Reimagining Professional Meetings: Another Lesson From COVID-19

Because this is November, I should probably be writing about things I am thankful for. So, after family, friends, and good health, I would have to put reuniting with colleagues right at the top of the list. As I write, I am just back from my first professional meeting—in person! For me, being there in person is the way to go, but I also got a glimpse of what a hybrid meeting might look like. As well as how we will endure the lingering risk of COVID.

Let's start with COVID. The meeting organizers required masks inside the lecture hall unless you were speaking, and thoughtfully put 6 feet of distance between participants in the audience. However, on dais for the panel discussion, faculty sat side by side with no masks, and during the coffee break, everyone took off masks to drink coffee and eat pastries, chatting side by side. The inconsistency in practice was very evident. I personally think the time has come to forget the masks if you are fully vaccinated; conversely, I recommend that those who are immunosuppressed or unvaccinated or worry about acquiring a breakthrough infection attend virtually. It is just too hard to mix it up in social settings.

As for the hybrid meeting, there were about 60 participants in person and 100 online, including several faculty members. I was very impressed with the technology they used for the faculty. As virtual speakers, they were live, not recorded, and I suspect they were using special camera equipment. These people were not talking into their computer cameras. They looked straight at you and were interactive with other panel members or as co-chairs. It seemed quite seamless. During the break, the faculty stayed with you on robot computers and visited with you around the refreshment tables. Pretty cool!

Because I was there in person, I don't know what the experience was like for virtual attendees. I know I am tired of virtual meetings, but when they are live rather than recorded, it's a bit better. Spontaneity keeps it interesting. So, for those times when cost or schedules do not permit travel, having a virtual option is better than nothing. And good camerawork and other technology makes a big difference.

Of course, going in person means travel of some sort. This was my first airplane trip for professional reasons, and now I remember why my stress level was much improved when I was homebound. The airports were crowded. My flight was delayed. I nearly missed my connection. The person behind me on the trip home looked and sounded as if he was very sick with COVID. Yikes! I was very glad to get home.

All the negatives aside, I am ready to head out again. I have missed my tribe, and it is very good to be back with them. People do need people.

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