



INTERACTING IN HYBRID WORK MEETINGS

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



Is this situation familiar? Could it happen?

Marah is in a hurry to enter the school building where she recently started to work as an administrator. Today there is a hybrid meeting with the administrative units at all the other schools in the municipality. The convenor and her colleagues connect from a large conference room. They sit next to each other in that large room, having a relaxed chit-chat.

The convenor opens the meeting by introducing herself and then continues into the first topic on the agenda. The technology is working well and Marah has no problem in seeing and hearing the others. After 45 minutes, there is a break. The microphone in the large conference room is still on, and Marah hears a murmur

of talk. Some attendees talk to each other and form small groups while having coffee. Some are still in the room, but they seem busy working on emails and checking text messages. The other remote participants have switched off the cameras and muted the microphones, to get a relaxing break. Marah cannot help feeling awkward.

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

Key issues

Human-to-human interaction, mainly in the form of talk, has been at the centre of the performance of traditional work meetings in the past. This does not mean that objects have been absent. To help them, specific roles in the meeting have in fact had some specific objects, such as a gavel, to signal their function or their power. These objects complemented talk. In contemporary work meetings, we commonly use objects such as whiteboards, or laptops and screens to share presentations. These objects support and reinforce what we are trying to accomplish with our talk. With the introduction of digital meeting technologies, however, human-to-human interaction, including talk, becomes entangled in technologies. The technology is no longer in addition to talk, but rather it becomes

integral to human-to-human interaction, and thus also alters it. That is, it profoundly changes how human-to-human interaction and talk in meetings work.

In hybrid meetings, when human-to-human interactions are performed through technologies, you may recognize the fact that we lack some of the cues that we have traditionally used for interpreting what goes on between humans. Sometimes we are prevented from effectively participating in the talk by, for instance, malfunctioning technology. But more fundamentally, it becomes more complicated to interpret what others say and do when some people are present to us in person and some through screens since we lack some of the cues that we are used to relying on when communicating and interacting.

🤔 Questions for reflection

- Thinking of my most recent hybrid meeting, what kind of cues do I miss the most when trying to understand those I am meeting with and what they do? Why do I need them?
- Thinking of my most recent in-person meeting, what kind of cues have been important for me to take into consideration in order to participate in a good way? Would they have been available to me if I had participated in remote? Would it somehow be possible to make them available?
- Are there meetings in which I do not feel comfortable being in the same room as some other participant and I would prefer to be on remote? Why?
- Is it important for me to see how others react, for instance, to a reprimand or an expression of disagreement addressed to me in order to know how to react?

Interpreting human body language, and mobilizing our senses to do so, is an important way of evaluating situations – in hybrid meetings this needs to be done differently. Although we are still learning how to deal with this, hybrid and digital meetings are nevertheless regularly run. In some cases, we may feel that the interaction in the meeting has been good; in other cases we may feel the interaction has not really been an interaction at all. Technology developers are also continuously developing new apps and features to bridge the gap between humans and support us in interpreting the ongoing interaction. In this reflection guide, we look into the issue of interacting in hybrid

meetings and its different facets. Before reading more below, if you want to start by discussing and reflecting with your colleagues or other interested people, you may explore issues related to interactions by using one of the workshop module formats that we suggest.

In the following section, we will discuss different aspects related to:

- The limits to body language in hybrid meetings – read more about mutilated but also extended bodies.
- The importance of understanding that interactions are about relating – in what sense is physical co-presence not enough?
- Depending on where you participate from, different rules for interacting seem to apply – how can we handle this?
- Depending on where you participate from, the premises for interacting differ – how can we handle this?
- The opening and closing of a meeting along with breaks constitute in-between moments, as we will describe – how are these experienced in hybrid meetings and what do we do about them?

The workshop based on metaphorical thinking and photographs and the workshop “Jeopardy - or what was the problem actually?” will help you verbalize assumptions, ideas, and wishes about hybrid meetings, and in particular how to interact in them. Read the workshop guides on

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

Interacting with mutilated but also extended bodies

Body language in human interaction has been studied for decades, and it continues to be intriguing for researchers and many others interested in human interaction and communication. Sensorial impressions are part of our interaction with the world and our social interactions. When you meet someone in person, the experience you have is multi-sensory, involving sight, hearing, smell, and touch. Maybe even taste. When meeting in person we therefore often intentionally and unintentionally communicate with our bodies.

In the 1960's, Erving Goffman invited us to explore human encounters in detail in his analysis of situated everyday human interaction. He proposed the theatre with its frontstage and backstage, and its props, as a metaphor for understanding how we behave. Mobilizing the same metaphor, meetings through digital technologies can be understood as a multi-stage performance (the main physical room, the

different screens, the rooms where the remote participants are, the chat etc).

We can mobilize our body language and our senses in different ways on these different stages – when on remote, we are limited in what our body and senses can do.

The different stages enable us to use our bodies and senses to different extents. For instance, when we attend the meeting in remote, we cannot use our gaze to get the attention of a particular person, and we have difficulty using our body posture to communicate to a particular person that we are interested in what they are saying. In addition, we do not have access to other people's body language in a way that is familiar to us, and we sometimes experience that we lack the cues we require to understand what is going on. Not having full access to other bodies can sometimes create frustration and misunderstandings. The bodies that interact could therefore be described as "mutilated".

”THERE ARE TWO GROUPS IN THE MEETING: ONE IN THE ROOM THAT HAS EYE CONTACT WITH EACH OTHER, AND ONE GROUP OVER THERE”. ”YOU DON’T GET ANY EYE CONTACT. WHEN ON DISTANCE, YOU CAN’T REALLY SEE WHO IS IN THE ROOM”

Eye contact may be difficult to gain with all participants. In the hybrid work meeting, there is a camera between us, and our eyes are directed toward the camera and not directly at each other. In addition, the cameras have limitations; thus remote participants may find it difficult to perceive and grasp the entire physical meeting space where the on-site participants are located. The remote participant therefore sees only a limited section of the meeting room onsite, cropped by the camera and controlled by those on site and how they direct the camera.

”It’s an oblong table that everybody sits around, and the camera is positioned low. So, the camera is at the height of the table, which means that people over here are a bit blurry. There’s quite a lot of focus on the person sitting closest...”

The effects of this mutilation of bodies and sense are multiple. They may make the interaction less productive or slower, more difficult to move forward.

”Body language is the foundation for decisions and direction, and if those attending at a distance don’t see the body language in the room that is the foundation for speeding up a question, for instance, that people nod or so, maybe they don’t understand why the meeting proceeds the way it does.”

But the effects of this mutilation of bodies and senses may also lead to more democratic and inclusive meetings. People that may have dominated in-person meetings thanks to their body language, confidence, occupation of the room, tone of voice, may now find themselves limited by the square they occupy on a screen. They have no possibility to “take more space” than the others. Traditionally, men have been the ones counting on their “natural presence” in work meetings while women have had to

find ways to make their presence as legitimate and to create space for themselves in the conversation. Hence, women may benefit from meetings formats where bodies are partly mutilated and “caged” in small squares. Similarly, interactions may also take place without body language involved, in the chat. This may benefit those that are not comfortable

🤔 Questions for reflection

- In terms of body language, in what respects do hybrid meetings work better than in in-person meetings according to my experience?
- In what respects do hybrid meetings work less effectively?
- What do I find most difficult when it comes to interacting in hybrid meetings? As a participant or meeting leader, can I do anything about it?

Meeting technology developers have of course picked up the change in ways of interacting compared to traditional in-person meetings and the needs that arise from mutilated bodies and senses. New features are continuously being developed to fill the perceived flaws in communication—examples of the development in the past few years are new reaction buttons, new settings for cameras, and new apps for collaboration. This means that actions that have previously been almost invisible to us since we performed them without really thinking them through – such as a slight twist of the body to communicate support for what someone is saying – now requires more work. First, we need to acknowledge the will to express our support, and then we

need to express it in a very open and concrete manner (a thumbs up, for instance). Drawing on Goffman’s theatre metaphor once more, we can see this as new stages being set up where we can direct our own and other’s performances with the support of different kinds of props: thumbs up, applause, hearts and so on. In this way, our physical body, and the emotions felt and expressed, may be argued to be extended through digital technology.

🤔 Questions for reflection

- How do I perceive the use of reaction buttons during meetings – do I find that they support, disturb, distract, provide energy, etcetera? What do I think it is about this practice that makes me experience them this way?
- When do I use a reaction button and when do I not? Why? Do others know how I reason when it comes to reaction buttons? Is it important that they know?
- How do remote participants communicate via body language during the hybrid work meetings I participate in? How do I perceive body language when I am participating in person and in remote respectively?
- Are there any technologies that I may use to make my body language more present to everyone? How? If not, could there be such technologies in the future and what would they entail? One could, for instance, try to make emotions more explicit by using different kinds of symbols (like emojis) in real time – would I want this? Why? Why not?

Interacting as being in relation

Have you ever experienced an interaction at work that was particularly intense? Although we may meet many people in person during a workday, not all interactions with them are necessarily intense. The mere fact that bodies are co-present does not lead to a strong experience. On the other hand, we may have a digital meeting in which we feel deeply connected to the person we are interacting with at a distance.

The French philosopher Gabriel Marcel puts this feeling into words describing a specific situation:

“We could say that the man sitting beside us was in the same room as ourselves, but that he was not really present there, that his presence did not make itself felt. But what do I mean by presence, here? It is not that we could not communicate with this man. . .[yet] between ourselves and him a kind

of physical, but merely physical, communication is possible. . .One might say that what we have with this person, who is in the room, but somehow not really present to us, is communication without communion: unreal communication, in a word. He understands what I say to him, but he does not understand me: I may even have the extremely disagreeable feeling that my own words, as he repeats them to me, as he reflects them back at me, have become unrecognizable.

We take from this that interpersonal connectivity is achieved when the other feels close, no matter how geographically distant they are. On the other hand, when someone does not feel understood, it fails. In such situations, one is left alienated and distant not only from the other but also from oneself.”¹

¹ Marcel, 1965, *Being and having: An existentialist diary*, p 204-205 as quoted in Hafermalz, E., & Riemer, K. (2020). Interpersonal connectivity work: Being there with and for geographically distant others. *Organization Studies*, 41(12), 1627-1648.

Do you recognize what Marcel describes? Work meetings are situations in which we may quite easily end up in not communicating, given the stressful, productivity-focused atmosphere that characterizes working life nowadays.

Although full access to body language and co-presence are important for the quality of interactions between humans, they are not the only important aspect of interacting and feeling together.

Martin Buber, a philosopher born at the end of the 19th century, proposed that we understand encounters and dialogue in terms of mutuality. When we are open to those we meet, when we treat them as humans to whom we are related, then the quality of our relations will be totally different from when we treat others as objects, according to the roles they play in your life. It is in the qualitative encounters that we grow as humans. And such interpersonal encounters do not require specific or unique conditions – they rather depend on us and the one we meet. For such an encounter you do not have to stand close to each other. Imagine a busy shopping mall with lots of people and noise, where you see and hear everything and nothing. Suddenly you make eye contact with someone a bit further away. Right then and there, in the space between, you meet there even though you are far away.

“When we encounter another individual truly as a person, not as an object for use, we become fully human”, Martin Buber writes².

Hence, whereas our bodies or emojis with hearts or smileys may help in interacting, our way of approaching the other and our ability to be present, here and now in a situation, are central for relating.

Questions for reflection

- What do I need to be able to focus and not work on anything else during a hybrid meeting but just be present in the moment?
- When do I feel close to others in a meeting? How come?
- Am I open to dialogue, that is, to meeting the other person(s) as persons and to letting them affect me? Does it matter if the meeting is in-person or hybrid? Why?

²The quote comes from Martin Buber's book "I and Thou" written in 1923.

Different rules for interacting depending on location

Are there any rules to follow in order to support high quality interactions in hybrid meetings where you work? Some workplaces may have established guidelines (more or less respected) and some not. It seems easy to agree on that remote attendees should have the camera on and the microphone off when entering the meeting. Applications such as Zoom even enable participants to set microphones on mute as a default when entering a meeting. Talking over each other can be perceived as rude – this is something that may easily happen when some people participate remotely and some are co-located in a physical meeting room since they can't look each other in the eye and there are limited possibilities to read body language. It is therefore not uncommon for remote participants to raise their hand, either their own or a digital hand, in order to get attention before starting talking. Sometimes remote participants forget about the muted microphone and

you may have heard several people in the main physical room say "You are muted!" at the same time. Just a few years ago this sentence was not at all a common expression.

When it comes to cameras, whereas the importance of seeing each other in order to interact is acknowledged, the use of cameras varies for several reasons, from a bad connection to a need to move one's head and body without being constrained by the camera. Some people may even prefer no cameras at all for some meetings, and instead work with something close to traditional telephone conferences.

Still, there is a rather shared understanding that good interactions presuppose:

- "camera on" for remote participants
- a wise use of microphones.

Whereas the rules for remote participants are relatively clear, co-located participants in the main physical room seem to follow different rules.

For co-located participants in the main physical room, there is no code of conduct yet. Sometimes a nod is enough to realize that someone wants to speak, or it is enough to briefly raise a hand to secure the possibility to talk.

Apart from visual aspects, auditory aspects are also important. In the physical meeting room, there is a soundscape, that is, a combination of sounds that together create the setting in which the meeting takes place. Besides sound from rooms nearby, the soundscape is produced by participants while giggling, standing up, or harrumphing, and so on. Such sounds may be a part of the ongoing interactions. For example, a rasping or coughing can indicate that someone feels slighted or wants to speak. On the other hand, it could also be that the throat is irritated. It is by being immersed in the situation that participants interpret these cues and interact with each other.

There are no “easy rules” to follow in the main physical room.

Moreover, the soundscape is not available in the same way to the remote participants due to noise cancellation and depending on where people are sitting in relation to the microphone. Not only that, since the norm for remote participants is often to be on mute, they cannot participate in the soundscape and communicate implicitly or explicitly in a similar way. Due to the muted microphones, the remote participants’ physical condition goes unnoticed, and friendly comments that show goodwill and care, such as “bless you”, are not made.

In addition, there are situations when peripheral participation is accepted during work meetings (see also the reflection guides on roles and on structuring hybrid meetings). Peripheral participation means only listening in on a meeting or

doing something else while in the meeting. Sometimes remote participants may only be invited to be co-listeners which means that there is no need to be present in video or audio.

”...the expectation is different depending on what role you have in a project. Everyone who is an active participant is expected to have a camera on. That's my feeling. Unless it's a very big meeting where there are many people.”

However, peripheral participation without appearing uninterested is easier when we are co-located in the same room than when we are silently hidden behind a black square or our icon since our cameras are off.

Questions for reflection

As a meeting leader, ask yourself ...

- Do I have any implicit or explicit rules for how to interact in the hybrid meetings I lead? If yes, is it clear to the people that participate what kind of rules they are supposed to follow? If not, what can I do about it? And if I do not have rules, do I need some?
- Is peripheral participation in terms of just listening accepted during the hybrid work meetings I lead? If yes, are the meetings organized so that both remote and co-located participants are allowed to be peripheral participants? If not, is it a problem and can I do something about it?

As a meeting participant, ask yourself ...

- Do I know how I am supposed to interact with the other participants in the hybrid meetings I participate in? Does this affect the quality of interactions? If I do not know how I am supposed to interact, how do I decide how to interact? Does it differ depending on whether I am attending in person or in remote?
- Is peripheral participation in terms of just listening accepted during the hybrid work meetings I participate in? If no, how do I talk about it? Why?

Different premises for interacting depending on location

During a hybrid meeting, it is important to keep in mind that people attending in remote face different premises for participating.

Remote participants are affected by digital technology quite differently compared with co-located participants.

The bodies of remote participants are mediated through technology to be made present to on-site participants and it is quite common to be visualized on a screen (even though other technologies are available today). Sometimes the scale is very much enlarged, and remote participants' heads or upper bodies cover an entire screen in a room. Sometimes the scale is reduced so that the remote participants are barely visible. There may also be other disturbances that affect their visual presence.

“We have some problem with the image on Teams which we use; [it is] flickering on the co-worker sitting there. So you see that it flickers down the right edge of the window all the time.”

Whereas you may have noted the issue of very large or very small heads when sitting in a meeting room and having others connect in remote, you may have reflected less on people's voices, besides the fact that sometimes the microphones or loudspeakers do not work properly.

The voices of remote participants are mediated through loudspeakers, which affects not only their appearance but also the meeting experience of co-located participants. For example, sometimes the loudspeakers are set in the ceiling as if remote participants are speaking from above. The volume may be so high that it covers the entire soundscape. How does this affect interactions?

The voice is a fundamental aspect of a working meeting. It enables communication and interaction, not only because we say things but also because we show emo-

tions with it, for instance. Our voice is part of our personality and affects how we are perceived by others. Unlike body language, which needs to be visible for us to be taken into consideration, a voice can be heard in the distance beyond what is visible.

To increase inclusiveness, you may consider an increased use of microphones, especially if the remote participants are in a reasonably quiet environment. One possibility is that the microphone is on all the time, just like the camera. There are also technological solutions making the voice come from different areas of the screen depending on where the image of the person speaking is located.

Moreover, there are unwritten conventions for how to behave during work meetings (to some extent reflecting conventions we use when socializing more generally). For instance, depending on where you are and who you meet, you could be expected to shake hands at a certain physical distance, or to kiss each other on the cheek, or not to touch at all. In these situations, all your senses are stimulated as we can see, hear, smell, and touch the other participants. With the digital technologies available today, such a multisensory experience between on-site and remote participants is impossible. There are virtual collaborative and immersive environments with 3D audio and 3D bodily representations. However, they are still not sensorily as comprehensive as a meeting in a physical room.

Since hybrid meeting participants play according to different rules, as discussed in the previous section, and have different premises for interaction, you may consider formulating some clear guidelines or codes of conduct. For instance, some general guidelines such as the necessity of a clear agenda and a clarification that some

behaviours are not accepted (such as working with different things at the same time), and some more specific rules of conduct such as how to use cameras and microphones, how interactions will be facilitated (for instance how to show that wants to talk), and so on.

Questions for reflection

- When I think of my most recent hybrid meeting, how were remote participants seen and heard by other remote participants (if you were in remote)? And by co-located participants (if you were in the main physical room)? How may this have affected the overall hybrid work-meeting experience?
- Could the physical rooms (both the remote participants' rooms and the co-located participants' room) be designed to support interactions in audio and video that do not privilege those in remote or those present in the main physical room?
- Do I usually do anything to adjust the way I (or others) see and hear the other participants in the meeting? For instance by pinning the main physical room (if I am in remote), or by using the option of seeing both all participants and the presentation shared (if I am in remote), or by using large or multiple screens, etcetera. Does this make my interactions in the meeting better? Could I do more?

The in-between-ness

When does a hybrid meeting really start? Is it when the first people to arrive/connect start talking? And does the meeting go on during the break? And is the meeting finished when the chair or facilitator says so, or when people stop talking about things related to what the meeting has focused on?

The start, breaks and the end of a meeting are situations of in-between: not really the meeting, but not really outside the meeting either.

The in-between-ness of start, breaks and end is also present in hybrid meetings, possibly with even larger impact on the possibility to interact with each other. Social interaction in this in-between-ness, and the expectations around such interactions, are in fact not easily navigated when we meet through digital technologies.

You may have experienced this in-between-ness for instance in the 'waiting room' before a meeting. What is

experienced as "a waiting room" or a lobby is the physical or digital space of the meeting prior to the official start of the meeting. If you are participating in remote and no function is activated that prevents attendees from entering the meeting before the organizer decides it is time to do so, you enter the meeting room directly upon connecting. Due to digital technologies allowing only one or two parties to talk at a time and the impoverished possibility to read body language, it may be difficult to create a nice safe atmosphere in such waiting rooms.

"It is stiff in the waiting room – people are doing their thing, reading emails..."

Our research explored some possible ways of creating an atmosphere that enables good interactions. For instance, a welco-

ming image and some music could provide a good atmosphere. The stiffness of waiting may be alleviated since participants would be greeted neither by silence nor by a difficult-to-navigate conversation. When organizing meetings, this pre-meeting space may be rather important to consider if we want to accomplish good energy and the positive contagious mood we often strive for in meetings (you can read more about this in the reflection guides about energy in hybrid meetings and about the digital and physical rooms).

When it comes to the in-between-ness related to breaks during meetings, first consider the following reflection questions:

Questions for reflection

- What is "a break"?
- What do I normally do when there are breaks during meetings?
- Does my 'break practice' differ depending on whether the meeting is in-person, hybrid or digital? How?

Breaks fill an important function not only for "re-charging", but also for the kind of social glue they provide as people interact in a more relaxed and informal way. In Sweden, for instance, "fika" is a widespread habit that fills this social-glue function. Forbes³ describes fika as "something of a ritual. It does typically involve coffee and a sweet pastry, but just as important is the decision to take a deliberate break from your day with others. It's a chance to relax and enjoy social connection with family, friends or colleagues." In some workplaces, "fika time" is almost sacred: the work

group, for instance, sits down together at 9 am and 2.30 pm every day for a joint break.

The breaks we have during work meetings are in many ways similar to 'fika'. Taking a break can be a deliberate choice by the meeting chair or facilitator to allow for more social interaction between participants and for less formal discussions. The need for a break may also emerge more organically depending on how a meeting develops – at some point you know there is a need for a break or someone asks for it. Independently of how the break comes about, if we consider the break not as "time-off" but rather in "fika-terms", then taking a break comes with challenges in hybrid meetings.

The distance between the on-line participants and the on-site participants is rarely perceived as greater than when someone says "let's take a break".

Cameras are switched off, and the remote participants disappear from the meeting space. In the room, different interactions may take place simultaneously: some may leave the room to go and pick up coffee, others start talking about something non-meeting related, and yet others may continue to talk about something that was just discussed in the meeting. The people in the room can quite easily monitor where other meeting participants are and what discussions and interactions are taking place, whereas for remote participants the either empty meeting room or the many simultaneous conversations that go on in the room make it difficult to join in or get an overview of what is going on during the break. It is worth reflecting on why dynamics of this kind are problematic: what is the problem of not having all the participants able to be part of informal conversations in the same way?

³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidnikel/2023/01/03/swedish-fika-swedens-premium-coffee-break-explaine>

🤔 Questions for reflection

- Do I experience any problems with breaks during the hybrid meetings I lead or participate in? What problems? For whom are they problems and why?
- What can I do to attend to these problems? What does my solution demand from me and from others? Is it different things depending on whether I am the meeting leader or one of the participants?

There is no quick fix or general solution for dealing with the experience of separated groups during starts, breaks and ends, which may lead to the exclusion of some participants from the moments in-between. Rather, it may be fruitful to talk about this and jointly discuss how to accomplish moments of in-between that are experienced as comfortable and rewarding for all. The solutions may differ between groups and meetings, but in general, what is important for these moments is the possibility to feel relaxed and to feel some sense of community and belonging.

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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