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Collaboration And Teams

3 Types of Meetings — and How to Do Each One Well

by Amy Bonsall

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Summary.   The new work calendar isn't about office or home, it's about three meeting types and the conditions that serve them best. Transactional gatherings move work forward; relational gatherings strengthen connections; and adaptive gatherings help us address complex or... **more**

Meetings are broken. Something happened when work moved online in 2020, and opening up the office hasn't fixed it. Every interaction with colleagues became a video call, and our days

became a game of transactional Tetris: Where can I slot in this or that meeting? Now, with policies directing which days of the week to be where, the Tetris has gotten more complex.

In my work helping distributed and hybrid organizations flourish, I see employees commuting only to spend time in near-empty offices or on calls. It feels less like flexibility than a new constraint, and it's not building the relationships we intended. It's the worst of both worlds.

There is a better way. Instead of focusing on when and where we meet, we ought to start with why we're coming together and let that dictate logistics. When I'm asked to help rebuild relationships and strengthen complex collaboration, I begin with foundational advice: The new work calendar isn't about office or home, it's about three gathering types and the conditions that serve them best.

Three Types of Gatherings

Why do I call them gatherings and not meetings? Names signal purpose. *Meeting* has a strong connotation, suggesting people around a conference table (or the online equivalent) and a tight agenda. *Gatherings* offer multiple purposes and release the idea that we must conduct a time-stamped march to check things off lists.

Transactional gatherings move work forward; *relational gatherings* strengthen connections; and *adaptive gatherings* help us address complex or sensitive topics. As transactional gatherings are easier to conduct online, relational and adaptive gatherings have become relatively scarce. Now is a great time to reintroduce and redesign these gatherings, as all had flaws even before the pandemic. Let's look at the best conditions for all three. While I focus on distributed and hybrid environments, the lessons apply for any organization.

1. Transactional Gatherings

Transactional gatherings are about getting things done. Examples include daily standups, weekly sales updates, and planning meetings. They need three things to be successful:

Shared working documents

Cloud-based tools like Google Docs, Miro, and FigJam are game-changers. If your team hasn't been using them, now is the time. Because multiple people can edit simultaneously, everyone sees updates in real time, and they far outweigh a whiteboard only a few can see.

Screen parity

Hybrid transactional gatherings — where at least two people are in the same room and the rest are distributed — benefit from screen parity, or having each person appear in an individual tile. As anyone who's attended a hybrid meeting remotely likely knows, it's hard to interact with a virtual conference room full of blurry people.

A host on the lookout for signals of participation

While tech adjustments go a long way, hosts have an additional responsibility when not everyone is together: spying signals of participation. A raised hand or a mic going off mute are signals to engage participants. I've found it advantageous to add a supplementary role: an engagement lead to support the host in ensuring active, equitable participation. In smaller events, the engagement lead and the host are synonymous. In bigger gatherings, consider appointing separate owners.

2. Relational Gatherings

Relational gatherings are intended to strengthen our connections. Examples historically included offsites, group lunches, or team-building outings. They need three things to be successful:

Clear objectives

Relational gatherings suffer most from "let's just get everyone together" syndrome: the idea that just throwing people together will suffice. While these types of events can be lovely, they are not relationship builders. Instead, whether you're convening two people or the whole organization, relational gatherings should be intentionally designed, with clear objectives. Instead of "get to know everyone," try objectives like:

- Learn about career evolutions

- Understand driving motivations

- Reflect on growth moments

These objectives give people a hook so they can get to know each other more naturally.

Structured activities

Instead of an amorphous free-for-all, structure time deliberately. Split the session into times to reflect (alone) and share (in small groups) through activities like the following:

- Draw a map of your career, highlighting pivots.

- Share one piece of work-related advice you return to often.

- Tell a story of resilience.

Strong relationships are built by laddering up levels of openness, so these activities allow people to choose comfortable levels of exposure. A leadership team who has worked together for years and navigated rocky waters would likely share deeper stories than newcomers at an onboarding event.

If you have a subset of your team together, create a distinct, asynchronous way for non-attendees to engage. For example, for the advice activity, you could ask people to share their example over video in advance.

A mix of people from across functions, levels, or locations

Left to our own devices, we go where we're comfortable: talking to our teammates, our peers, or those in similar circumstances. But organizations need us to have relationships beyond these silos, which relational gatherings can support by deliberately mixing people who wouldn't naturally gravitate to each other.

3. Adaptive Gatherings

Adaptive gatherings help us address complex or sensitive topics where the right process or the desired outcome are not clear from the outset. These gatherings require agility and sensitivity. Examples include strategy sessions, innovation sprints, career conversations, or navigating the organizational impact of a societal issue. To be successful, they require three conditions:

A malleable, distinct environment

When I was at the design firm IDEO, where almost every client gathering was adaptive, we preferred rooms separate from team meeting spaces. Ideal were spaces where furniture was moveable, people could mill around, and there was no formal hierarchy implied (board rooms: out!). Space influences how people interact, so the location was the first clue to participants that this was not a run-of-the-mill conversation.

If you're online, break out of video boxes. Design brainstorming sessions with video off and the focus on a digital jamboard. And try to host delicate conversations (where body language matters)

with people sitting on couches or chairs rather than at desks, with the camera farther back to reduce intensity and allow for full-body signals.

A sense of safety

Historically, difficult or sensitive conversations happened in person, so we could watch body language and use physical surroundings to create a sense of safety. But we've learned over the pandemic that this isn't always necessary — or desirable. An example is sensitive career conversations. While your instinct may be to hold these meetings in person, several employees have told me they prefer these discussions online. The screen helps them hold their emotions in check, providing a greater sense of control. Allow employees autonomy over where these are held (some may prefer online, others a walk-and-talk).

Release valves to dissolve tensions

Often, complex problems have time pressure, and release valves can help. To navigate to conclusions from a place of calm, create separation between discussing options and making decisions. In the room, that might be a coffee break with a shared laugh about something off topic. Online, encourage everyone to get outside and not think about the issue. This change in focus is not expendable, but rather a critical component of a successful outcome.

In a distributed organization I led, we needed to build a new guiding framework after a charged incident. To dissipate tension, we altered cadence and structure. First, we hosted a small digital round table to reflect on the incident (to allow emotions to flow when assessing the pain point). Next, we held one-on-ones with various individuals to understand diverse needs (the intimacy helped people feel more comfortable being vulnerable). Finally,

we hosted a session to craft our new framework (by then, the emotions from the first two stages had sufficient space to dissipate).

What should you do if your gathering is all (or none) of the above?

While these use cases benefit from different conditions, it doesn't mean you can't combine them. An example is an offsite slated to build relationships, address complex strategic issues, and get work done. Set separate conditions for each: Mix and match people who wouldn't naturally gravitate to each other, allow strategic discussions to have breathing room, and use distinct spaces for each type of activity.

Other events may not feel like they are transactional, relational, *or* adaptive gatherings. That's okay, too. Because the path to an effective gathering is always to ask: Why are we meeting? What are we trying to accomplish? And to let each need have its own space and place. You may be surprised by the rhythm of when to convene in person. While it will vary by team needs, it's more likely to be on a monthly, quarterly, or project cadence than weekly.

And if you can't make organization-wide change, you can still impact your own gatherings. Within a policy that dictates where you should be, not why, reorient how you conduct gatherings by shifting your priorities from the logistics of your calendar to the needs of your people.

Amy Bonsall is the CEO of **Collective**, a platform that helps distributed organizations and their people flourish. Prior, Amy was an IDEO and Old Navy executive. She's been on the pages and stages of Entrepreneur, IDEO.com, SXSW, Singularity University, and
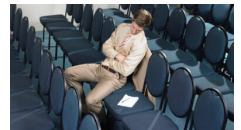
more, covering flourishing at work, working from anywhere, distributed organizations, and behavioral prototyping. She co-teaches a course on Designing a Business, hosted by IDEOU. Follow Amy on **Instagram**.

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