

As a professional meeting facilitator and panel moderator, I've often talked about the amount of money and time wasted in meetings – and the same thing holds true in the virtual world! What would make them worthwhile? Stay on task, stay on time, and share some structure and boundaries with your team so that your meetings are productive.

Kristin

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ZOOM MEETING GROUND RULES FOR GREAT TEAM DISCUSSION

At this point, you would think we are all comfortable with Zoom meetings (or the equivalent video-conferencing software). But that doesn't mean you should forget a powerful intervention strategy: Reinforcing group ground rules.

For Zoom Meetings, consider these ground rules to ensure a great group discussion:

- Find a quiet space to participate in the meeting.
- Enter the room a few minutes early to resolve any technical issues.
- Start on time. End on time.
- Take a break at least every hour.
- Do not multi-task (do other work) during the meeting.
- Mute your microphone when not talking.
- Position your camera close to the screen you're looking at.
- Keep your camera on whenever possible.
- Turn off your camera if doing something distracting.
- Balance airtime so all participate and no one dominates.
- Raise your hand/Speak up if you have something to say.
- Ask quieter members for their opinion.
- Use the chat box to record key ideas and action items.
- Be interested so the meeting can be interesting!



THE VERY BEST VIRTUAL PANEL DISCUSSION EVER!?

#BestPanelEver. It was, literally, one of the best virtual/hybrid panels I've seen all year. And I wasn't the only one who was thinking that – the chatbox blew up with all the accolades.

It was the last day of the National Speakers Association Winter Conference. 9amET/6amPT (who picked those hours? OMG, I felt so sorry for my West Coast peeps!). And what was on the program? An hour-long panel. The topic? "Concepts to Cash: How to Implement Your Best Ideas Immediately!"

Initially, the Chair of the NSA board, Barry Banther was supposed to moderate the panel of four illustrious members of the association. However, during the prep call, EmCees Jon Petz and Pam Leinmiller quickly ascertained that Barry, the font of much knowledge on the topic would best be served as a panelist. So a fourth panelist was born and Pam and Jon became the moderators!

And then the creative juices started to flow...Starting with the objective, they wanted to share different aspects of the speaking business – the pros and cons – and to provide meaningful, meaty takeaways for the audience. And yet, they were going to serve two different audiences (in-person and virtual) AND one of the panelists was going to be remote! They quickly realized, the traditional panel format wasn't going to work.

Jon said, "Why don't we create three sets in the corners of the room, so we can all see each other, and have the remote panelist on the large screen in the front of the room, so the panelists can all see each other with the in-person audience in the middle of this dynamic. We can create this energy vibe and call it a 'Battle!' where the panelists, in a playful way, go at each other."

Pam, who is a huge sports fan, added "Why don't we have some football flags or cards for penalties for talking too long, getting off topic, not getting to the cash! I'll get a whistle, some cards and a referee shirt!"



Next came the format: They agreed to have initial introductory remarks, giving each panelist 30 seconds. They identified several controversial questions to ask the panelists and covered the logistics.

They all met up again the day before the presentation and reviewed the process, emphasizing the need to bring the game on! So when the panel started, Pam described the setup with the panelists so the virtual audience could understand how the room was set. And then Jon noticed that Barry had put a sign up behind him saying “Roll-Tide!” – which is a reference to Alabama football. Panelist Mike Staver quipped, “Barry should just write the check to the ref like they do in Alabama.” Oh my! This is NOT going to be your traditional panel!

The moderators clarified the process and ground rules (opening statements, closing statements, audience participation/questions from live and virtual audience):

- Each panelist quickly introduced themselves in less than 15 seconds. Opening statements for 30 seconds each – “without being interrupted”
- First question directed to a panelist. Panelists chime in. Moderator moves to the next question.
- Closing statements

It was a pretty straightforward process, but the conversation was anything BUT straightforward! It was quick, full of ideas, fun, and entertaining.

A few days later, I asked Pam and Jon, “What made this panel so extraordinary?” They responded:

- **The Panelists Were Ready to Battle!** The first question was directed to Barry: “How do you set your fees for consulting?” Barry answers...and then Jon asks, “Who thinks that’s bull?” Whaaatttt? Panelist Anton Gunn and Mike Staver chime in and say, “No!” Mike gives his reasoning, and then Anton calls bull on Mike. Then panelist Alana Hill piles on and builds on something Anton said. Barry chimes in to comment on what the panelist said and made a reference back to the last play of the Alabama game – and Pam Blew the whistle on him! Way to go Pam! (who deftly moved on to the next question!”
- **The Moderator was Instigating Excitement.** Jon was running around seeding ideas to the panelists and telling them what was going to come next. For example, because Barry posted a “Roll-Tide” sign, Jon gathered up pieces of paper, markers, and tape so other panelists could create their own signs.



Pam noted, “It was really fun for the live audience to watch Jon run around...they could see the activity and wondering what the heck he was doing! They could also look on the big screen and see what the virtual audience was seeing too!”

- **The Questions were Fluid.** The questions were well-thought-out in that there were no right/wrong answers and the moderators knew what the panelists’ positions were – and they knew where the controversy was and where to direct the conversation. Jon said, “I think the key was knowing ahead of time when we ask this question, we have two pros and two cons and I know where they are coming from. We didn’t know what they were going to say, but wanted to make sure from a structure format standpoint, we had two sides of an issue.”
- **Included the Virtual Audience.** The moderators looked at the chatbox for follow-up questions from the virtual audience and raised those questions in the discussion.
- **Being Concise.** The panelists were professional speakers and knew how to prepare, keep their answers crisp and full of great takeaway value. Sadly, Pam didn’t have to use her cards for the panelist who talked too long, but she did use it to reign in the frivolity (which is a good thing!)
- **Trust the A/V Team.** The moderators gave complete trust to the A/V crew to run the audio and visually depict their shenanigans:
 - 1 moderator on-screen
 - 2 moderators on-screen
 - 1 panelist on-screen
 - 4 panelists on-screen
 - Moderator(s) on-screen with all 4 panelists.
- **High Comfort Level.** By the third day of this conference (and the run-up sessions to the conference), the two moderators had become comfortable with their styles – so when Jon jumped off the stage to run around to the different panelists, Pam wasn’t the least concerned!
- **“Create” the Unexpected.** Since Alabama became a theme, Jon asked the A/V crew to quickly find the Alabama fight song to play when he red-carded Barry. Jon explains, “I went to our panelists and said, ‘Listen, I need you to jab him one more time, and when you do, they’re going to play the fight song!’ Completely unexpected, but took some quick thinking and set-up to make that happen.”

I’m sure there are other reasons why this panel was so amazing (if you were there and have ideas, feel free to write in the comments below), but as a virtual participant, I thoroughly enjoyed the experience, took lots of notes, and attribute much of this success to the mindset that was created in the planning of the panel discussion. Well done, my friends!

[Listen to the podcast for a further debrief from the moderators here.](#)



FROM THE BOOKSHELF:

NSA WHITE PAPER: “WHY HIRE AN EMCEE? HOW AN EMCEE BRINGS VALUE TO YOUR MEETING”

Technically, this month’s book is a white paper on the value of hiring an emcee. Published by the National Speakers Association, it is a treasure trove of great info on what an emcee can do for your in-person and/or virtual meetings.

Many believe the Emcee just introduces speakers and keeps everything on time. But the role of emcee can be so much more! This whitepaper describes what an emcee does before, during, and after an event for the meeting organizers, speakers, and audience. It clarifies the skills needed for different types of emcees (yep! There ARE different types) and checklists for success.

To download your complimentary copy, go to www.nsaspeaker.org/emcee.

And, just in case you’re wondering, I was the lead instigator and author. So I’m a little biased. :-) Would love to know what you think!

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