

Guide to Leading Virtual Groups

BEST PRACTICES FOR GROUP FACILITATORS AND TRAINERS

INTRODUCTION

Virtual meetings allow group members to connect in meaningful ways even when physically apart. A prepared and thoughtful facilitator and fully engaged participants can create an environment where group members feel valued and cared for and where the Spirit can be present.

Meeting virtually presents special challenges to maintaining full engagement, connection, and belonging. It's a learning process for both facilitators and participants. If you have a question about what platform to use or how to use it, consult with your local ward or branch leaders.

Use the following tips in addition to the facilitator's guide for your group and any other necessary training materials (for self-reliance groups, addiction recovery groups, and so on).

OVERALL BEST PRACTICES

- Bring positive energy and an active interest in each person to the meeting.
- Encourage everyone to use video over call-in whenever possible to increase communication and personal connection.
- Carefully prepare for each session (see the checklist below).
- Set up your physical environment to remove distractions.
- Keep the group size small enough that everyone has a chance to actively participate.
- Use time well to keep sessions from being overly long. This will help keep people motivated and engaged.
- Ensure that there is interaction early and often in the meeting.



BEFORE THE FIRST MEETING

- Send a warm welcome message to everyone. Introduce yourself and send the “Virtual Group Participant Guide” to participants. Ask them to review it in advance of the meeting.
- Practice using your meeting technology. Get to know how to use the chat, turn on your video, test your audio, and try out other features. Create a test meeting with a friend to practice.
- Figure out how you will help people take turns speaking. This could include raising hands or, if possible, using the “raised hand” feature of your platform.
- Schedule the meeting at a convenient time for everyone, keeping time zones in mind.
- Consider ways to learn about your group members and their needs. Find out if any language differences exist.
- It can be helpful to have an assistant among the group—for example, to help people individually with technology or connection issues, to answer questions appearing in chat, or to bring points made in chat into the conversation. It can also help to have a timekeeper for various parts of the lesson.

CHECKLIST—PREPARING FOR EACH SESSION

- Plan how much time to spend on each part of the lesson.
- Plan how and when you will encourage interactivity and engagement.
- Make sure you are comfortable with all the meeting technology features you plan to use (such as screen sharing and chat).
- Have ready on your computer's desktop anything you will need to share by screen.
- Have group materials in hand (the group manual and so on).
- Arrange for an assistant if desired.

TIPS FOR A SMOOTH START

- Welcome participants warmly by name.
- Invite participants to mute their audio if they have background noise that would distract the group.
- Review the goals of the meeting, and point participants to the agenda or lesson outline.
- Commit to creating a safe environment in the group, and invite others to do the same.
- Review the “During the Meeting” guidelines in the “Virtual Group Participant Guide” together.

TIPS FOR ENGAGING PARTICIPANTS

- Invite active participation every 5–10 minutes.
- Use the activities supplied in the manuals.
- Ensure that activities support the learning goals.

Examples:

- Ask a question.
- Invite participants to share in chat.
- Complete an activity from the group manual.
- Discuss a quote, idea, scripture, video, or example.

- Brainstorm solutions to a problem.
- Work through a case study.

- Share the current manual page on your screen to avoid confusion and keep focus.
- Be creative to enable partner or smaller-group activities. People could phone, privately chat, or use breakout rooms if your platform supports this. Explain the task and the time frame before dividing up.
- When showing a video, share the link in the chat feature and give time for others to watch it individually.

RESPONDING TO CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

If emotions escalate during a meeting, consider suggesting a short break to the group. Then connect privately via phone or chat with the participant having trouble. You may ask, “Are you OK? You seem really upset. Is there anything I can do to help?”

Check to be sure all participants are OK before resuming the meeting. If it seems that the person may be in an unsafe situation or may create one in his or her home, call law enforcement and notify priesthood leaders immediately.

TIPS FOR DISCUSSION

- Instead of asking for the “correct” answer, ask for opinions, experiences, and thoughts.
- On occasion, give people time to write their thoughts before sharing with the group.
- Divide into smaller groups for discussion, and then share thoughts with the larger group.
- Use inclusive language such as *we*, *us*, *our*, *let’s*, *together*, and so on.



- Embrace a diversity of experience, background, and perspectives.
- Genuinely thank those who share, even if you disagree with them.
- Choose someone to be a timekeeper to help keep discussion within a designated time frame.
- If a person dominates discussion, gently prompt him or her to allow others an opportunity to speak.

TIPS FOR CONNECTING BETWEEN MEETINGS

- Send a reminder of action items, the next week’s agenda, and a link to join the meeting.
- Consider forming a group text message or using social media apps.
- Remain interested in the lives, challenges, and successes of your group members, and look for ways to show them you care in between meetings. Be respectful of the level of engagement they are comfortable with.