



ROLES IN HYBRID WORK MEETINGS

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*"Enhance your hybrid work meetings through reflection.
Avoid the pitfalls of quick fixes!"*



Meeting Chat

MH MARK Is it ok for me to keep the camera off today?

MT Manoj Sure!

Mark

MH

Ramya

Manoj (Chat manager)

Ester

Is this situation familiar? Could it happen?

As Ramya enters the digital room, she sees that Yuki has already started the camera in the conference room at the office and is checking that the mics are working properly. 'So glad Yuki is there', Ramya thinks, 'so wonderful to have someone else taking care of this so I can focus on the agenda'. This is a really important meeting and Ramya has been tasked to facilitate it.

It is Mercedes that has organized the meeting, actually, not Ramya. Mercedes knows that Ramya is good at facilitating and has therefore asked her to lead this meeting gathering all stakeholders for the project. Some of the participants will be joining in remote, as Ramya does, so she has asked

Manoj, the business unit manager, to keep track of the chat. This is a way of both acknowledging he is an important player, but also limiting his influence.

'Well, well, let's see how this goes', Ramya thinks smiling into the camera as in-person participants enter the room and take their seats, and remote participants connect.

What are the **key** issues here? Read more on next page.

Key issue

We often think of work meetings as conversations on particular pre-defined subjects, because the conversations that we have during meetings are an important part of what makes those meetings valuable to us. But if we reduce meetings to being mainly conversations, we can easily miss other important aspects of what happens in (and before) meetings: during the meeting, people take different roles that entail various responsibilities regarding specific aspects of the meeting. Some people - especially the meeting organizers - already had responsibilities before the meeting.

The work meeting is a particular type of conversation, since it entails a division of labour that is uncommon in ordinary conversations.

A different image of meetings is "meetings as productions", as in film or theatre productions. This image can help us keep in mind that meetings are much more than "people talking to each other". If we think of a meeting as an event that we

produce, we become more aware of the roles and responsibilities required for that production. Examples of roles that may or may not be included in producing any particular hybrid meeting are:

- meeting organizer (preparing the meeting, sending the invitation, etcetera)
- meeting leader (facilitating, that is helping the group achieve the outcome of the meeting without taking a stance, or chairing, that is having the authority to make a final decision)
- note taker (securing documentation from the meeting)
- chat facilitator (managing and integrating the chat into the conversation)
- time keeper (making sure that issues on the agenda do not go over the time assigned)
- stack keeper (keeping track of the queue of people that want to speak)
- technology manager (making sure the

technological devices work well)

- meeting editor (curating the production of a professional video to be released in the organization when the meeting is recorded)

All these roles are needed in order to perform a hybrid meeting and the so-called meeting leader may take on all these roles, or the roles may be shared among different people. In your organization you may have your own labels for these roles – what is important is that someone performs the roles, the labels are less critical.

This reflection guide offers you some insight to further reflect on roles and responsibilities in hybrid meetings. Before reading more below, if you want to start by discussing and reflecting with your colleagues or other interested people, you may explore questions related to different roles in meetings by using one of the workshop modules we suggest.

Read more below if you are interested in:

- The difference between roles in a meeting and the roles you usually have in your organization – how to take this into consideration and what this enables.
- The onion model of participation – how hybrid meetings enable different kinds of participation and what it takes to handle this.

We recommend workshops that will help you discuss what you take for granted and what could be done differently when it comes to roles in hybrid meetings. You could try "Jeopardy - or what was the problem actually?" and/or "Rate 1 to 4 - or what do I think about this?" as methods to organize workshops to start a conversation about roles. Read the workshop guides on

<https://sites.mdu.se/inpro-hym/en/inpro-hym>

Questions for reflection

As a meeting leader, ask yourself ...

- If I think about my most recent meeting, do I know what participants expected from me as a meeting leader? How do I know?
- How are these expectations related to the meeting modality (digital, hybrid, or in-person)?
- Do I think these expectations are reasonable? Why/why not?
- As a meeting leader, did I focus on one leadership role or did I take on several? What did I perceive as my responsibilities at the meeting? Did I share any of these with anyone? If not, do I think the meeting might have been better if someone else had taken care of some of these things? What steps would I need to take to share some of these responsibilities?

As a meeting participant, ask yourself ...

- At my most recent meeting, did the meeting leader act more like a meeting chair or more like a facilitator?
- What other roles were there at my most recent meetings? What were their responsibilities?
- Are these roles usually tied to specific individuals or are they filled by different people at different meetings? Why is this so?
- How are the responsibilities for these roles different in digital, hybrid and in-person meetings?

Meeting roles ≠ roles in the organization

Part of what makes meetings such a powerful tool for organizing is their ability to set aside the roles and responsibilities that we have outside the meeting and to allow us to wear a different (or additional) hat for the duration of the meeting.

Meeting roles open for different possibilities. Some examples:

- the project leader or CEO does not need to be the leader of the meeting
- the silent colleague may contribute crucial knowledge by giving a short presentation
- the role of writing the meeting minutes is often endowed with more power than that person otherwise holds in the organization (since that person is in charge of the material traces of what was said).

A meeting holds the potential of organizing for rather different dynamics than other events or situations during a workday allow for.

This does not mean that we change our roles completely as soon as we enter a meeting. But the meeting has the potential to modify our roles in ways that ordinary conversation cannot do.

We can talk about entering a meeting as joining a role play where different rules apply from outside the meeting and we adjust our behaviour accordingly without necessarily thinking about it.

For instance, we rarely contemplate why everyone suddenly falls silent when the meeting leader starts the meeting – this way of behaving is embedded in the meeting practice and the roles we take on. It may be trivial to point out that a meeting requires everyone to share a single focus of attention and that this means that only one person can speak at a time. But are you always aware of which rules govern the meeting? Which roles are available (or missing)? Which responsibilities are connected to them?

If we see meeting participants only in

their usual roles in the organization, we may fail to understand the needs of the meeting, i.e. what is needed for a meeting to fulfil its purpose.

Training sessions in meeting leadership and facilitation since the 1950s have promoted awareness of the role-play of meetings (including various methods designed to achieve certain kinds of meeting outcomes). But most meetings take place without the help of a trained meeting leader and even when a meeting is professionally led, meeting participants may be hesitant to accept the meeting roles, or they may feel uncomfortable with or even provoked by the facilitation methods used. This is the flip-side of meetings not being an ordinary conversation: they may not feel as “natural” as informal conversations.

As the number of digital and hybrid meetings increases, however, we become painfully aware of the need for some new rules and new roles:

A more formalized turn-taking system where people raise their hands to be placed in the queue seems to be needed, for instance, since meeting through digital technologies seems to make the somewhat seamless turn-taking that we sometimes experience during in-person meetings difficult: the body language is less accessible and other cues, such as a raised yellow digital hand, are needed.

New roles such as ‘chat facilitator’ may be required to relieve the meeting leader of some of the responsibilities that digital meeting technologies add. A chat facilitator can, for instance, keep an eye on the written meeting chat and intervene in the spoken conversation when something in the chat is perceived as providing value to the ongoing conversation.

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If the meeting leader delegates the chat to a chat facilitator, for instance, this has consequences for power over, and inclusion in, the conversation in the meeting. A chat facilitator has the power to decide which of the things written by others in the chat to bring into the oral conversation and which not. This is quite a powerful position from which to make something valuable or not. On the other hand, having to focus on the chat, on how to facilitate the exchanges in the chat and on when to intervene in the oral conversation with input from the chat, means that the person will have less possibility to actually carefully listen to the oral conversation and contribute to it actively with their own input.

In other words, it is often costly to take on a role: accepting some responsibility for the meeting entails that one will have to dedicate part of one's attention and energy to this role. The incentive for that may be low if doing a good job means that nobody will notice that you did it (while one has to take the blame when something goes wrong).

If roles are distributed among different people, there is a need for coordination between them not to negatively affect the flow of the meeting.

The more the responsibility for having a meeting that smoothly develops according to the planned purpose is shared among people, the more the coordination between these people is crucial for keeping the conversation flowing. What happens, for instance, if the chat facilitator comes into the conversation with something that was written in the chat once the conversation has already moved to the next step? Timing is central to a smooth conversation.

We should take into consideration that hybrid meetings are the kind of meetings

that mostly need various support roles, since multiple rooms need to be taken care of (see our reflection guide on the physical and digital room in hybrid meetings).

Questions for reflection

As a meeting leader, ask yourself ...

- Why am I leading the meeting? Is it because of my role in the organization?
- Do people expect me to lead the meeting or am I afraid of losing control if I don't lead the meeting?
- Do I feel that I could use some help with producing the meeting? Which leadership responsibilities would I like to delegate? What is preventing me from doing so?
- Can I imagine new ways of performing meetings than the one I am used to? What roles would they need?

As a meeting participant, ask yourself ...

- Which meeting production roles do I miss most at my meetings? Does it differ between digital, hybrid and in-person meetings?
- Have I ever proposed any of them?
- What would be the challenges of introducing such a role in some of my meetings?

Participation ≠ participation: the onion model

Digital and hybrid meetings call for a diversification not only of roles for producing the meeting but also of participation roles. Remote participation makes it very easy to participate to varying degrees, from active presence to peripheral “lurking” (listening in). Even non-participation is possible when the meeting is recorded and, based on summaries provided by a digital assistant, selectively visited afterwards. Have these different ways of participating puzzled or frustrated you? We suggest the possibility of working proactively with them and call this “the onion model”.

Participation in digital and hybrid meetings can be understood as layered like an onion: from the core of the most active participants, to less active, to peripheral participants.

At the time of writing, automated summaries by digital assistants are still rarely used but participants listening in during a meeting with their cameras turned off is a more widespread practice.

Digital meeting practices not only enable peripheral participation but also transform the dynamics among the active participants.

On the one hand, the semi-presence of the peripheral participants makes these participants more easily available (e.g. as sources of information) than if they did not participate at all. This is the advantage that many organizations see with digital and hybrid meetings, the possibility to connect people with competences and experiences that they otherwise would not have been benefitted from (because they live elsewhere or because of travel restrictions, for instance).

”It has always been a challenge to convince these experts to move to this little town, but now we can connect with them from where they are instead.”

But at the same time, active participants may feel surveilled or exploited by the peripheral ones, especially when their cameras are turned off or when it is unclear why they are participating or what exactly their role is in the meeting. Moreover, a common complaint about meetings has long been that they unnecessarily consume working hours from individuals who only contributed to one or two agenda items. Remote participation makes it easy for these people to join remotely when “their” agenda point starts or to leave early when the meeting moves on to topics that are irrelevant for them.

Coming “late” to an in-person meeting (or leaving early) can be difficult because it may be considered impolite or as a sign of low commitment. For remote participants, the threshold seems to be lower, perhaps because there is already a greater distance between the participants. This could also be accepted as a different way of participating in a meeting.

The onion model of participation acknowledges different ways of participating in meetings. It may be a way of working with productive and inclusive hybrid meetings, but there is a need to explicitly agree on the terms of participation and to discuss why this model may be beneficial for both individuals and the organization in order not to create discontent and frustration.

”What does a camera off mean? Is someone there looking? Who? Or are they working with something else?”

Questions for reflection

As a meeting leader, ask yourself ...

- In my hybrid and/or digital meetings, is it common that people participate remotely without actively contributing to the meeting? What might be the reasons for this? Does it affect the meetings in any way?
- Have I ever invited someone to join the meeting remotely, perhaps for only part of the meeting? Did I communicate this to the other participants?

As a meeting participant, ask yourself ...

- Do I recall any hybrid or digital meeting with silent remote participants? How did I experience their semi-presence? What might have been the benefits of their peripheral participation in the meeting?
- Have I discussed with colleagues when and how peripheral participation is acceptable or even desirable?
- Have I been a peripheral participant myself? Why?

This guide is the result of research we have done in the 2-years long project InPro-Hym (INclusive and PROductive HYbrid Meetings), and also draws on our work in the research projects MnC (Meetings and Community in the postdigital era) and MeetWell (Leadership and Employee Well-Being in Virtual and Hybrid Meetings). The InPro-Hym project has been performed in collaboration between Mälardalen University, the University of Gothenburg, Hitachi Energy and the municipality of Västerås. The project has been funded by Vinnova.

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