



The Scope of These Guidance Leaflets

This leaflet is one of a series which give an overview of the things that might be helpful for small charities and voluntary community groups setting up facilities to enable it to continue working effectively with Trustees, volunteers, staff & beneficiaries who are unable to meet face-to-face.

They are NOT a full and comprehensive guide to all the technology available.



Please read the Disclaimer on the last page of this leaflet.



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Social Etiquette in on-line gatherings

The word “gathering”, rather than “meeting” is being used in this leaflet to show that it applies to both formal “business” meetings (eg: a Trustees’ Board Meeting) and informal social meetings.

For the most part, social etiquette (how people in a group interact and behave with each other) in group meetings and gatherings on-line is essentially the same as when people meet or gather physically together in one place:

Making sure that everyone gets a fair opportunity to express their feelings and points of view, and that they get listened to courteously and are responded to respectfully, are paramount.

The big difference with on-line gatherings is that “body language” – the subtle, but important, way that we communicate with each other through the way we move our bodies – is much more easily overlooked when we are communicating through an on-line video link than when all the participants are sitting around a table or chatting in a room.

- ☹ The “irritated fidgeting with papers” by someone who wants to say something but “can’t get a word in edgeways”;
- ☹ The person “leaning forward, pen poised in hand”, also wanting to say something but “can’t get a word in edgeways”;
- ☹ The person sitting back in their chair, because they are bored and have lost “connection” with what the meeting is talking about;
- ☹ The person sitting grumpily with arms firmly folded, because they are feeling ignored and angry.

And the positive “body language” too:

- ☺ The little grunt of approval;
- ☺ The nod of the head;
- ☺ That person who was sitting back in their chair now moving forward to re-engage with the gathering;
- ☺ The turn of the head and smile of appreciation.

And the problems are made more difficult because in modern on-line meetings the software cleverly automatically mutes everyone's microphone when sound is coming through their computer's speakers (*ie*: somebody else is talking). That is great for reducing unwanted feedback, but it does also ensure that other bits of body-language – the subtle cough, or “Hmmm!”, or the tapping of a pencil on the table – also get cut out and so missed by others in the gathering.

As with all gatherings, the lead responsibility for “keeping an eye” on the “body-language” of the participants is with the host (*eg*: the Chair for more formal meetings). But a good sign of an efficient and effective gathering – whether a formal business meeting or an informal social gathering – is that ALL the participants are aware of not just the spoken words of other participants, but also their body-language, and are doing their best to make sure that all participants are able to contribute equitably.

Note that in the case of on-line gatherings, the leader of the gathering (*eg*: the Chair of a business meeting) may not be the same person as the “technical host” of the meeting (*ie*: the person who is making sure that all the on-line communications technology is properly set up and working).

A difficult problem in any gathering, and more so for on-line gatherings, is how to deal with the participant who just won't stop talking. With on-line automatic microphone control, the more usual vocal interruptions – the subtle coughs, or “But!....” – just get filtered out.

And a more forceful interruption, sufficient to break through the automatic microphone control, can be seen as inappropriately aggressive.

A good solution is to have a social etiquette “hand up” rule to indicate that a person wishes to interrupt and speak. That should be recognised by all and accepted by the speaker who will, at the first opportunity stop speaking to allow the other person to “get a word in”. The host/chair of the gathering will also be able to see that and, if necessary, intervene to interrupt a speaker who is insisting on continuing their “speech”.



Where a persistent speaker resumes talking immediately the person who had interrupted pauses for a breath, a useful approach (which also works well in meetings/gatherings in person) is for the host/chair to create a list of people who will speak: “Let's hear now from John, and after him Mary, and then Robert”.

Also good practice in any gathering, but particularly in on-line gatherings, is for the host/Chair periodically to pause and go round all the participants to invite them to contribute if they wish. That is particularly the case for the “quieter” participants who might be reticent to interrupt more forcibly. But while it is always good to encourage and facilitate such “quieter” member to contribute to the gathering, trying to insist that they contribute against their wishes can be VERY counter-productive.

SUMMARY

The “social etiquette” rules for on-line gatherings are essentially the same as the social etiquette rules for gatherings in person. Except that extra care must be taken not just by the Chair or host, but by ALL participants, to look out for, and respond appropriately, to the subtle “body-language” communications of others (including the “hand up – please may I interrupt” signal) which can more easily be overlooked in on-line gatherings than in “participants together in one place” gatherings.



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