

Tips for Running Virtual Peer Communities

Peer coaching is a rich experience where participants are required to use both effective listening and observation skills. When you take your sessions to a virtual platform, here are some best practices to ensure your virtual peer coaching experience is engaging and successful.

The Technical Details

Select a platform where you can see everyone.

- Choose your technology. Some suggestions: Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, Google+ Hangouts.
- Ensure that the group members have created their accounts and tested the platform prior to the virtual meeting.
- Send out the log-in details and confirm the meeting at least two days prior.

Not Your Average Conference Call

To have a successful virtual experience for your entire coaching community, remember your commitment to being prepared and bringing your experiences to the table. It may be easier to sit back or multi-task when you're not all in the room together but the quality of everyone's experience decreases if members aren't fully "there".

- Find a location that is quiet, where you won't be disturbed
- Shut down/remove all possible distractions (email, phone, that deadline that's looming)
- Give yourself time to mentally "clear your agenda" so you can focus on the call
- If conference calling, on paper, draw a 'table' that shows everyone's name so you can take notes, keep track of the conversation etc.

The Grassroots Leadership Revolution

Up Your Communication Skills

When we connect with our groups on video or old school conference calls, we can miss important (and sometimes very subtle) cues when a member is sharing a pressing issue. Here are some tips to help remove ambiguity from your communications. Share these ideas with your coaching group.

- Put some structure around how you'll get people involved. Ask for a volunteer to kick things off but then be a bit more directive and work your way around the video screen to call on subsequent participants.
- Encourage members to name their emotions when they're sharing challenges or opportunities in the group – "I'm upset about this..." vs. "I have a situation with a peer..."
- Listen closely for emotion, tone, pace and energy...what are you hearing?
- Use names when directing questions to individuals which will prevent either total silence or everyone talking at once
- Check your group temperature frequently to ensure everyone feels involved (Give "one word" for how you are feeling? Rate your engagement from 1-10)
- Make sure your webcam is positioned so you are making eye contact with the rest of your coaching circle
- Bring your energy and enthusiasm to the call, pay attention to your body language – it affects your voice too
- And, if you're on a conference call, use your name each time you start to speak

Build Connection and Trust

Whether your group meets in person or virtually, it takes time to build trust and go through stages of team development to get to 'high performance' as a group. Here are a few ways to accelerate the trust process in a virtual environment:

- Use trust building exercises outlined in the Grassroots Leadership Revolution book to accelerate getting to know each other
- Revisit trust activities when new members join your group
- Allow some time for small talk or have a quick "opener" for each coaching session (What Netflix program are you currently bingeing? What news story caught your interest recently?)
- Consider ramping up the frequency of your meetings in the early stages to accelerate trust
- Reach out to members of your group individually to get to know them better