



# **GREAT CONVERSATIONS, THE VIRTUAL WAY**

## **AMBASSADOR INSIGHTS**

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*Developed collaboratively by the*  
**LEAP OF REASON  
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# GREAT CONVERSATIONS, THE VIRTUAL WAY

Although video-conference software has been around since [1930](#), most of us used virtual meeting platforms sporadically (and only if forced to do so) until early 2020 when “zoom” became a verb—much like “google” replaced “search” in 2006.

Many of us have been a part of virtual meetings that use [Zoom breakout rooms](#), [Teams reactions](#), [Google’s Jamboard](#), [chat waterfalls](#), and a zillion other tech bells and whistles, but it’s the skilled facilitation that makes a meeting memorable.

That’s where folks like Leap Ambassadors **Beth Kanter** and **Debra Natenshon** come in. At the Leap Ambassadors 2021 Convening, these seasoned facilitators gave a behind-the-scenes look at how to structure a virtual meeting so that great conversations happen, no matter where you are. Through demonstration and hands-on exercises, participants learned the ins and outs of Zoom and other technology tools.

But Kanter and Natenshon also transparently provided “meta views” of techniques and activities that went far beyond how-to technology instructions. Linking the tech features to good facilitation practices results in greater connection among participants. Here are three of their takeaways:

- **The platform is only one component of successful virtual meetings.** As **Mario Morino** and **Lowell Weiss** wrote in their [May 2021 Leap Update](#): “Virtual meetings can be more than just a pale imitation of the real thing if you have the right mindset, planning, platform, and facilitation.” In [The Art of Gathering](#), **Priya Parker** emphasizes the importance of not letting a meeting’s function become its purpose. And the same holds true for virtual gatherings. In another session at the Leap Ambassadors 2021 Convening, **Christine Robinson** emphasized the importance of determining the kind of meeting or gathering. For example, she facilitates a learning community where “everybody in the group agrees that this is a learning community. We’re there to learn with each other and not necessarily to teach each other. It’s a fine distinction but a really important one. Co-creation is generative; it honors people’s perspective, builds trust, and helps colleagues feel valued. This matters particularly in a virtual reality.”
- **Prioritize relationships over tasks.** It’s tempting to cut activities that may not be directly connected to tasks or decisions that impact an organization’s work. But great conversations are necessary. Kanter said, “Opening a meeting with a ‘pair-share’ exercise done in breakout rooms allows a one-on-one opportunity to get to know participants and establish beginning levels of trust that can be a lubricant for conversation. It’s simply good instructional design.”

In another session at the Leap Ambassadors 2021 Convening, **Janeen Comenote** also emphasized how relationships contribute to a community’s ecosystem.

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She said, “Indigenous peoples believe that everything in life is predicated on relationships. We all have a responsibility to maintain and nurture those relationships. We also have a responsibility to reciprocate these relationships within our communities, and we see this reciprocation reflected in nature. A healthy ecosystem is circular so that one thing is feeding the next. And finally, we have a responsibility to redistribute everything—from knowledge to wealth.”

- **Continue to innovate and adapt.** As pandemic restrictions are lifted, hybrid meetings with some participants in person and some virtual are going to become even more commonplace. Be sure to take advantage of the benefits from both modalities and try to refrain from going back to the “normal” 2019 routines when hybrid meetings involved side conversations filled with laughter from the in-person crew and remote associates were tempted to check email and social media feeds because they didn’t feel part of the meeting.

Natenshon said, “With many organizations choosing to go back to their offices only part-time, there will be continued opportunities to make meetings meaningful for both content creation and relationship building. It will continue to be important to be intentional in providing just the right amount of flexibility so that all voices are heard and the materials are understood.”

Kanter noted, “The concept of inclusion in terms of user experience, time zones, and participation will be an important collaboration principle. In addition, nonprofit leaders and their staffs will need to reflect on exactly what types of work should take place in real time at a meeting and what can be done asynchronously. These are critical to the success of hybrid workplaces and has implications for meeting facilitation design.”

There’s no doubt that virtual technology tools will improve and that’s a good thing. But the importance of strong facilitation skills won’t diminish, especially for virtual meetings.

## Resources

- [Virtual Meeting & Facilitation Resources](#), curated by Beth Kanter. This curated material provides a treasure trove of links, articles, and suggestions for running effective meetings. Most of the information focuses on virtual meetings but can be easily adapted to in-person meetings, too.
- [Icebreaker questions](#), curated by Beth Kanter. This shared document provides question prompts for icebreaker activities to help establish relationships and connections.

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- [Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry](#), AI Commons, Champlain College and Case Western Reserve University, retrieved May 27, 2021. This website provides a high-level overview of the principles, cycle, and application of Appreciative Inquiry.
- [A Social Prescription: Why Human Connection Is Crucial To Our Health](#), NPR transcript, April 20, 2020. The interview includes a description of a moai, an ancient Japanese tradition for bringing people together to decrease loneliness and increase connectivity.
- [Power Dynamics and Inclusion in Virtual Meetings](#), Evelyn Arellano, Aspiration, May 27, 2020. This article suggests ways to manage power dynamics before and during a meeting.
- [Meeting Best Practices for Hybrid Teams](#), Jessica Wishart, Rhythm Systems, April 9, 2021. The post suggests ground rules for inclusive engagement for in-person and remote team members and how to embrace the advantages of both modalities.
- [Meeting Makeover](#) podcast with [Priya Parker](#) and Brené Brown, May 24, 2021. Parker and Brown discuss why one of the weekly meetings with Brown's team isn't working and what considerations the team should make to make these sessions more valuable.
- [How to Do Hybrid Right](#), Lynda Gratton, *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 2021. Flexible working arrangements can boost productivity and employee satisfaction. This article suggests that managers consider the challenge from four distinct perspectives: (1) jobs and tasks, (2) employee preferences, (3) projects and workflows, and (4) inclusion and fairness.
- [Blending remote and in-office workers into a real team](#), Wayne Turmel, SmartBrief, April 16, 2021. The article offers four suggestions for how leaders help their teams collaborate and work together as effectively as possible.



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