams / Hangout / Webex* etc. Working out this agreement may take time and it is useful to engage an external facilitator to guide the process.

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

#7 The Gremlins Have Struck



PROBLEM

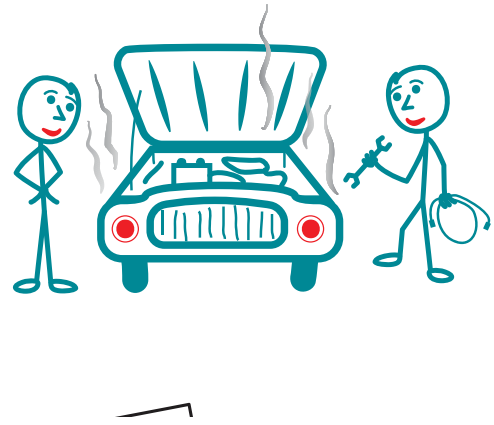
Technology failures! Front camera or rear?

'I can hear you. Why can't you hear me?'

'Why won't my headphones work?'

'It was fine when I tested it!'

*'What the *&^%!?'¹³*



FIX

Expect the unexpected.

Test. Test. Test.

With a colleague, a friend or family.

Test on your different devices.

Test again in the pre-meeting chat.

Distribute a simple list of *Dos and Don'ts* for your platform before you get together. Repeat the most important ones as part of meeting housekeeping. Use the list of virtual meeting tips at the end of the book.

Agree work-arounds or follow-ups in *How we Zoom / Teams / Hang out / Webex etc.*

Who will you contact for help?

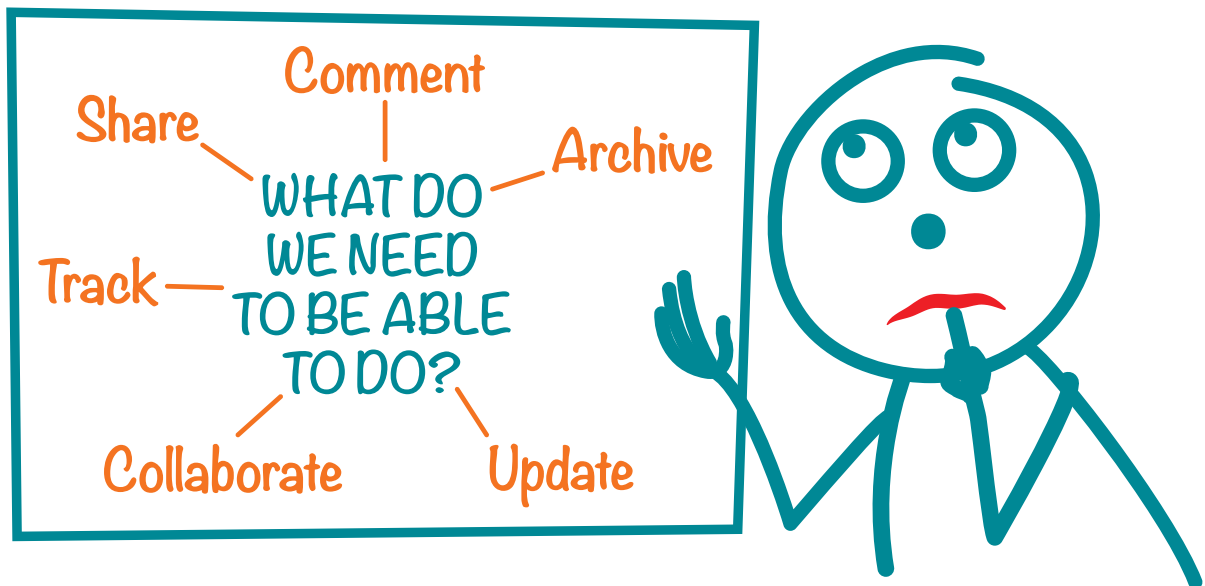
Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

#8 The Platform Won't Behave



PROBLEM

No application does everything that we expect. But in our rush to find the answer, we often choose the platform and then try to fit it to our purpose.



FIX

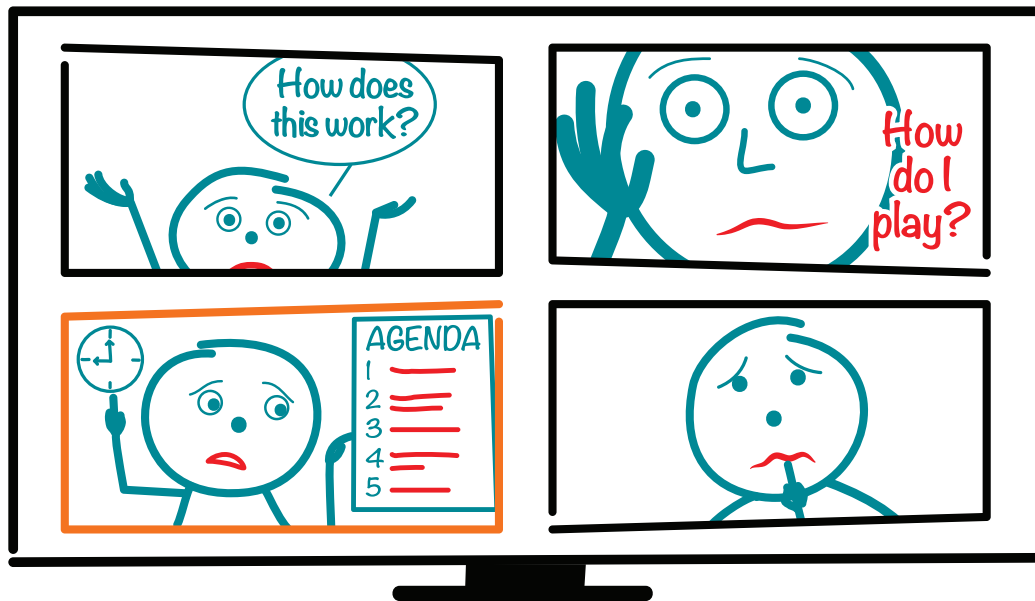
Take time to work out what is required, then find the application or platform to match.

Do you need to: comment, connect, communicate, share, track, collaborate, update, archive?

What platform or app does this best, for *your* group, team or project?

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

#9 How Does All This Work, Again?

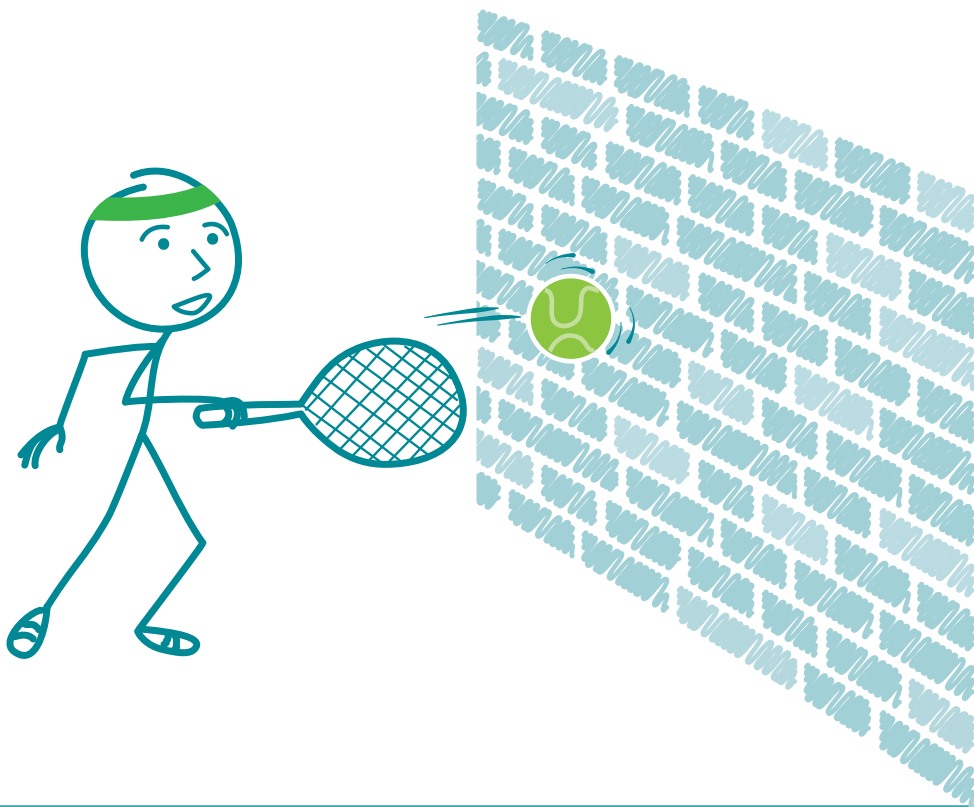


PROBLEM

There's always one, isn't there? Someone who just assumes it will all work when they turn up.

Precious minutes are lost while others try to help the hapless participant, who probably cannot even hear or see them!

The convenor looks at their agenda with despair.



FIX

Practice makes better. Practice. Practice. Practice.

Agree as a group in *How we Zoom / Teams / Hangout / Webex etc* that testing audio and video is part of your meeting preparation.

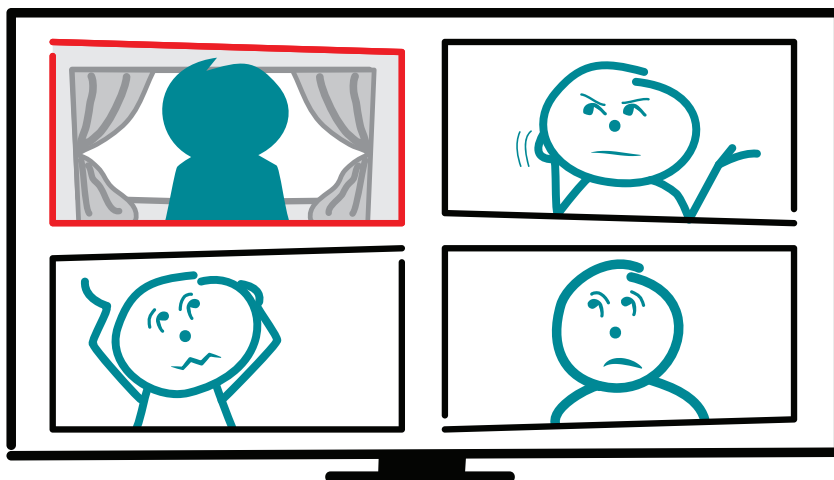
Distribute a simple list of platform *Dos and Don'ts* before you get together. Repeat the most important ones as part of meeting housekeeping. Use the list of virtual meeting tips at the end of the book.

Test. Test. Test your audio and video before *every meeting*.

Draw instructions, questions and hold up to the screen.

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

#10 Talking to a Shadow



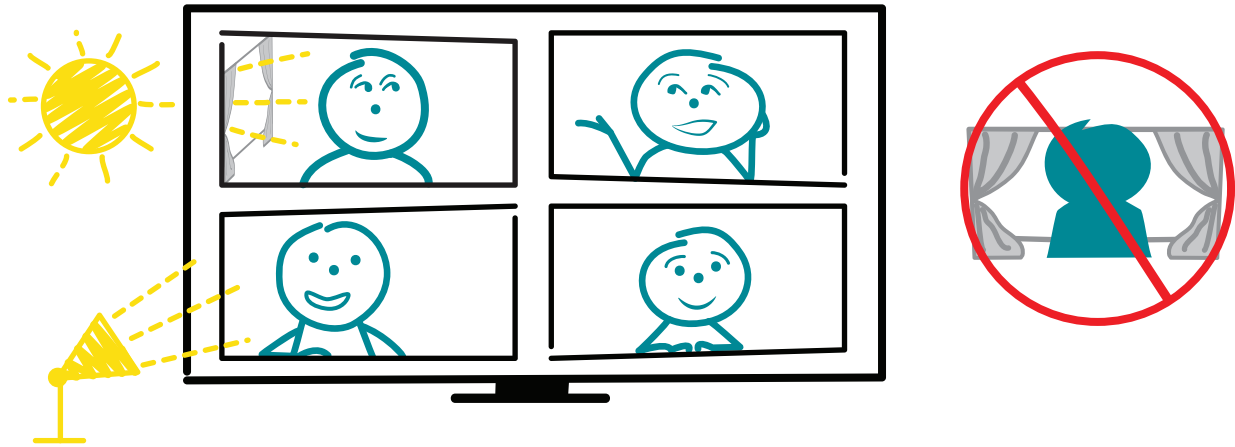
Talking to a Shadow

PROBLEM

Screen time is hard enough, so don't add a layer of mystery by turning up as a silhouette.

Video is not yet good enough on any platform to read the nuances in people's faces the way we do in person. It's even harder if we lurk in the shadows.

'People who are backlit - we can't really see their faces. Fix your lighting!'¹⁴



FIX

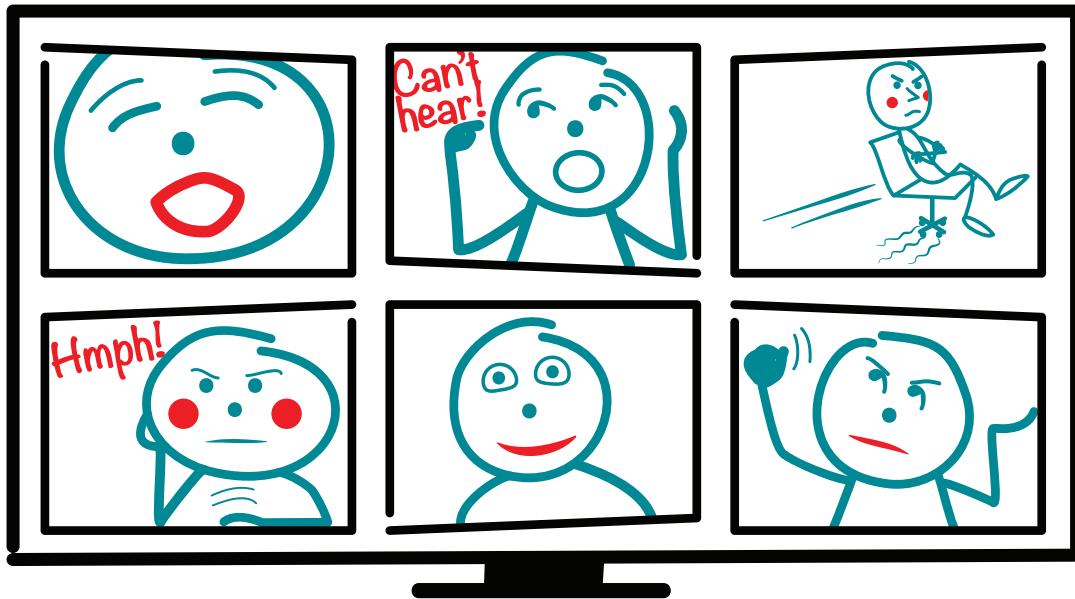
To be seen clearly, have good lighting behind the camera or to the side - not behind you.

Natural light is best in front of you but not coming from the side or right into your eyes so you're squinting.

If that's not an option or it's dark outside, grab a few desk or table lamps to shine up at the ceiling or onto white walls. Work with what is available around you.

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

#11 The Sound Is Faulty

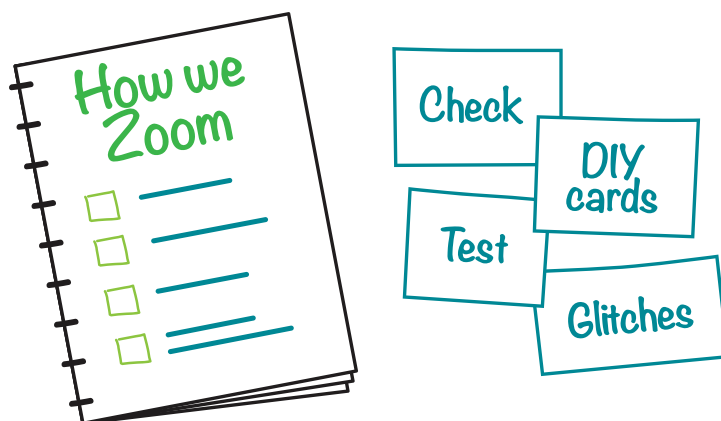
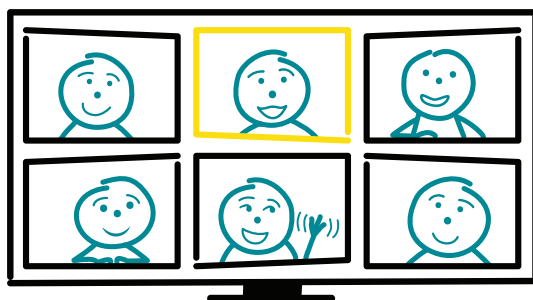


PROBLEM

If we can't hear one person, the whole meeting can disintegrate. The person with the faulty audio is embarrassed and goes quiet in a bit of a huff *'I've never had this issue before!'*

Others are frustrated with repeated technical issues and withdraw.

Meanwhile, others mouth instructions at the offender in a patronising manner.



FIX

Agree as a group in *How we Zoom / Teams / Hangout / Webex etc* that testing audio and video is part of the meeting preparation.

Test. Test. Test your audio and video *before every meeting*.

Distribute a simple list of *Dos and Don'ts* before you get together. Repeat the most important ones as part of meeting housekeeping.

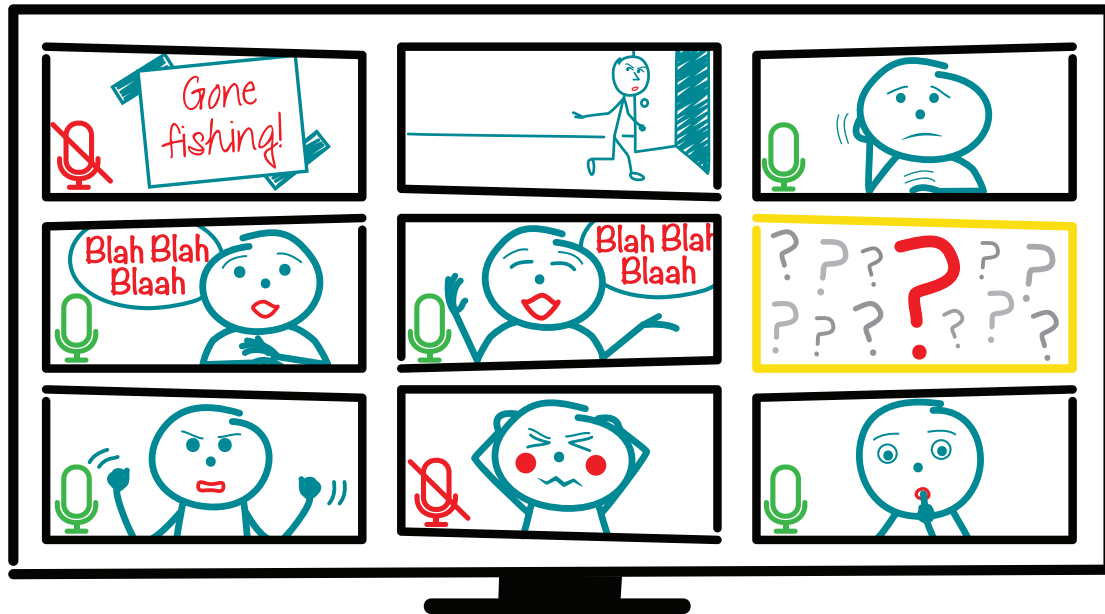
Draw instructions, questions and hold up to the screen.

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

Communication

It's not just the words we use, it's when we talk to each other, what we say and how we say it, and who talks when, about what. Communication issues often stem from the facilitative skills of the chair - if there is one.

#12 Who Is Chairing This Meeting?

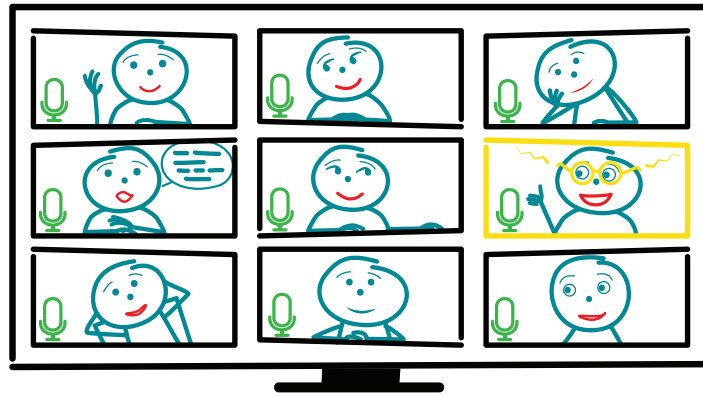


PROBLEM

Who speaks when? How is the group kept to purpose and time? What actions are agreed? Who will do them and follow up?

What if there is disagreement and the group gets stuck?

*'There's a lack of structure if someone is not taking the reins. Meetings definitely need a chairperson or convener.'*¹⁵



FIX

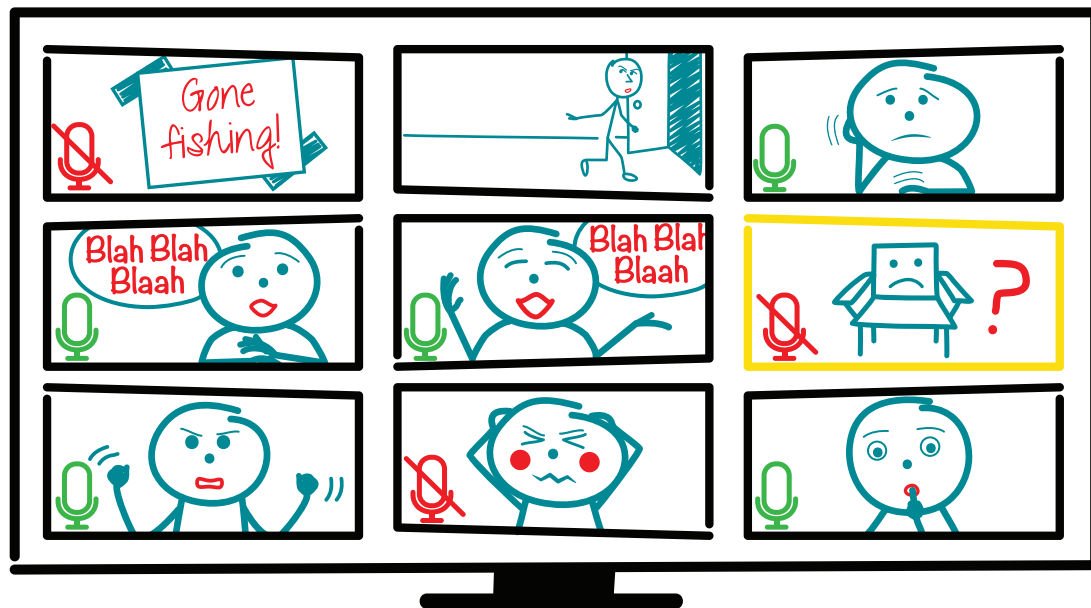
Meetings with three or more people need someone to direct traffic.

If there is no chair, appoint one.

Every participant can print a picture of a chair and hold it up to the screen when it's their turn to chair a meeting. This fix may push you a little out of your comfort zone. It works best when accompanied by a smile. Give it a go!

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

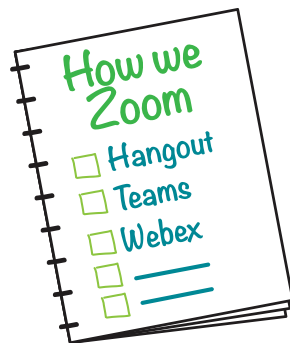
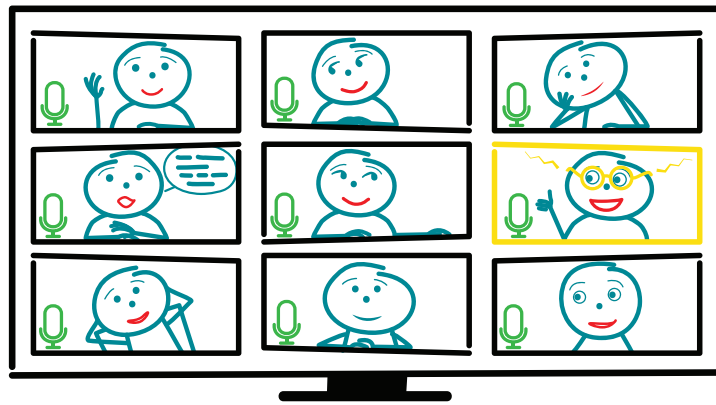
#13 The Chair Doesn't, or Can't, Facilitate



PROBLEM

Worse than a meeting with no Chair, is a meeting with one who doesn't, or can't, do their job.

*'With online meetings, especially with larger groups, some people monopolise the time. Unless the meeting chair or facilitator is skilled at ensuring everyone gets a say, it turns into a bandwagon for a few who love to perform for a crowd!'*¹⁶



FIX

If your group meets regularly, agree on the role of the Chair in *How we Zoom / Teams / Hangout / Webex etc.*

Distribute a simple list of platform *Dos and Don'ts* before you get together. Repeat the most important ones as part of meeting housekeeping. Use the list of virtual meeting tips at the end of the book.

What are the main problems that your group experiences with online meetings and workshops? Together, come up with signs or pictures that represent that problem, such as: interrupt, interject, a kid jumping up and down. Perhaps some of the ones in this book. Then everyone draws up their own cards, using the same symbols. Anyone can then hold a card up to the screen to keep the group on track. This fix may push you a little out of your comfort zone, but it really does work - give it a go!

Engage an external facilitator. They can coach the chair, attend a meeting, and make suggestions for improvements or facilitate the sessions.

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

#14 Everyone Talks Over Each Other



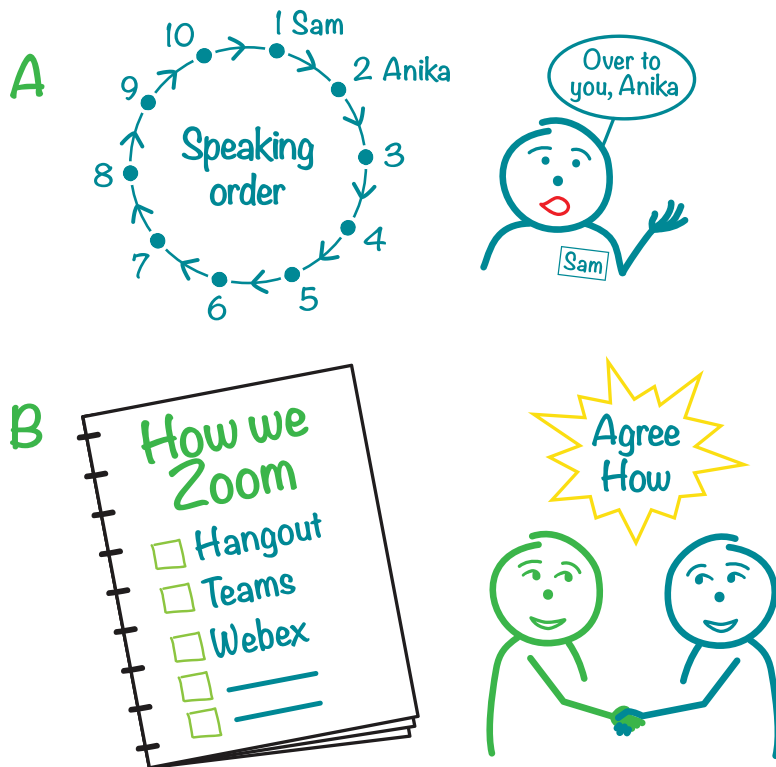
PROBLEM

'So, what do you think?' often kicks off a confused chorus of distorted responses as people speak over each other.

'I thi-...oh, you go...well, sorry you go...no, that's ok, you...well...'

It's like a footy match. There's a pause as the ball goes out of play and then it starts all over again with the next invitation to comment or speak.

*'People tend to talk over each other in online meetings because they don't have the same visual cues as to who is speaking next. Once there are more than three people, it starts to be an issue.'*¹⁷



FIX

If more than two people are meeting online, you need someone to facilitate, or at least direct traffic.

If you meet regularly as a group, agree how do this.

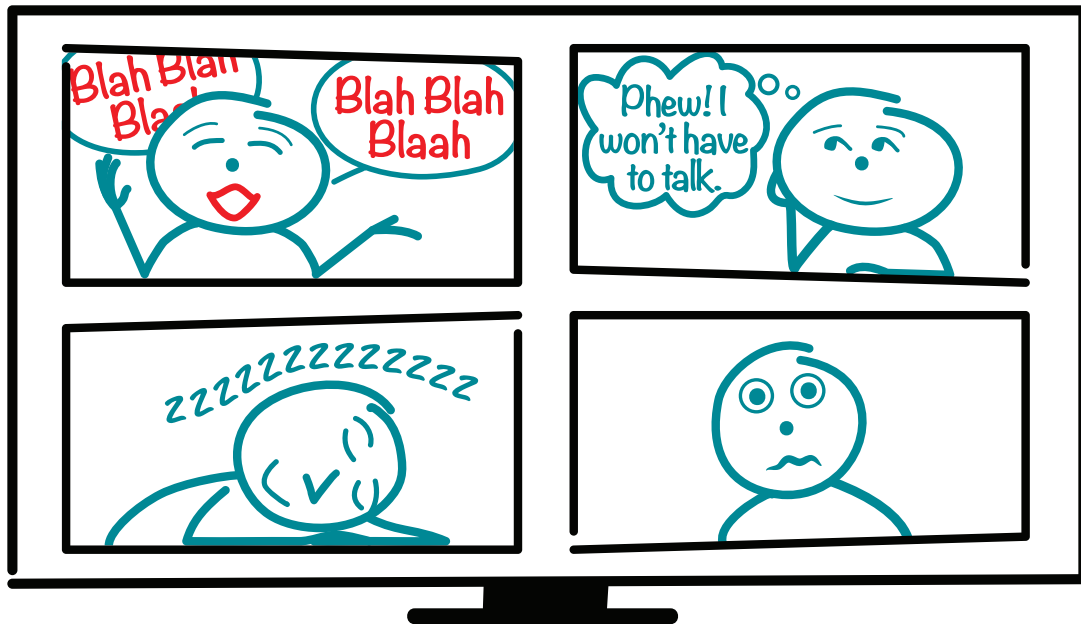
Set up a speaking order at each meeting. Write a list or fill in the names on a virtual table diagram for each meeting.¹⁸ Include this in your housekeeping protocols at the start of your session.

People can relax, knowing that their turn to speak will come. If you have nothing to add, just pass. Hand over to the person next in the speaking order.

Part of your agreement could be to limit the time that everyone can speak.

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

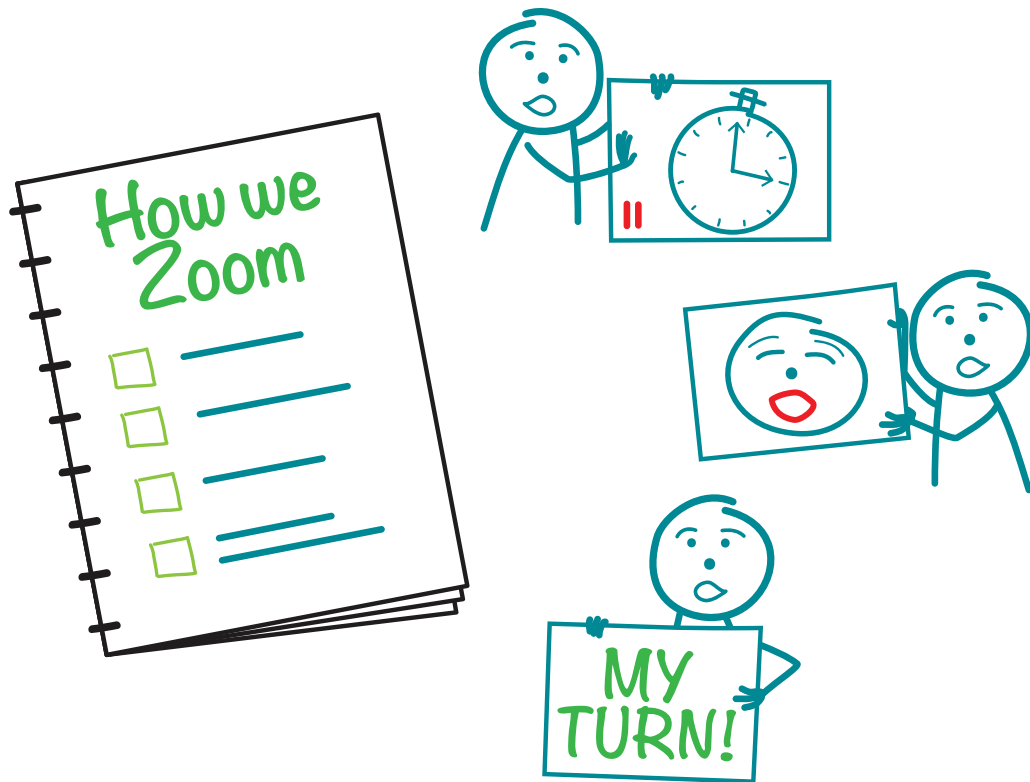
#15 People Talk for Too Long



PROBLEM

People going on and on is boring and leads to people disengaging.

It can be hard to get a sense of how long you have been talking without visual cues from your colleagues.



FIX

This is where those DIY cards come in handy.

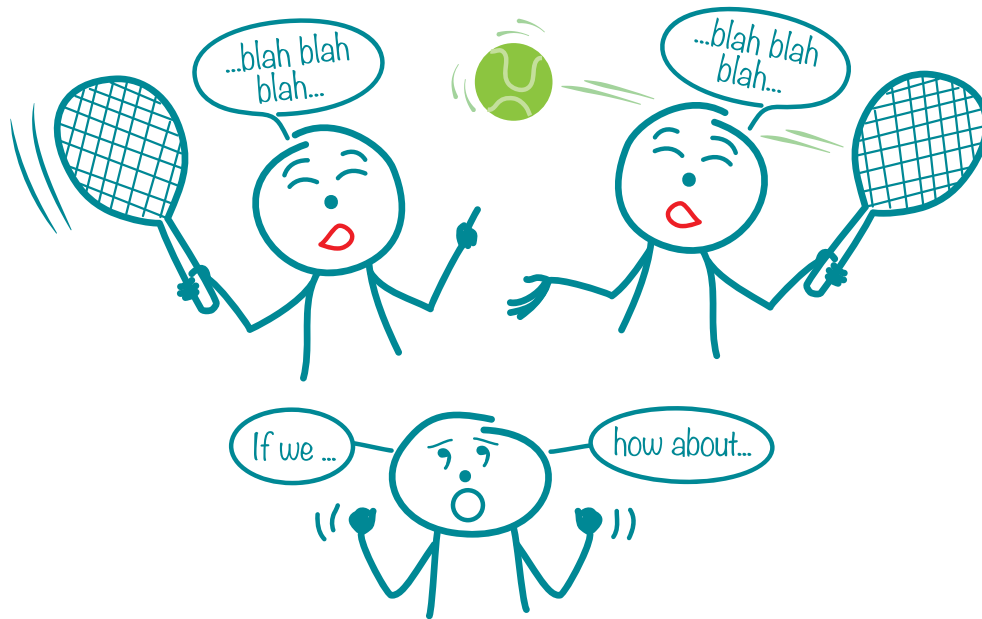
Agree some symbols or pictures and make your own cards to hold up to the screen. For example, *shut up*, *yawn*, *looking at the clock*, or *my turn!* This fix may push you a little out of your comfort zone. What you come up with depends on how well you know each other.

Step up and prepare your thinking before the meeting (see Fix #19). As a group, agree the critical questions everyone needs to consider prior to the meeting. Such as:

- What is the most important thing about this topic that we need to discuss / agree on / resolve?
- What do you think about x, y, z?
- What's your take on?
- What are the pros and cons of?
- Where do you sit?

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

#16 We Can't Get a Word In

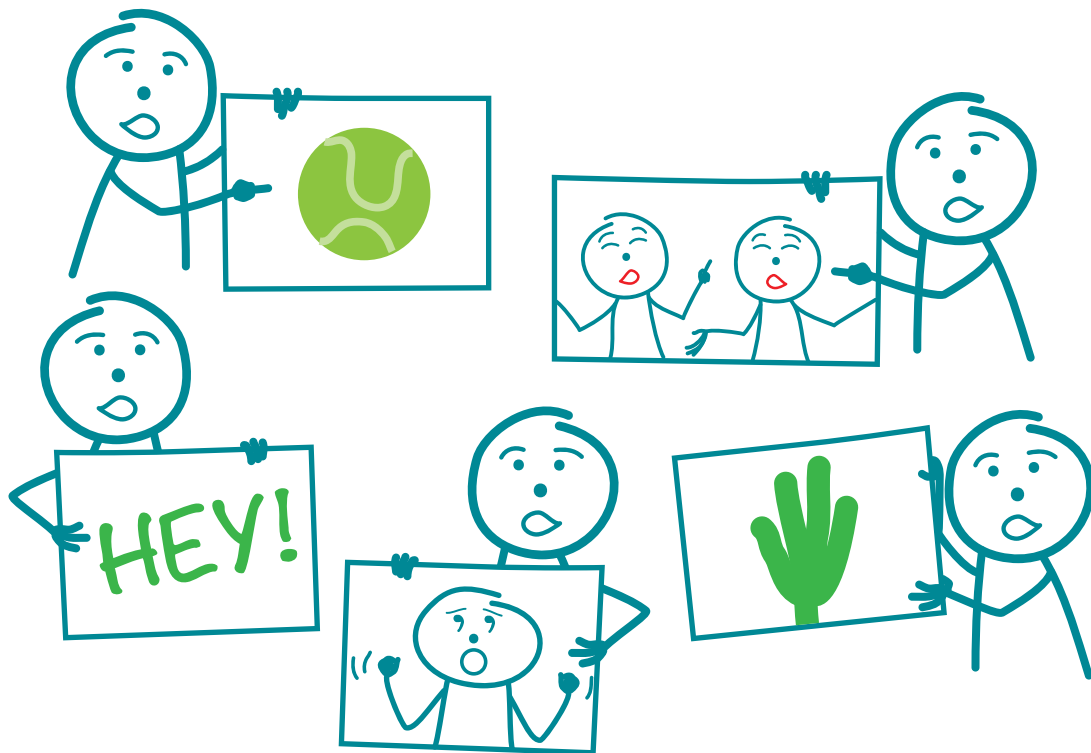


PROBLEM

Ever feel like you are watching two people play tennis in online meetings?

They do all the talking, have a debate or exchange news while we all watch on a little helplessly. It is impossible to get a word in.

The two speakers get into a rhythm that has no breaks.



FIX

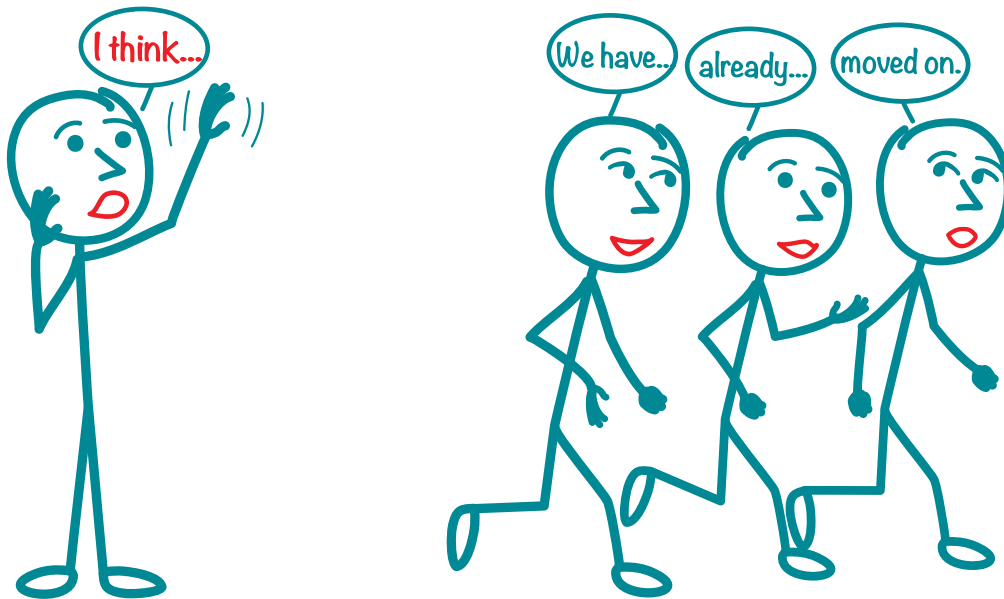
If your group meets regularly, take the time to agree on *How we Zoom / Teams / Hangout / Webex etc.*

Draw up your own set of DIY symbols and signs for these problems such as: interrupt, interject, a kid jumping up and down (see Fix #13). Anyone can then hold a card up to the screen to keep the group on track. This fix may push you a little out of your comfort zone, but it really does work - give it a go!

Agree movements and body language. For example, leaning in, with your face to camera, or holding up your hand could mean: *'I have something to add.'* Leaning back, *'I don't have anything to add right now.'*

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

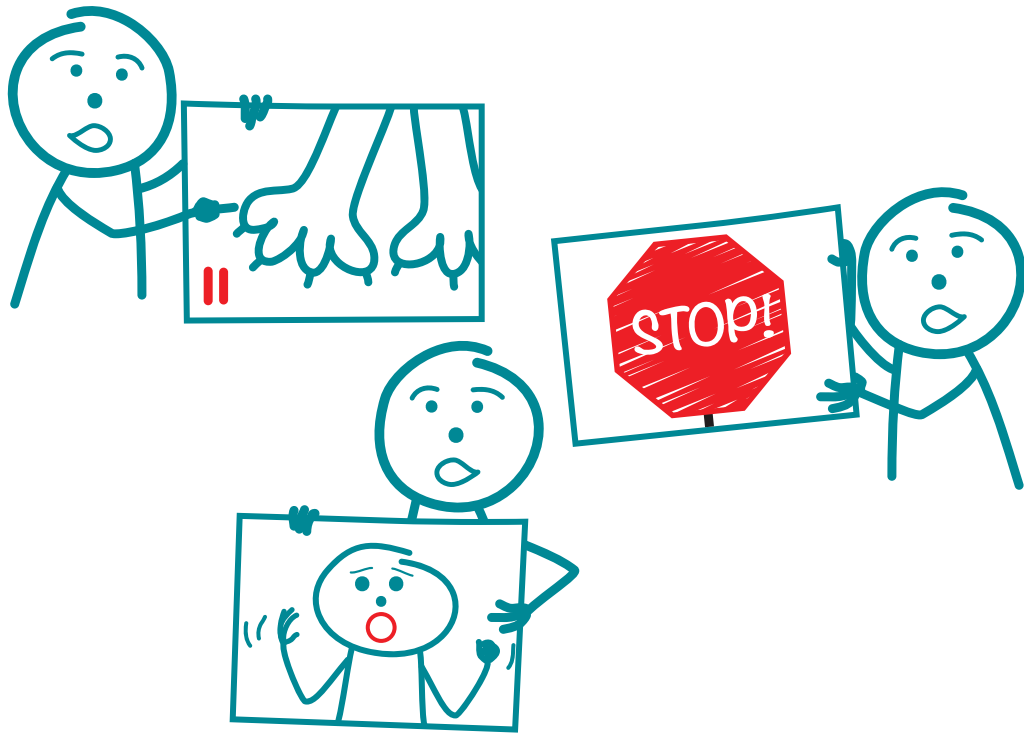
#17 We Missed the Boat



PROBLEM

By the time you get to make your point, the conversation has moved on.

You feel embarrassed and are reluctant to try again. Perhaps you end up not contributing at all.



FIX

If more than two people are meeting online, you need someone to facilitate, or at least direct traffic.

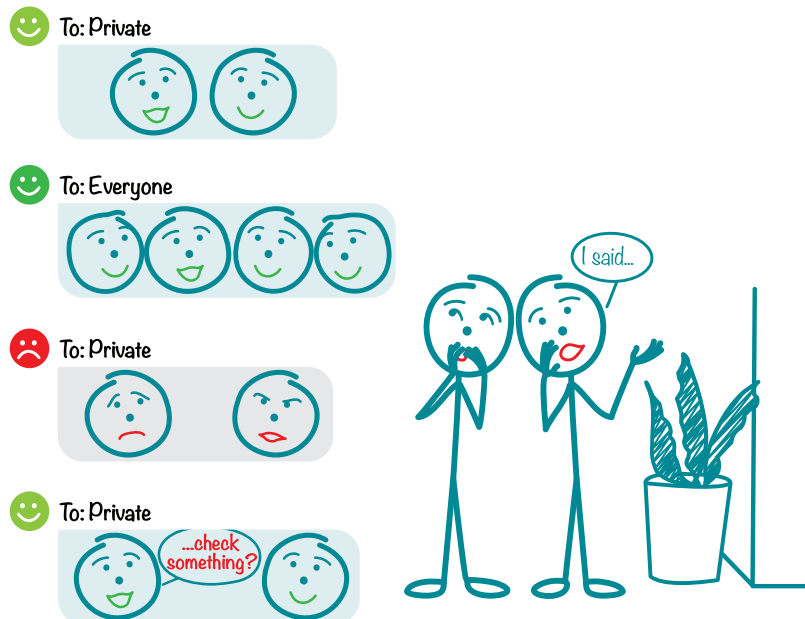
If you meet regularly as a group, agree *How you will Zoom / Teams / Hang out / Webex etc.*

Set up a speaking order. Set a limit on the time people can speak for. Pause for three seconds after every speaker.

Agree DIY cards or signals: stop, pause, hand up. Anyone can hold a card up to the screen to keep the group on track. This fix may push you a little out of your comfort zone, but it really does work - give it a go!

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

#18 Using the Chat Box

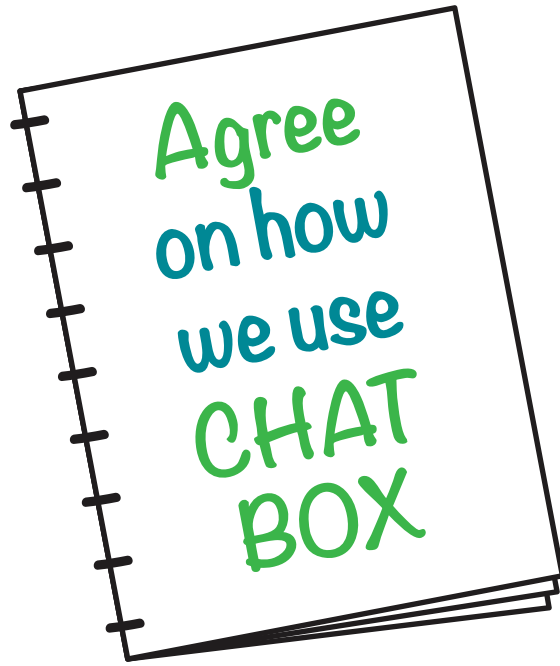


PROBLEM

The ability to talk to anyone at any time in most online applications is embraced by most. It's empowering, engaging, informative and fun.

*'Usually, if you were texting or emailing each other during a meeting that would just be rude. The chat function is different - everyone can see your comments...and it seems to add another layer to the discussion.'*¹⁹

Some complain about chat conversations being distracting. If set to private there is also the potential for corridor conversations where the real decisions are made. Inappropriate or offensive comments are also possible in private chats.



FIX

This is another one to cover if your group meets regularly. Take the time to agree how you will use the chat function in your *How we Zoom / Teams / Hangout / Webex etc.*

Does your group want open chat? Do you expect chat to be set to *everyone* as a default? Do you want the chats to focus only on the topic of the meeting? Are you comfortable with private chats? Whatever you decide, the point is to decide and agree.

Include agreements about the Chat box in any opening housekeeping protocols.

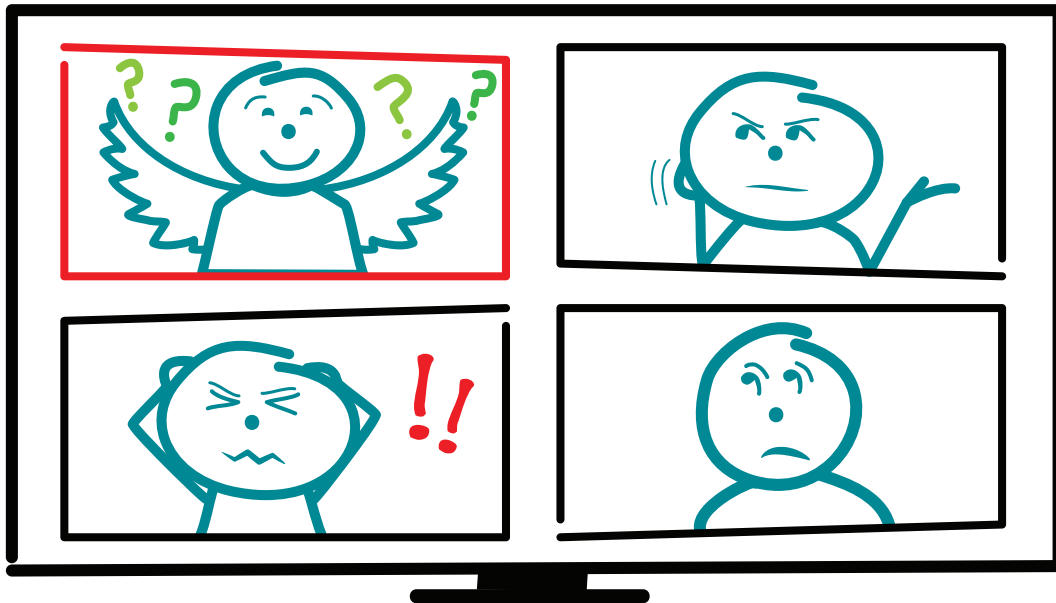
Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

Etiquette

Etiquette is about our behaviour and comes down to respect for ourselves and others.

We are still working out the unwritten rules. If you don't know, ask, or work out how your group works together online - *together*. Just because you worked well together face-to-face doesn't mean you will online. It makes sense to revisit agreements to see if they suit the virtual working world.

#19 People Arrive Unprepared

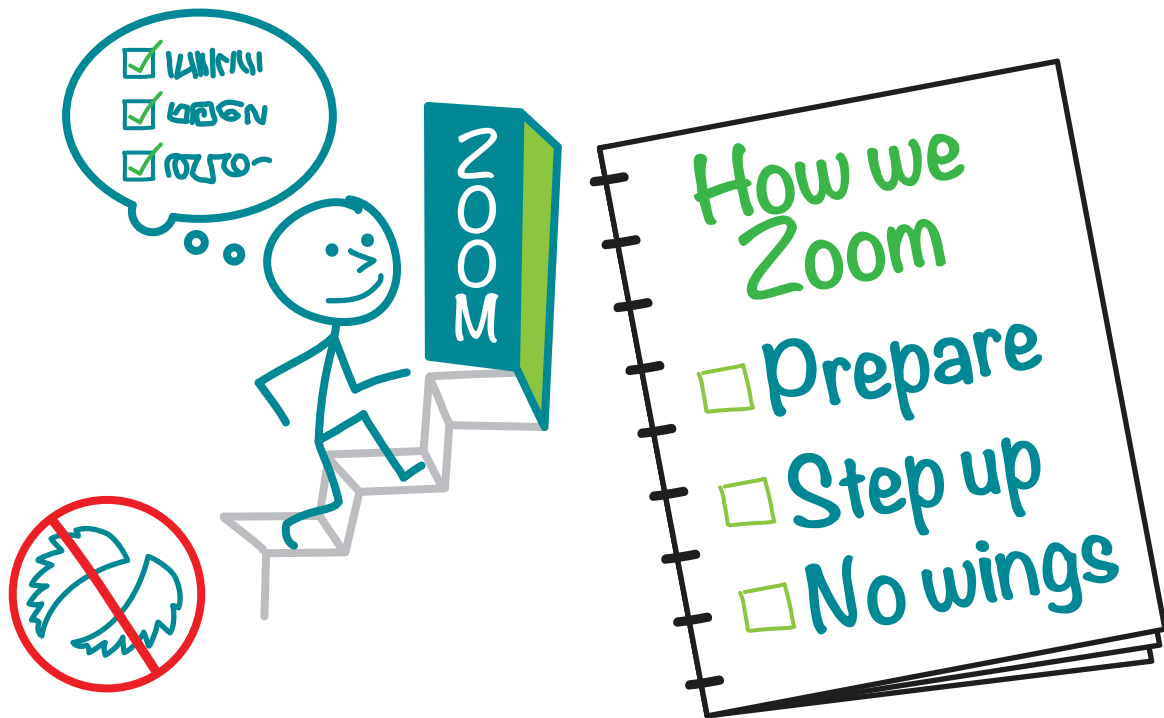


PROBLEM

Precious screen time is wasted bringing people up to speed on the content distributed before the meeting.

They haven't read the content, let alone thought about it. They try to wing it, which is frustrating for other participants who have done their homework.

Our frustration is amplified online because there is less time to digest content. As Viv Groskop wrote in the first half of the Covid lockdown *'If a real-life meeting is unbearable at an hour and a half, then a Zoom meeting is completely intolerable.'*²⁰



FIX

Online requires more pre-work and stepping up. Turn up prepared.

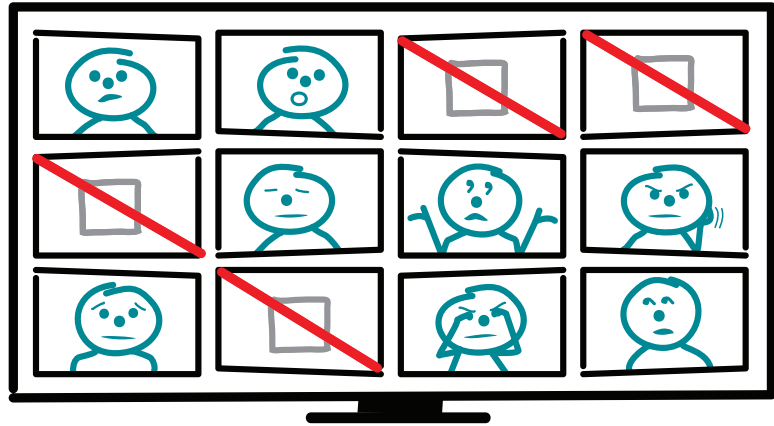
If your team or group meets regularly, spend time at the start agreeing expectations and how you are going to work together and document this as: *How we Zoom / Teams / Hangout / Skype / Webex etc.*

Identify what is best done ahead of time (preparation), during the meeting and afterwards (homework).

No wings in sight.

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

#20 Turning Up Late

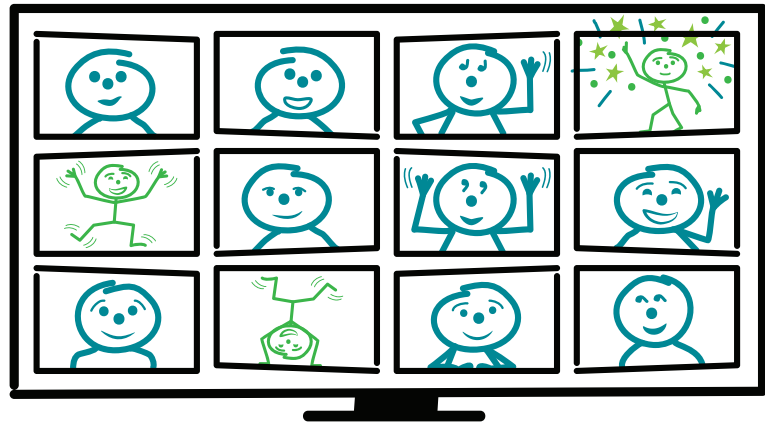
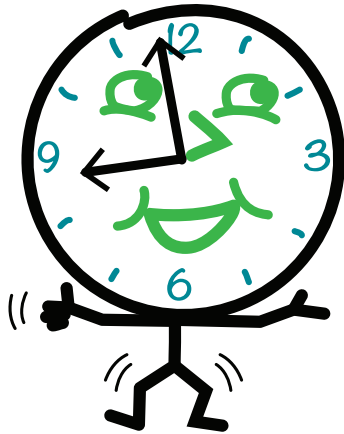


PROBLEM

'Sorry I'm late' (again) starts to wear thin when people are reliably unpunctual. It delays or disrupts the discussion. We have to go over things again for the latecomer, wasting everyone's time. The inconvenience is amplified online if the latecomer's audio and video aren't working properly.

Are you early, late or on time? If the meeting is at 1pm, what time do you log on?

- 12.45pm: 'I want to test my tech and have a chat to xxxxx.'
- 12.55pm: 'I'd like to see who's there.'
- 1pm: 'On the dot. Oh, my camera's not working.'
- 1.05pm: 'People will still be sorting out their tech.'
- 1.12pm: 'The traffic was terrible.'(!)



FIX

Make it valuable to be early²¹. If you're meeting regularly as a team or group, work out the best incentive (the worm) to reward the early bird in your team or group.

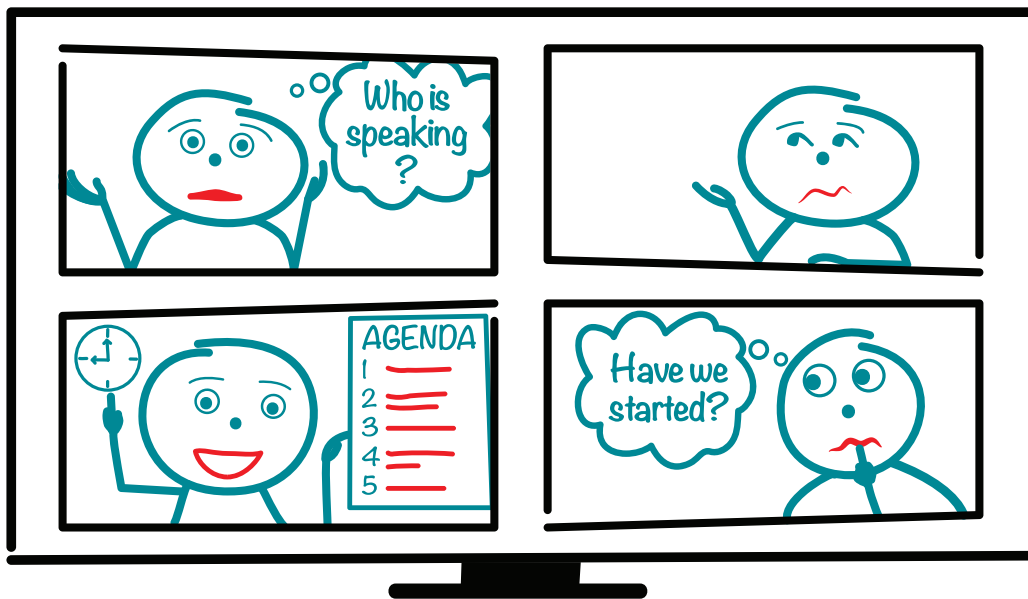
Open the room early. Create an atmosphere where people appreciate welcoming the wait²² before the meeting starts.

Accept that someone will always be late.

- Set the meeting time at 9.45am, so that you get started at 10am.
- Factor late arrivals into your planning. A 45-minute meeting will, in reality, have about 30 minutes to achieve its purpose and get stuff done.

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

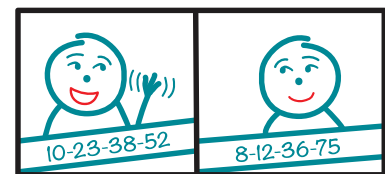
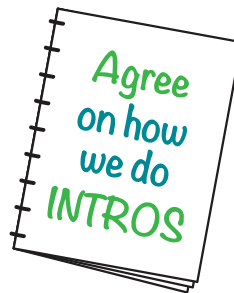
#21 There Are No Introductions



PROBLEM

Efficiency rules, often at the expense of common courtesy.

Maybe we are so keen to get off the screens that we forget to take a few minutes to introduce ourselves to people on the other screens.



FIX

We talked about this earlier. Online meetings require more pre-work than face-to-face meetings.

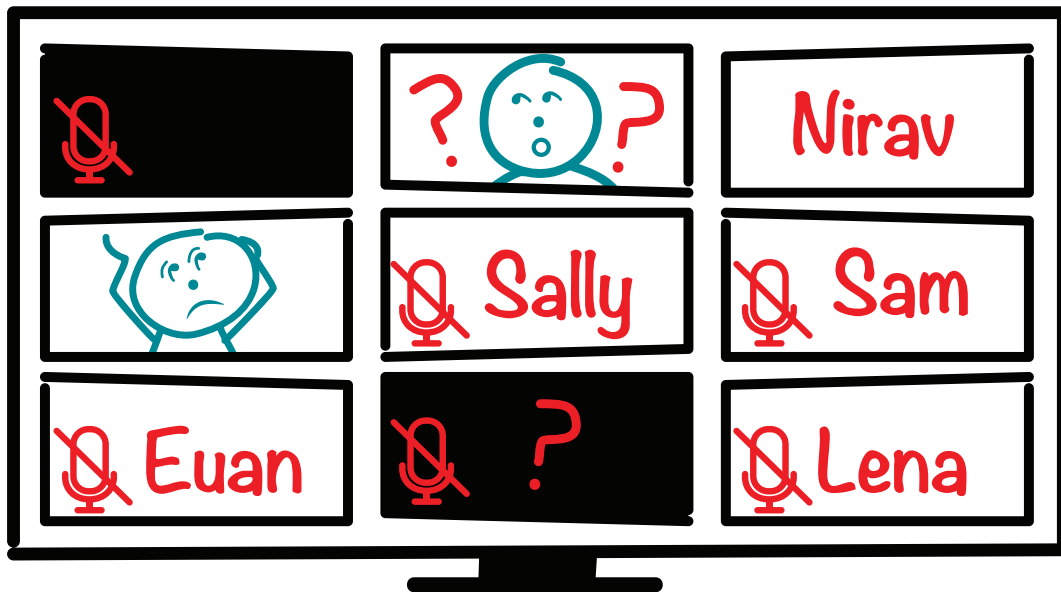
Consider introductions and check-ins when you're planning what can be done to prepare for a meeting.

Depending on the purpose, participants can post a quick introductory video about themselves; complete an *About me* template or tell people what they're looking forward to discussing at the meeting. Upload them into the team or project communication platform. Set up a telephone tree, so people can have a quick chat with another participant over the phone.

There are countless activities to quickly introduce people to each other without the tedious 'Let's go around the room' (groan!). Here's one. Write your name on a card and four or five numbers that mean something to you. In a small group, or pairs in breakout rooms, have a guess at what the numbers mean for each other.²³

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

#22 Who Are the Mystery Participants?



PROBLEM

One survey respondent had a problem with large meetings on Skype where someone's video is off, and they don't have a profile photo.

*'They hide mysteriously down on the bottom row until they finally speak and move up onto the top bar.'*²⁴



no video?
can't come



FIX

Make it a default expectation that video is always on, and agree exceptions such as low bandwidth, poor internet connection or unavoidable visual distractions in the background.

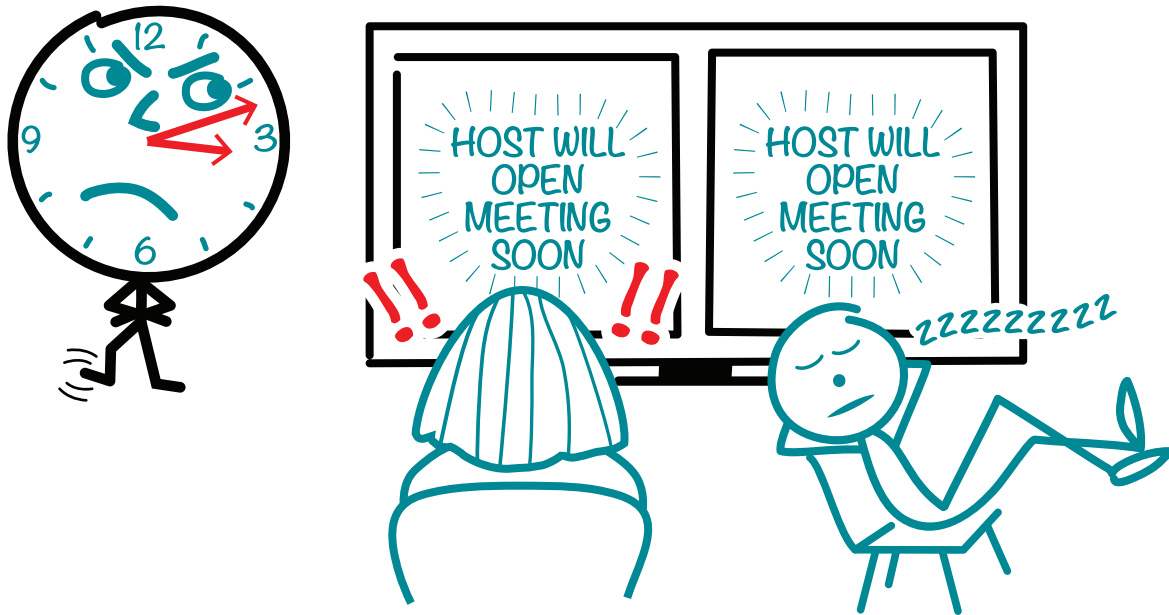
Create a set of symbols for these exceptions and get everyone to draw their own on cards to hold up to the screen if needed. This fix may push you a little out of your comfort zone.

If engagement and participation are not important to the effectiveness of your group, and you're meeting on a regular basis, specify expectations that *video on* is a non-negotiable for online meetings.

This was so important for one client that she included *video on* as a requirement in the terms of reference for a new community governance group.

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

#23 Why Are We Waiting?

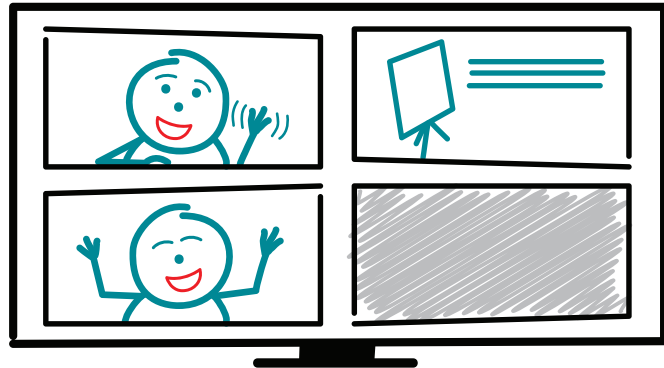


PROBLEM

Late arriving participants is a common complaint.

It is much worse if the host keeps people waiting.

Lateness impacts individual satisfaction with a meeting, as well as the whole group.



FIX

Punctuality. Whatever it takes, show up on time. Arrive early.²⁵

The host can open the room 15 minutes early so participants can join when they log in. The host can be off screen as people arrive, keeping an ear out for any technical hiccups.

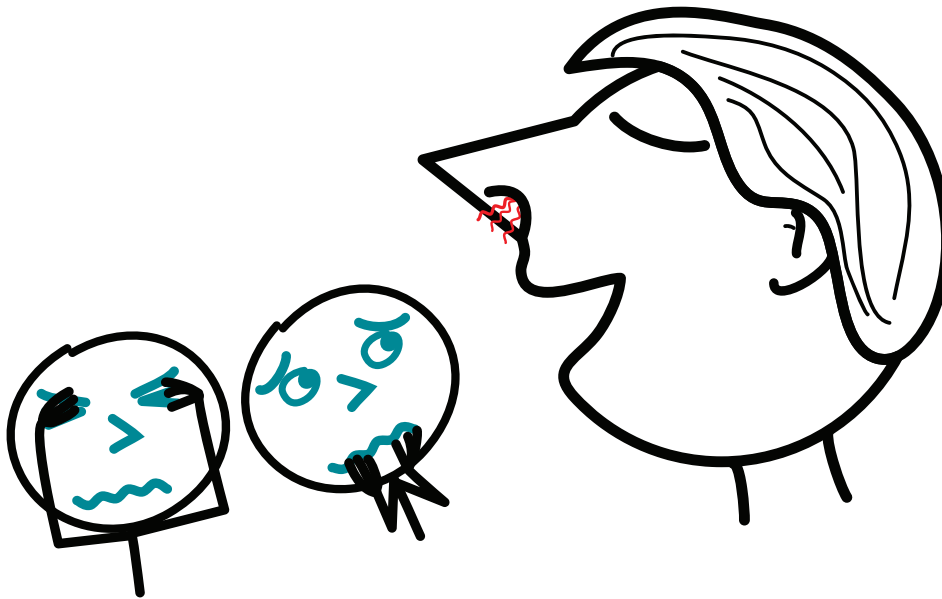
Enable settings so participants can join before the host. Use a password if you wish.

It's empowering and facilitates informal connections between people as they chat before the host arrives.

'I'm really enjoying the conversations between people before the meeting starts. People are more relaxed...showing where they live, their pets...I've had really warm chats with people in these fleeting moments!'²⁶

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

#24 Looking up People's Nostrils

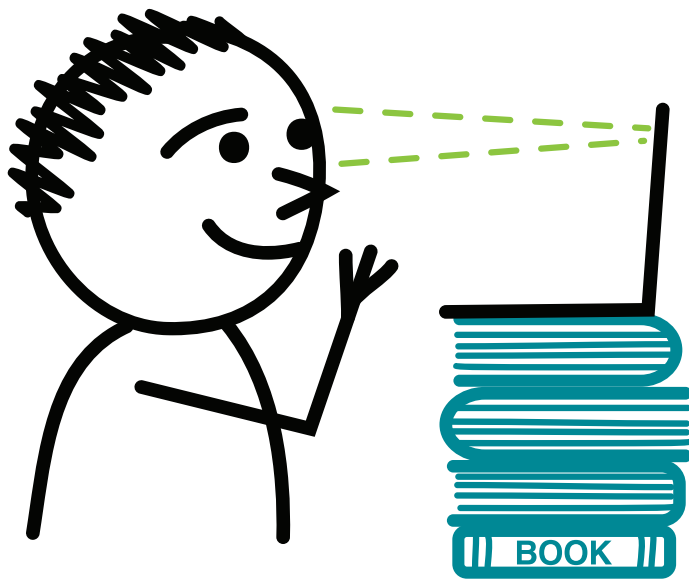


PROBLEM

Looking at the tops of people's heads, at their chins or even half a face.

Yes, it's more common than we think and still needs to be said. It happened in early March and still happens now, despite a few months of getting used to things.

It is so easily avoided.



Camera at
level

A green eye icon with eyelashes, positioned between the words 'Camera at' and 'level'.

FIX

Make sure that the camera you are using - on the computer or a webcam - is at your eye level. This will change if you're sitting or standing. Check it before the meeting.

Put a few books under your computer to raise it.

Test this every time.

Do you have any other fixes that have worked well? Sketch or jot them down, and share with your team, group or collaboration.

Stay Curious

Did you notice that there were more fixes than problems? That is encouraging.

How many did you come up with? I'd love to know, so send me an email!

There are certainly more problems and issues with online meetings than I've captured here. And it is likely more will evolve as new technical platforms are developed. If we want our meetings to hum, we need to keep talking to each other, and when a new problem arises, name it and fix it. An oil leak can become a major mechanical problem if it is ignored.

Call for help from an independent facilitator if needed. This depends on how well the group knows and trusts each other, and their purpose for meeting.

As one of the survey respondents said '*...the video is not good enough to read the micro-expressions around eyes and mouths that are so important in really understanding the person we interact with*'²⁷. When it is (and it will be) I think many of our issues with online meetings and workshops will disappear.

In the meantime, there is much within our control as I hope these light-hearted cartoons show. Staying curious about why something is not working will keep us focused on solutions.

This sign that I pass every other day, is a well-placed reminder to remain eager to know and learn something new. On those days when it seems the gremlins are taking over every piece of technology we own, it is challenging to remain curious about unfamiliar technology.

I hope that this gallery of virtual mistakes and ways to fix them will help you stay curious.



Bingo Templates

Print this template to use for team and personal bingo.

<p>1</p>	<p>2</p>	<p>3</p>	<p>4</p>
<p>5</p>	<p>6</p>	<p>7</p>	<p>8</p>
<p>9</p>	<p>10</p>	<p>11</p>	<p>12</p>
<p>13</p>	<p>14</p>	<p>15</p>	<p>16</p>
<p>17</p>	<p>18</p>	<p>19</p>	<p>20</p>
<p>21</p>	<p>22</p>	<p>23</p>	<p>24</p>

Virtual Meeting Tips²⁸

This is a list of tips I distribute to groups who have not worked together before. Add your own to suit your preferred online platform and the needs of your group.

Do a test call before the meeting or workshop

A meeting ID will work even before your meeting takes place, use it to check if your image is shown unbroken back to you. Please feel free to contact (insert name) help you to get it all in order.

Be on time

Log in from (15 minutes before start time). (host) will open the meeting room at (xxx) and will be available to help if you need it. We will start promptly at (xxx) and finish by (xxx). Please do not leave it to the last moment to log in.

Log in on a computer, with video and audio on

A computer is best. Tablets and phones are next best, in that order. Log on with a camera, and preferably a headset for audio. We'll chat, interact, and collaborate. You won't be able to just sit back and listen.

Internet connection

Turn off all non-essential programs and apps on your computer to enable our discussion to happen. This will give less potential for technical glitches or unplanned pings or chimes.

Wear a headset or headphones to prevent echo

An attached microphone stops background noise (like your computer's fan, hard disk or keyboard tapping). The little white ones that look like string are fine if you don't have a headset. Bluetooth sets give poorer quality audio.

Set up in a quiet area or keep on mute

Background noise causes fatigue, and more than one person with background noise can easily stop everyone else from hearing anything.

Good to know

- Use Gallery View so that you can see others on the call.
- Use Speaker View if one person is doing all the talking (unlikely!).
- To be seen clearly, have good lighting behind the camera or to the side, not behind you.
- Set up your screen so that your computer camera is at eye level.
- If you're muted in Zoom and want to speak, keep pressing the spacebar. This will temporarily unmute you.
- Touching or playing with your microphone will flood the call with noise.
- It can be very distracting to keep seeing yourself, so close your self-view. Click anywhere on your video window (the one showing yourself), and then click on the three dots that appear in the upper right-hand corner. Select *Hide myself* from the menu that appears. To see yourself again, right-click any visible user's display to show the menu. Choose *Show myself*.

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- 26 Survey respondent
- 27 Survey respondent
- 28 Adapted from Helga Svenson. <https://www.helgasvendsen.com.au/>

Other Useful References

Julian Mather <https://www.julianmather.com/> for advice on audio, and a wealth of tips and advice for smart phone videos

About Jacinta Cubis

Jacinta Cubis is one of Melbourne's most energetic and creative facilitators. She is known for her skill in drawing out people's best ideas and then physically drawing their thinking through graphic facilitation.

For 20 years, she has facilitated collaborations, workshops, forums and conversations on diverse issues in the government, education and community sectors, with groups from 5 to 500.






Jacinta's superpower is her ability to capture ideas in cartoons that offer people an easy way to talk about the hard stuff. As a facilitator, Jacinta senses what a group needs at just the right time. She knows how to mine the gold in their thinking. She does this using practical tools to share ideas, have productive conversations and make people feel heard.

This book arose from her frustration at seeing the awkward and disheartening transitions many organisations have experienced in moving meetings online.

Get Humming is Jacinta's multi-layered program that makes virtual meetings more engaging and productive. Through a combination of coaching and facilitation, Jacinta works with your team, your stakeholders and your partners to improve their online meeting culture and practices. Contact her for program details.

Want more?

Jacinta would love to chat with you about:

-  Creative facilitation for your collaborations, workshops, forums and conversations
-  #Facilitography Walkshops
-  Facilitation Mentoring
-  Stakeholder engagement
-  Community engagement

Email Jacinta jacinta@jacintacubis.com or visit her website www.jacintacubis.com

Jacinta went to university to become a journalist, exited as a filmmaker and developed photographs in a Parisian basement. When not facilitating a workshop, you may find Jacinta on her yoga mat, in her art studio or on the tango dance floor.

Online meetings are here to stay. When the online environment works, it is wonderful. When it doesn't, it is tiring, frustrating, draining and humiliating.

Ineffective online experiences shut down, rather than enable, effective meetings, collaborations, stakeholder, and community engagement.

A few tell-tale signs will indicate your online meetings may be in trouble.

- ☹️ We are frustrated by others' unfamiliarity with meeting platforms.
- ☹️ We feel rushed with not enough time to explore discussion points.
- ☹️ We end meetings exhausted by poor communication and lack of progress.

Organisations may have tolerated people adjusting to new technology when it seemed temporary. But after allowing several months to adjust, the same problems and mistakes persist.

This book fixes that.

The pictures tell the story. You can see the problems and know exactly how to get your meetings working well. Spend more time on the purpose of your meetings and workshops, and less time whinging about what is not working. Imagine – people might even look forward to attending virtual meetings!

Jacinta Cubis is one of Melbourne's most energetic and creative facilitators. She understands exactly what groups need for effective and productive collaboration. With an extraordinary ability to read the room and capture what people are thinking, she brings great insight to the challenge of online meetings.



jacinta
Cubis