ENGAGEMENT BY DESIGN:
THE VIRTUAL HOUR

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REFRAMING THE NEW NORMAL

Over the past few years, the virtual world has offered us possibilities that have allowed us to bypass constructed and physical barriers. Today, working with someone from the other side of the world is easier than ever. The virtual world allows us to connect, converse, and even fall in love with people we may never meet in person. For many organizations, the normalization of using video calls and virtual meetings has revolutionized their business models. It has allowed international non-governmental organizations to impact communities far beyond reach. Coaches, therapists, and consultants can work with people who would otherwise not be clients.

With all of the convenience and access that technology provides, the virtual world is a mixed bag. For example, water-cooler conversations are no longer a regular part of the workday, and we struggle to read body language. As consultants, our success at working and building relationships with clients depends on our ability to listen diligently, consciously create silence, and make time for genuine connections before diving into content.

While the virtual world has shifted so much of what it means to work with others, there are powerful techniques for consulting and connecting under all conditions. In the fourth and latest edition of ***Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used***, Peter Block presents and unpacks elements of the consulting process that are available to us all as we meet with others digitally.

TIPS FOR HUMANIZING VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT

Harnessing the power of the small group

Whenever you are convening a group of six or more people, put everyone into breakout rooms of three people every 30 minutes.

1. Join people who know each other the least. (Random if necessary)
2. Ask questions about purpose, accountability, doubt, and commitment. Avoid questions about opinions, explanations, and theories
3. When bringing people out of small groups, ask them: "What struck you about your conversation?"
4. Avoid screen sharing. "It shrinks each human being into something smaller than a postage stamp, even into invisibility," says Peter.
5. Check–in with people halfway through and ask, "Are you getting what you want from the gathering?"
6. To get closure on each gathering, in a small group or in a closing circle, ask each to name what gifts they received from each other or from the session as a whole. This affirms the benefits exchanged in being together.

STRUCTURING THE VIRTUAL HOUR

OPENING FOR BELONGING

In a meeting that is structured for problem-solving and not belonging, the host opens the call with a green room, leaving all participants in the waiting room. As we wait behind our screens, we find the isolation that defines so much of digital engagement looming.

Let everyone enter the common room instead of putting people into a waiting room. Invite everyone to put on their cameras and switch to the gallery view. Add some music to humanize the moment, even though we all showed up to talk business.

AVOID POWERPOINTS

The less screen sharing, the better. When we display something like a PowerPoint presentation, people are minimized into thumbnails, and their energy becomes drained by going over points that could be covered in a brief opening statement.

CONNECTION BEFORE CONTENT

After a five-to-ten-minute period as a welcome, which allows people who are late to flow into the room, move into breakout rooms of three people. Community is built by connecting with strangers. Ask the brief question: "Why was it important for you to come to this meeting today?" This question allows for a conversation that is deeper than icebreakers or introductions. It allows participants to get a deeper sense of each person's purpose and the meaning they will get out of the meeting.

Once returning to the main room, allow time for a harvest. Ask three people to answer the question, "What struck you about the conversation you just had?" This is not a report-out.

PRESENTING THE CONTENT

After people have had the opportunity to connect with their small groups and hear from others in the room, move into the purpose of the gathering. Here, short PowerPoints are allowed. There are about 20 minutes where people can listen and pay attention.

BACK TO BREAKOUTS

To keep the engagement high, move back into ten-minute breakout rooms after the 20 minutes. Remind participants that while in their small groups, they should not give advice to each other; ask them instead to be curious and ask questions.

The question given to structure the small-group conversations depends on the purpose of the gathering. Here are a few questions the host might propose to the larger group:

1. If you took these ideas to heart, what commitments would be demanded of you?
2. What promises are we willing to make to each other to implement what is on the table?
3. What doubts or reservations do you have about the ideas presented today?

One ground rule is to make sure that each person knows that it is perfectly acceptable to pass or to say 'no' to any request. Saying 'no' can be an act of integrity.

CLOSING WITH GIFTS

With the short amount of time that is left after bringing people together, ask three people to share with their whole groups what value they received from the hour that they have all spent together. Ending with a gifts conversation is powerful and allows people to feel that they have actively co-created time together.

When a virtual gathering is designed with intention, with belonging being a primary focus, the convener or host is helping to build community and engagement with every minute of the virtual hour.

MORE FROM PETER BLOCK & DESIGNED LEARNING

The ideas presented throughout this E-book are based on Peter Block's best-selling book _Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used_ (4th Edition, Wiley).

To learn more about how to get your own expertise used, visit www.designedlearning.com/consult to discover more about our **Flawless Consulting®** workshop.

If you wish to learn more about designing large group gatherings in a way that fosters true and authentic collaboration, belonging, and community, visit www.designedlearning.com/convene to discover more about our **Leader As Convener** workshop.

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If you wish to join us in adapting and facilitating a shift to a new way of working, one that leads to better outcomes, a sense of belonging, authenticity, and accountability, contact info@designedlearning.com.

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