7 TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE REMOTE COLLABORATION

Institute for Conservation LEADERSHIP

1 RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PEOPLE COME FIRST

Many individuals have experienced a rapid shift to a remote workplace. This sudden change may be disorienting and/or prevent new opportunities for creativity. To help ease the transition, it is important to be deliberate about building and supporting relationships virtually.

- Design your online meetings as conversations that actively engage all participants. Facilitate this by asking an opening question at the start of every meeting to get people engaged and talking. Questions such as "What was your biggest 'win' yesterday?" "What new online resources would you like to share with the group?" or "How are you staying social while practicing 'social distancing?" are all solid examples. Follow up by building in multiple discussion points throughout your meetings and limit presentation portions to 10-15 minutes maximum.

- Give folks avenues to express their feelings about the pandemic and its impacts on their life and work. Have frequent, perhaps even daily as appropriate, "check-ins" with your team members to see how they are coping.

- Open group meetings 15 minutes early and encourage folks to join and chat prior to the official start. Giving people the ability to connect informally will help maintain and build connections virtually.

2 TO GO FAST, IT HELPS TO GO SLOW

It is tempting, and sometimes necessary, to be reactive during times of great change. However, being deliberate about next steps can help minimize disruption.

- The transition to online will require more forethought and planning than in person meetings require. When planning, be mindful of why you are meeting, human dynamics and desired outcomes. Always create and distribute agendas prior to your meetings, even for long-standing meetings.

- Take time to assign roles (such as facilitator, note taker, timekeeper, chat monitor, etc.) to meeting participants. This will help participants stay engaged and makes the meeting more productive.

- Take the extra step of scheduling a standalone meeting to introduce virtual tools and train team members how to use them. Collaborative software like Zoom, Google Docs, Slido, Slack, Basecamp, etc. are great but only work when people are comfortable and the full group is able to make use of them.

3 MANAGE TENSION BETWEEN FULL GROUP NEEDS AND INDIVIDUAL WANTS

Some individuals thrive in a remote work environment while others may struggle with feeling removed from the team. To address this, be proactive and mindful about the needs of the individual and the group.

- Vary the ways you connect with your colleagues. Video conferencing is important, but also collaborate via phone, shared documents, or other online tools. Proactively ask about each person's needs and work styles. Use a variety of engagement methods to honor these differences.

- Be explicit about next steps and takeaways at the end of each meeting and send them to the group in a follow-up message after the meeting and prior to the next meeting.

- Borrow from Agile software development and do brief regular stand up meetings with your team. These meetings could be daily or several times a week at the same time. Three core questions are asked of each team member during these meetings: "What did you do yesterday?", "What are you going to do today?" and "What is currently blocking your progress?" Short stand up meetings (30 minutes max) are a great way to keep your group productive and the work moving forward.

4   POWER DYNAMICS ARE ALWAYS PRESENT

A new way of doing work requires a deliberate effort to make sure that all leaders on your staff or collaboration team are engaged and feeling supported.

- Those with informal influence or positional authority can greatly influence the ways any group works together. Pay attention to how those with power are influencing the group's engagement or disengagement. Getting early buy in from leaders in your organizations, networks, etc. to new ways of doing work can help others adopt new norms and more quickly.

- If you are leading a virtual meeting, don't be afraid to step up and truly lead. Provide clear guidance and instructions, solicit the opinions of colleagues who are passively participating, and structure time in the agenda for others to step up and lead during meetings.

- Find ways to ensure that online meetings are inclusive of all participants and not dominated by a smaller group of team members. For example, establish an order to call on people and use that for each discussion. Consider rotating who leads the meeting among staff members to balance uneven power dynamics and provide professional development opportunities.

5   DEVELOP A CULTURE TOGETHER

Much of what people lose when going remote is their connections to their colleagues. This loss can be challenging and affect morale and output. But there are simple and fun ways to combat this challenge.

- Set new expectations with your team by crowd-sourcing suggestions for how you want to work together and allowing colleagues to share their unique skills and needs. Some staff may be veterans at remote work and virtual tools and may have great tips they can share with others.

- Develop norms for participating in virtual meetings. Are you requiring everyone to be on camera during video chats? Do you want to have people raise hands when they want to speak? What lighthearted or energizing activities could be incorporated into your meetings?

- Establish a virtual "watercooler" meeting each day that allows folks to log in and chat informally.

6   ALL GROUPS PROGRESS THROUGH PREDICTABLE AND UNAVOIDABLE PHASES

New norms and new expectations can be exciting for some and challenging for others. Help your team adjust to working remotely with patience and positivity.

- When you start meeting online, don't be surprised if you feel like it's your first day working as a team. Don't be afraid to start at the beginning and create a new solid platform for the way you work together.

- Be patient as your group pushes through the inevitable awkwardness, conflicts and slower than normal production as everyone gets acclimated to this new work environment. In anticipation, add buffers to your timelines and don't forget that frequent contact will help keep your progress moving forward.

- Making conflict constructive is challenging in person and even more so when working virtually. Don't hesitate to pick up the phone to explore dissenting opinions, brewing conflict and any uncertainty that you sense.

7   GROUP REFLECTION IS NECESSARY FOR LEARNING AND IMPROVEMENT

Reflect on your group's new efforts often to discuss what is working well and what isn't, and why.

- Frequently evaluate the tools you are using to connect remotely. Are people using the collaborative tools? Too many or too few check-ins? Are people communicating effectively through other channels that should be shared broadly? Never stop iterating.

- Add group reflection as a standing agenda item to weekly meetings -- ask about what's working and what might be changed, and then change it up based on the input.

- End meetings with a discussion of what worked and what you would change. As you are learning and adapting together, the spirit of appreciation and support will really help each person and your team function well.