

83 { Succeeding virtually

“I’m going to break you in gradually to a reduction in sensory cues... starting with your sense of smell...”



In our *last Lucid Thought* and in *Lucid Thought 71* we explored some of the challenges of **working virtually, and across multiple ‘networked’ organisations.**

We observed that ‘in a virtual world, every word counts’, i.e. the need to take great care in planning, facilitating and contributing to telephone and web-based meetings given the massive reduction in communication that occurs when all visual cues are missing.

We also observed that it becomes necessary to compensate for reduced opportunities for mutual adaptation and accommodation by increasing the time spent on, and the discipline of, planning and control – because there is far less we can ‘take for granted’.

What can we do to make sure that we succeed when working virtually, rather than being virtually sure to struggle?

There are two perspectives we’d like to explore – the section

headings below are very ‘tongue in cheek’ and certainly not intended to be ageist in any way, but the messages within are very serious.

What the ‘oldies’ can learn from younger colleagues.

There’s some practical stuff that can surely be learned and that’s **how to use available technology more effectively.** Some may not like the idea of social media, virtual spaces such as Second Life™, or using the full functionality of web-based software (i.e. not just sharing a desk-top, but using on-line whiteboards etc). Of course, there is fabulous video-conferencing technology available now – but it’s expensive and in our experience heavily booked; but for critical meetings, for example a project kick-off, or key decision-point – it’s really worth trying your best to make it happen. However expensive it is to hire, it’s cheaper and more eco-friendly than international travel.

More difficult than the practical ideas above, it may also be possible over time to **adapt your communication style to be more auditory and less visual,** and as a result becoming comfortable with fewer or no visual cues. This is a bold suggestion. We know that all of us have neuro-linguistic preferences, e.g, whether we prefer visual (what you see), auditory (what you hear) or kinesthetic (what you feel) sensory channels to filter and communicate information. Experts in NLP (neuro-linguistic programming) tell us that it is possible to teach/coach people how to reach rapport quickly using different sensory language, and with people whose communication “styles” differ from one’s own. There are many books, training courses and free resources on this topic that you can find with a simple internet search. One really valuable exercise that you can do, with colleagues, is to practice communicating clearly with your visual cues blocked – close your eyes, or wear ‘black-out’ goggles. You may feel silly trying, but in our experience the quickest way to build new skills, is to block out the senses we might have relied on in the past. Give it a go!

NLP, and other practical techniques, hold the keys to helping us learn how to develop a keener auditory set of skills suited

to communication that relies on hearing not only what is said, but how it's said. We know that over-time, our species naturally adapts to changes in its environment. An absence of some cues in communication will help us to adapt to use other cues more effectively and in doing so become competent in dealing with changing contexts for conducting our business.

What the 'young ones' can learn from old-fashioned disciplines.

In the 1980's it was typical for young managers and professionals to be trained in **how to plan and chair a meeting** - sorting out the attendees, the purpose, ensuring people were in the right state of mind to attend to the task, managing the agenda to time, dealing with inevitable conflict and making sure that actions were taken by the right people, and followed up. It's obvious really that if you don't do this, you may run into difficulties - but if you really think about your meetings over the past weeks - how often does it happen now?

Sloppy meeting skills are evident to us in all sorts of companies - a sort of 'turn up and generally chat and see what happens' approach. We know of many people, ourselves included, who spend many days on 'back to back' conference calls and on those days it's difficult to make the time to plan the meeting with good 'old-fashioned' discipline. Perhaps there is an assumption in many firms that planning and contributing to a virtual meeting should be 'second nature', so an area where people do not need specific instruction, or feedback? Perhaps the assumption is that younger employees will learn from the older ones. Of course they do - but not always good habits! We could also hypothesise that the growing trend towards instant and constant communication is influencing the perceived need to plan communication. Social communication is far less formal than in the past and can adapt to moods and shifting interests. There is perhaps a paradox here that as communication media becomes increasingly instant, we need to plan what we want to achieve from virtual, or 'mixed' (some people present in the room and others not) sessions to a greater degree to ensure that perspectives are shared and real communication takes place.

In **Lucid Thought 23**, written many years ago we drew on academic work published in 2005 looking at 'socially-efficient' meetings and suggested that being really clear about the purpose of the meeting, in advance, was critical to success. A meeting designed to take a set of decisions, is a different gathering to one

designed to share ideas. Building on this idea, the techniques used to achieve a specific meeting purpose may also not be as suitable in virtual, or 'mixed' settings as they are face-to-face. For example, you may use a brainstorming technique in a face-to-face meeting to engage all the participants to share ideas and build on the perspectives of others. To achieve the same purpose in a virtual, or mixed setting needs far more planning. It is possible to achieve the same end-point though and indeed this can be a superior way of achieving the objective because the negative aspects of group dynamics such as senior people stifling the contribution of more junior people can be isolated. To do this however, you need to plan to use a mixed media approach, e.g. sharing of ideas in advance and then building on them in the actual session.

This area is explored much further in recent work on Facilitating Risk Management led by Ruth and our colleague, Penny Pullan, that you can access through the Teams areas of our **website**, or on **www.facilitatingrisk.com**.

Ruth and Penny are spending lots of time at the moment **drawing on the general skills of virtual facilitation** and applying that to the risk management process where large groups of people need to be engaged to identify, own and manage risk in short periods of time. This work is challenging, but finding out what works best for facilitating risk management has wider implications for facilitating other discussions- so watch this space for more on this topic.

In the final analysis, we are not arguing here that virtual working is easy. Neither are we arguing that it is ideal in terms of richness of communication and the building of relationships in the workplace that can withstand the inevitable strain of working on fast-moving change. What we are arguing is that **there are some specific technical, managerial and interpersonal skills that we can all learn**, or re-learn, that can make the challenges of virtual working much easier.

Our aim is to demonstrate ourselves, and to help others to succeed virtually, rather than being 'virtually sure to struggle'.

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