



Power Dynamics and Inclusion in Virtual Meetings

By Evelyn Arellano, Program Director at Aspiration

Many of us are sheltering-in-place, practicing social solidarity by physically distancing, and shifting to majority online work and organizing in midst of the global coronavirus pandemic. For many folks that means adjusting to different work spaces and work-flows, ones where virtual meetings have become a regular and expected activity. On the one hand, being able to work from home or participate in virtual meetings represents a very clear form of privilege, in that you have work to do and don't have to do it in higher-risk settings like caregiving and essential retail. But within our online meeting spaces, other forms of privilege and associated power dynamics play out in ways that undermine our work and marginalize important voices and perspectives.

These considerations matter now more than ever. To quote a couple of allies...

Our ally and co-conspirator [Cheekay Cinco](#) has observed, *"We have never been in a situation like this. Before this, online meetings have been done to prepare for and support an eventual face-to-face meet-up. But now, we are entirely reliant on virtual meetings in order to share info and experience, and to communicate with each other. Add to that that we are experiencing a global pandemic, not something that many of us have experience in, while trying to remain functional and operational in our work."*

Our friend [Adrian Martinez](#) responded to an earlier draft of this post saying *"For some people, working from home has been the norm, staying indoors to avoid sickness has been the norm, and skepticism of medical systems has been the reality. For many disability justice advocates, getting workplace accommodations and worker protections have been a fight and the pandemic is making workplaces adapt. As we build a new reality together, what can we learn from movements where people rely on critical connections to stay alive?"*

Facilitating a meeting where everyone feels empowered to participate meaningfully is no easy task, and is becoming ever more necessary, as the decisions we make together online are increasingly determining the ways we are responding to vital community needs offline.

Big love and appreciation to the folks who are learning and striving to hold more inclusive, equitable, accessible online meetings. We feel fortunate to be in community with an amazing crew of strategic facilitators, capacity builders, trainers and designers, who are openly exchanging experiences, tips and resources on how to hold more inclusive meetings.

What follows are a few things that we are learning as we practice how to manage power dynamics and hold space with awareness, intentionality, and from an empowered place in the online spaces we are a part of. I invite you to read this as a start of a conversation and not by any means a comprehensive understanding and approach. I also really welcome folks to challenge any assumptions we are making, as I am sure we are. We have learning curves and are striving to be self aware of our privilege, healthy bandwidth and contexts. We are eager to continue learning and are always curious about the ways you're managing power dynamics and inclusion in your spaces.

What we are seeing as so much of our work goes virtual

As organizers and facilitators in tech and movement work, my colleagues and I are always strategizing and practicing ways we can recognize and invert power dynamics in everything we do. Something we have been thinking a lot about lately is the ways we see power dynamics show up explicitly, and not so explicitly, in virtual meetings, where we constantly see a 'few voices privileged over the rest.'



c5
@c5



With this renewed reliance on virtual meetings / conferences / workshops, we're back to traditional models of sharing info / knowledge / experience. Where a few voices are privileged over the rest. *sigh*

10:23 PM · May 6, 2020 · [Twitter Web App](#)

Raise your hand if you have ever been in a virtual meeting where:

- One or two people do all the talking;
- You don't feel safe or empowered to share your thoughts, ideas, or questions;
- You don't feel the value of what you or others have to contribute is acknowledged by everyone in the meeting, especially the hosts;
- One or a few people feel able to interrupt or talk down to other people;
- Someone uses their specialized knowledge (i.e. on tech), to assert their views or force a decision;
- Somebody has a hard time meaningfully participating because they have a poor internet connection;
- Accessibility needs are not met for the group (e.g. offering large font print, interpretation, translation, and/or captions)

If you are tired of seeing this play out in online spaces and want to learn and practice ways to joyfully and lovingly subvert this dynamic, I am excited to learn with you.

First and foremost, it is important to remember we are not helpless or alone in these situations. We have agency to design, hold, and manage a space that is more inclusive and accessible to all voices.

When preparing to hold or facilitate a virtual meeting, we find it helpful to start from naming and understanding the ways folks hold power and privilege in virtual spaces and how that power is expressed. We then work to manage those power dynamics both by planning ahead and mapping out how to respond in real time if/when they do play out.

What are some ways that people have power and privilege in virtual meetings?

How do folks hold power and privilege in virtual spaces? Some folks are better set up than others -- some have more access to the hardware and software needed to show up fully on virtual platforms, while others have to navigate space, time, and other factors (e.g. care work, location privacy) more creatively in order to be fully present. This gives some people an advantage over others, like in many other spaces.

As such, this is further compounded and complicated by ongoing **systemic privilege** and **systemic inequality** around **race**, **gender** and **class**. To name a few privileges and dynamics in greater detail:

- **Technology capacity** - people who have the necessary tech at home, those who have a designated work or personal computer, and those who have computers that can use the latest version of the meeting platform all have an advantage over those whose only way of joining a virtual meeting is calling in or using older technology. Those who join over the phone do not have the same capabilities as those who can use the desktop application, have a big screen, can chat easily or get the links posted on the chat, etc. We also hear of households having to share one computer now, with kids and/or other family members who need to complete schoolwork or access resources.
- **Digital literacy** - while an ever-increasing number of folks have grown up around and with access to computers, it is always important to remember those who don't have fundamental digital experience. Not everyone knows how to type quickly, navigate a computer interface, or use the controls in a virtual meeting.
- **Better Internet bandwidth** - people who have good internet bandwidth have better connectivity quality, meaning clearer video and voice over most virtual meeting platforms.
- **Designated work space** - people who have a designated quiet, private, well-lit space where they can connect, those who have a house, bedroom, home office to work from and concentrate within.
- **Abilities** - not many online platforms are designed with disability and [neurodivergent](#) needs in mind or at the center. Those who are blind, deaf, hard of hearing, or disabled are left out when accessibility needs are not anticipated before the meeting. Adrian adds, "*Disability justice advocates have been organizing from home and in their beds for a long time, we can learn from our comrades at [Sins Invalid](#), [Disability Culture Club](#), and leaders in the disability justice movement.*"
- **Freedom from care-giving roles** (those not looking after children, elders, or loved ones) - some folks have the benefit of being able to be fully present because they are not taking care of children, family members, roommates or friends while doing call. In the same breath, it is important to note that care work and family support looks different for everyone.

- **Facility with spoken language** - Those for whom the online meeting is held in their native or first language.
- **Virtual meeting experience** - those with experience using online meeting platforms, those who are familiar with video-meeting etiquette or can apply it easily. For example, understanding where to turn off the mic and video, using the chat channel, etc.
- **Knowledge privilege** - folks who have domain-specific knowledge that they use to marginalize others or control the flow of meetings, for example: techies who use jargon and acronyms to push through decisions and plans.
- **Seniority privilege** - folks higher up in organizations often feel more entitled to speak and those less senior feel less empowered to speak.
- **Relational privilege** - folks who know people on the call. Someone who knows or is familiar with more of the people in a meeting will be much more comfortable to participate and take up space than someone who does not know others present.

Cheekay also highlights that, "*the intersection of those privileges and dynamics is also important to consider.*" For example, "*A non-native speaker participating from a context of low internet bandwidth is going to be so much more disempowered in that meeting than a native speaker participating from a high bandwidth context.*"

What are some ways that people assert power and privilege in virtual meetings?

Some folks assert power and privilege in virtual meetings in ways that are both frustrating and disempowering to others in the space. Ways these are expressed include:

- Speaking more than one's fair share, monologuing or always having to respond to every comment;
- Interrupting, both preventing others from completing their comments, but also inhibiting the flow of the dialog;
- Arguing and debating, taking focus away from collaborative and co-created outcomes and putting emphasis on individual views and opinions;

- Using vocabulary not everyone understands, including jargon and acronyms, to both assert knowledge superiority as well as to marginalize those not able to speak in those terms;
- Asserting seniority or role power, overriding a group decision or rough consensus with a unilateral "this is how we will do this" declaration;
- Paraphrasing and re-framing other's comments in ways that do not respect the original meaning or intent;
- Harassing and insulting other participants, either through disrespectful or offensive comments, or through more passive-aggressive mannerisms such as eye rolls and exasperated sighs.

We know that it doesn't have to be this way.

Our vision for richly empowering, effective online meetings

In everything we host or co-organize, we ask whether we doing everything we can to achieve meetings which are:

- **More inclusive** - where folks feel that they can contribute their voice knowing that what they say matters, is important and has direct impact to meeting goals and outcomes.
- **More equitable** - where folks in non-senior positions are heard, are able to engage meaningfully. Senior leadership are not the only folks speaking and making decisions, and everyone present hears from those working directly with community members, etc. Emerging leaders are centered.
- **More accessible** - where folks with varying tech and abilities can participate meaningfully.
- **Truly valuable** - where folks find work done in the meeting was useful to their work, and participants feel like their time has been well spent.

What follows are our learnings-in-progress on how to realize this vision on a day-to-day, meeting-by-meeting basis.

Managing power dynamics before the meeting and in real time

Below are a few steps we work through and plan before and during virtual meetings. Some are proactive things we do and set up before the meeting. Others are practices and mechanisms for how to respond within meetings when we perceive an imbalance in the voices who are contributing or unhealthy dynamics in the way the meeting is flowing.

Before the meeting:

- **Schedule mindfully** - Schedule group meetings at least 2-3 days ahead of time so that folks can arrange schedules, care-taking, quiet space, tech, etc.
- **Build the narrative** - Tell a story that ties meeting participants together in unity and solidarity ahead of the meeting. What is the purpose and importance of the meeting? How do the target outcomes depend on equitable, inclusive, co-equal participation?
- **Convey the meeting goals and purpose** in simple, concrete, inclusive language, and **request input and feedback from all** who will be participating to maximize value and relevance for all involved. Make sure those attending are clear on how time will be spent. These goals are ideally sourced and affirmed by participants before the meeting.
- **Proactively negotiate** - If you anticipate specific individuals will be less willing to yield their power or participate co-equally, and the meeting is important enough to justify the effort, think about trying to engage them in advance and pre-flight your plan for the meeting and the importance of all voices being heard. This may not guarantee that they honor the meeting environment you are trying to establish, but it gives you a concrete touch point to reference if and when they over-contribute or otherwise assert their power or privilege.
- **Offer accessibility and accommodations support** - Ask participants to share if they will need translation, interpretation, or any other accommodations that would allow them to participate fully and meaningfully before the meeting. Be sure to also ask if those who plan to participate need any assistance in setting up and learning the technologies that will be used. This is particularly important when there are accessibility and digital literacy needs. Be sure to include a reasonable time-frame for participants to inform you about their needs and for you to respond. Documented notes and video recordings are tools that make our work more accessible.

- **Share meeting resources** - If you have context and visuals you want participants to review before or during the meeting (for example, slides, images, or videos), provide that information ahead of time whenever possible, in order to minimize "broadcast" phases of the agenda and maximize participants' ability to reflect and synthesize before the meeting. Providing offline versions of meeting documents also allows those only joining by phone to have richer context and participation.

In other words, make virtual meetings not about pushing out information, but much more about discussing and building on provided information, and in turn co-creating shared vision, decisions and actionable next steps.

At the beginning of meeting:

- **Start with introductions and check-in** - Take a little time at start of meeting for folks to introduce themselves if they don't know each other, and to also create a human connection by saying how they are doing.
 - Go first, to model appropriate sharing, or start with participants and go last, instead inviting someone who models introductions with self awareness to go first.
 - Include a short check-in, to ground the group in the shared moment. This can be sharing a word that encompasses how folks are doing, a shout out to boost group morale and energy, or anything else brief and inclusive.
 - Ask people about the pronouns they use (refrain from using "preferred pronouns" as pronouns are mandatory for respecting gender identity). One way that transphobia operates is by forcing people to make assumptions about peoples gender based on appearance and other cues. Ask people to share their pronouns and interrupt transphobia in the moment if it happens.
- **Communicate participation guidelines** to invite everyone to engage with respect and help create an inclusive and safe environment. Below are guidelines we share in our online meetings, which we tailor and adapt based on the size and make-up of meetings:
 - Please focus on listening, and on appreciating what others are trying to say, not only on what you are hearing.
 - Wherever possible, please refrain from multitasking on email or social media and strive to remain fully present and tuned in to what others are saying and feeling.

- Please assume best intent in everyone's comments and strive to keep a constructive tone in your own.
 - Please use simple, accessible language. In particular, please avoid jargon and acronyms, so that all may fully participate.
 - When you speak, please make just one point and then let others speak. We want everyone to have an equal chance to speak. In a group of "n" people, speak no more than "1/nth" of the time.
 - Please speak for yourself and your organization when making comments, using "I" or your organization name. Please don't speak for the assembled group by speaking as "we".
 - Help us be mindful of the schedule and stay on time; we anticipate many people will have much they want to say, but please support us in moving the dialog forward.
- **Honor privacy** - Honoring people's privacy is our default. If we need to record, we name it early and allow folks to opt out, by getting off video, or managing their participation and contributions. Any plans to record should also be conveyed in pre-meeting communications, so concerns can be addressed before meeting time.
 - **Don't forget accessibility needs** - Be mindful of participants who may not be able to see or hear or otherwise fully participate in virtual meetings. For instance, when working to include blind folks, use more descriptive language that paints a picture of what others are seeing and otherwise provides richer context than they could acquire themselves. Some people use screen readers to access information - make sure your presentation has image descriptions and refrain from using images/GIFs with flashing lights as they can cause seizures, headaches, and migraines for chronically ill people. If you anticipate participants who are deaf or hard of hearing, make sure to be using a platform that supports good real-time closed captioning and other non-verbal mechanisms for communicating essential information.

- **Review virtual meeting etiquette.** Points we make include:
 - On the call, please plan to be a self-aware participant
 - Please indicate you want to speak by raising your hand on video; if you are not able to use or raise your hand, please feel free to speak up, but please try not to interrupt others.
 - Stay muted when you are not speaking.
 - Please be mindful of background noise and join the call from a quiet location. Construction sites, windy gardens and non-quarantined internet cafes do not qualify as quiet locations.
 - All parents and caregivers shall enjoy an irrevocable "background/foreground kid and dependent noise" exception at all times, but muting etiquette still applies.
- **Use a shared online document whenever possible.** Best practices for shared documents in virtual meetings is a longer topic than fits in this post, but providing an online document that starts out with agenda and essential meeting details and grows to include notes and comments is a transparent and inclusive way to both document the meeting and engage with participants.
- **Ask for support in monitoring your online document** - If it is viable, it helps to have someone assist you in monitoring the online document. Things others can help you monitor include:
 - Capturing key points, comments, and action items so that participants can also read what's going on, or catch up if they missed something.
 - Catching participant questions and comments for those who do not have direct access to the chat, raise hand features, or other platform features.
 - This allows the meeting facilitator to focus on facilitating.
- **Safety mechanisms** - Provide information for separate channels where participants can reach you or someone to help if they feel disrespected or unsafe. For larger meetings, provide a phone number, email, or other channel for immediate support.
- **Announce ways folks can get technical support** - Let folks know how to get support if they have tech or connectivity issues in order to avoid disrupting the flow of your meeting. If possible, have someone ready to respond and support.

- **When multiple participants are wanting to speak, employ a "talking stack"** - A talking stack is a list of participants who have indicated they want to make a comment or contribution. Introduce or review a stack early so folks know the drill and let those who are joining by phone know that they can come off mute and say they'd like to be added to the stack. If using a shared online document, consider managing the talking stack as a bullet list in the document, and ask participants to write their name if they want to speak. For those not able to view and edit the document, you can invite them to request their name be added to the stack.

Throughout the meeting:

- **Continue to check in with the group periodically** - Ask if there are any thoughts or questions, and emphasize wanting to make space for those who group has not heard from much before you move into next topic.
- **Sustain the narrative** - Narrate where the group is in the overall agenda, acknowledging work done, outcomes produced and decisions made. Continue checking back against the goals you collectively defined at the outset. Keep everyone focused on work you have yet to do, and how it will get done in your time together.
- **Plan for responding to challenging or "problem" participants** - Dealing with "problem" participants who don't work and collaborate well with others is a bigger topic than fits in this overview. That said, sometimes folks don't participate constructively, and their behaviour can marginalize others in the meeting. If someone in the meeting is being disrespectful or taking more than their share of space, you have a few options to work with:
 - Remind the group as a whole about participation guidelines as well as the outcomes you are collectively working toward. Name the problematic behaviour without attributing it to one individual, e.g. "I'm hearing a couple of folks interrupting others, please be respectful and collaborative, so that we get to hear from everyone and reach the goals we set out to achieve". The idea is to avoid calling anyone out too soon.
 - If the individual continues to act counterproductively or worse, politely address them by name, respectfully name what you are observing, and ask them to check their behaviour. In particular, it is often helpful to invite them to "listen actively".

- If a participant continues to negatively impact the meeting, you can ask them to leave, usually with a final warning.
- Bottom line, it's critical to counter inappropriate and nonconstructive behaviour quickly and directly, so that all present feel safe and respected.
- **Make sure notes are getting captured** - Truly inclusive, transparent and productive meetings depend on good documentation. Make sure key points are getting recorded in the shared document, and remind everyone to be tracking the notes, adding anything they think is missing, and correcting anything they believe needs correcting.

At the end of the meeting:

- Tie off the narrative - Did you achieve or get closer to your group's target outcomes?
- Affirm outcomes and action items.
- Commit to send out the notes.
- Thank everyone for being fully present and honoring the participation guidelines.
- If you have time (always honor everyone's time by ending on time) do a closing check-out - closing check outs are best done as one word or one sentence.

After the meeting:

- Send a high-level summary of the meeting - This is a good way to share what was achieved or work done towards goals during your time together and to catch up folks who could not attend. Send recording if you took one and/or your document of the agenda and notes captured.
- Ask folks to share feedback. Ask them for input on ways meeting can feel more productive and time well spent, any accessibility needs.
- Remind folks how they can reach out to you to follow up, share thoughts and reflections, and/or ask questions.

Applying these practices where you are

What I have shared here is what we have learned in our own work and from our friends and allies. We welcome thoughts, input, further discussions and collaboration as others seek to apply these practices.

We need to acknowledge that we are navigating new dimensions of work and collaboration, so let's remember to be good to ourselves as we continue exploring and applying new practices and approaches. We need to embrace an iterative learning mindset as we experiment. When things don't work? To quote Cheekay, *"then we adjust. We are learning as we go. We are testing what we know works in face-to-face meetings to online workshops. Some will work, some won't. Because the point is to make that shared time meaningful for everyone. And I find that when my methods are flexible, those events end up being successful."*

To also quote [Gunner](#), *"As we focus on addressing power dynamics and holding safe and equitable spaces both online and offline, we can also amplify the celebratory, playful, and uplifting part of doing this work together to provide the most welcoming energy for all those present."*

Know that you do not have to feel alone as you work to hold more inclusive and empowering space in online meetings and events. We would love to hear from you! Feel free to reach out and share what you are up to with us anytime at virtualmeetings@aspirationtech.org. What are some practices you're finding useful to manage power dynamics in online meetings?

Conclusion

I hope these approaches and practices can prove relevant, applicable, and practical for recognizing and managing power dynamics in your virtual meetings.

I am learning many of these practices from my colleagues at Aspiration and a community of folks who have shared and evolved these approaches over many years. Deep thanks to those who have and continue to collaborate and co-create with us.

Big love to those who are working to hold space together in more inclusive, equitable and accessible ways. We're always working to hold more valuable and impactful virtual meetings, collaborations, and events and welcome your thoughts, questions and perspectives.

Thanks and acknowledgements

Deep gratitude and appreciations to all the amazing folks I got to collaborate with to improve this post. In particular, huge love and props to Gunner, Cheekay, [Teresa](#) and Adrian from [MediaJustice](#), and Dirk from [FabRiders](#). Thanks for sharing your knowledge, experiences, encouragement and opportunity to learn alongside you.



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