ARTICLE
MEETINGS

Break Up Your Big Virtual Meetings

by Liana Kreamer and Steven G. Rogelberg
Remote meetings are plagued with challenges. It’s often difficult to find a communication rhythm and flow, especially when there’s background noise or poor connection quality. As a result, people may feel detached or removed; they’ll engage less, be less present, and multitask more. Voices become lost, especially from people who tend to be more introverted. These problems only amplify as meeting size increases, where air time becomes scarce and anonymity becomes the default.

To address these issues and gain valuable perspectives from all your meeting attendees, consider modifying your approach. There are two techniques in particular you can try: embracing silence and
assigning breakout rooms. While not appropriate for every type of meeting, these tools can be extremely valuable for promoting effectiveness, creativity, engagement, and inclusion.

**Embrace silence to improve brainstorming**

Research supports the benefits of embracing silence during meetings to better leverage the ideas, perspectives, and insights of all attendees. Silent brainstorming produces significantly more ideas than brainstorming out loud — and these ideas tend to be more creative and of higher quality.

Why? Because encouraging meeting attendees to contribute — silently and individually — allows multiple people to express their ideas all at once. Instead of hearing from one attendee at a time and responding to each person, many voices can be “heard” via this written style of brainstorming. Additionally, because the written brainstorming can be done anonymously, there is less filtering of ideas, which allows attendees to write their contributions with less fear of judgment.

This technique is particularly beneficial for remote meetings given the communication and attendee engagement challenges noted above. Here’s one way you might execute this technique:

First, when you schedule a remote meeting, review the agenda and highlight the goals of the meeting in the invite. Then, at the start of the meeting itself, share a working document (for example, a Google Doc) to all attendees. The document should contain key questions that need to be answered during the meeting and/or brainstorming prompts.

After explaining that you’ll be experimenting with silent brainstorming, encourage all participants to contribute to the document for 10 to 20 minutes, depending on your meeting’s needs. During this time, attendees can actively engage in idea generation, responding to one another using commenting functions, and collaborate via the document. You’ll find that this silent brainstorm will result in an incredibly vibrant exchange of ideas that engages a much larger group of people with no speaker logjams. As a leader, feel free to chime in, providing direction and asking attendees to elaborate on specific ideas they write about.

Once the brainstorm phase is done, you have several options. If the meeting is relatively small in size (under six attendees), you could debrief with your team — hosting a verbal discussion of what emerged. If the meeting is larger in size, the meeting can end for now. You could then take time to go through the document and see what materialized. You could share general conclusions and next steps with the group in a follow-up email. Or, you might consider sending out a quick survey post-meeting where folks vote on final options for ways forward or share ratings of prioritization. Separating discussion and deliberation from actual decision making — as described here — has been found to promote better meeting decision quality.
Use breakout rooms to create a sense of accountability

When meetings are large in size (more than six attendees), voices are even more at risk of becoming lost. Attendees may miss the opportunity to contribute, feel uncomfortable dominating the discussion, or fear talking over others.

The critical step in making these large meetings better virtually is by getting them to feel and function more like small meetings. The easiest way to do this is simple: break the large group into smaller groups of two or three for a portion of the meeting.

Many video platforms (for example, Zoom, Adobe Connect, and Samba Live) include a “breakout” option where the leader can assign smaller group discussions within a larger group. The leader can also set a time limit for the breakouts.

Here is an example: Say there are 15 attendees on your team who enter Zoom for your weekly staff meeting. You begin this virtual meeting by reviewing meeting goals and objectives with all attendees. This should only take a couple of minutes. Then, you assign breakout chatrooms with three people per room, with the time limit of perhaps 12 minutes. Each subgroup can be charged with a different or similar task.

When time is up, all five breakout groups come back together as a whole. Depending on the assigned task, there are a variety of paths the meeting could go from here: it could end with each subgroup emailing you (the leader) what they came up with. You could then plan next steps. Another path is having one representative from each subgroup report out what they worked on to the wider team, while inviting comments and clarification. A final path, depending on the meeting’s desired result, is recording the shared recommendations into a poll or form as representatives are presenting them. You could then send a voting link to all group members via the chat function or email to vote on which ideas they like best. It should take them no more than a couple of minutes to cast votes. Again, voting could be done during or after the meeting.

This breakout strategy allows all attendees to be engaged and involved in developing ideas. More voices are heard with less risk that an attendee flying under the radar. This strategy also creates a sense of accountability, where each group is assigned to a task. As an added benefit, this technique can save time if a divide-and-conquer approach is used.

If the remote meeting platform you are using does not have a breakout function, there are alternative mechanisms for carrying out this strategy. For example, when you create the subgroups prior to the meeting, ask a representative of each subgroup to create a brief team meeting invite at a particular time (e.g., 20 minutes prior to the large group meeting time). After all sub-teams meet to collaborate, the larger group can come together to report ideas and discuss.

Trying out different techniques — whether embracing silence or assigning breakouts — helps mitigate some challenges that virtual meetings face. Importantly, these techniques are not intended to
become defaults for all remote meetings. But if you want to hear more ideas from your team, try silent brainstorming. If you have a particularly large team, give breakout rooms a go. After trying out a new technique, reflect and gather feedback from your team on how it went — see what is working and what is not. Learn, reflect, and grow as you expand your meetings toolbox.

**Liana Kreamer** is a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina Charlotte, studying Organizational Science under Dr. Steven G. Rogelberg. She is interested in meeting tactics and cadences, leadership styles, and team dynamics. Find her on [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com) or on UNCC’s [graduate student website](https://www.uncc.edu).

**Steven G. Rogelberg** is the Chancellor’s Professor at the University of North Carolina Charlotte for distinguished national, international, and interdisciplinary contributions and the author of *The Surprising Science of Meetings: How You Can Lead Your Team to Peak Performance* (Oxford University Press, 2019). He writes and speaks about leadership, teams, meetings, and engagement. Follow him on [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com).