



STRATEGIC | OFFSITES

WELCOME TO THE MOON!

Learn to Use Your Virtual Meeting Superpowers

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In 1971, Alan Shepard hit a golf ball farther than anyone in history. Swinging one-handed with a taped together six iron, Shepard's shot flew for seventy seconds. Some say the ball traveled over two miles.

Shepard's secret? He was standing on the Moon, as Commander of Apollo 14.

Though it took 180 pounds of life support equipment for Shepard to breathe, on the Moon he became a golf Superman. The physics of a low-gravity environment gave him the ability to do something unimaginable on Earth.



Since last March, we've been working with companies around the world as they virtualize previously in-person meetings – from routine weekly staff updates to strategy offsites to annual leadership and sales conferences. In the course of our work we've discovered that in-person meetings and virtual meetings are governed by completely different underlying "physics" – just like the Earth and the Moon.

Doing business on Zoom, WebEx, Teams and the like presents many challenges (e.g., the inability to read body language, video call fatigue, reduced participation of introverted team members, technical glitches, etc.), but what's overlooked is that these virtual platforms provide managers an extraordinary set of superpowers – the ability to do what was previously unthinkable in the earthbound world of conference tables and flip charts.

Welcome, friends, to the Moon. You might as well get used to it. We're going to be here for a while.

While COVID-19 will eventually pass to the point when we can once again meet in person, your life as an executive will never revert to the old days when meeting by video was – for most – the rare exception. The sooner you begin to understand, explore and utilize these new superpowers, the better. Let's take a look at just three examples and see how they work in practice.

1. The Power of Polling and "Yes, but..."

Samantha and her team face a tough decision during her weekly Zoom staff meeting: whether to implement a 20% across the board pay cut from now to year end. Nearly everyone seems comfortable with the idea that this is difficult, but necessary. Kathy raises some concerns. Her team feels underpaid, a recurring theme every time compensation is on the table. After a brief conversation about the immediate need to reduce costs, Samantha is ready to bring the discussion to a close.

She has three options:

Option A – Just ask.

In person, Samantha might say, "So what do others think? It's going to be rough, but are we good with the 20% pay cut or not?" then glance around the conference room

table, looking for subtle visual cues from her team members – a turned head, tapping finger, or eyes to the ceiling – and call on them. She had worked with Ian, her CFO, for years, and had a “sixth sense” when he was holding back his opinion. Just a few months ago, she would look at him across her conference table and ask, “Ian, Is there something we are overlooking here?” giving him the opening to bring up a valid, unaddressed issue.

But in a virtual meeting, Samantha’s “sixth sense” disappears. Her eyes scan the postage-stamp sized images of individual team members looking for some indications of discomfort or disagreement. No reason to call on Ian this time – he’s staring into his screen with a blank expression, just like the others. And since he hates being at the center of attention, the last thing Ian will do is speak up so his face fills the center of everybody’s screen.

Since Samantha always tells her team “If you think something, say something,” she takes their silence as approval and announces “OK. It’s agreed. 20% across the board pay cuts ‘till year end” though she has a nagging feeling something may have been overlooked – that she may have made a decision prematurely.

Option B – Take an up/down vote.

Samantha recently learned more about her Zoom software, so instead of just asking for verbal approval, she asks her team members to hit a button to vote yes or no. The result looks like this:

A Yes/No Vote Taken at a Virtual Meeting Asks, “Should We Impose a 20% Across-the-Board Pay Cut?”

Participants (10)				
Team member	JC James Curtis	✓	📞	📺
	MK Max Krueger	✓	📞	📺
	SC Samantha Colby	✓	📞	📺
	TM Tess Magner	✓	📞	📺
	JB Josh Bartley	✓	📞	📺
	KM Kathy Moss	✗	📞	📺
	JT Jordan Thompson	✓	📞	📺
	IH Ian Howe	✓	📞	📺
	BN Bill Nader	✓	📞	📺
	CS Chris Scott	✓	📞	📺

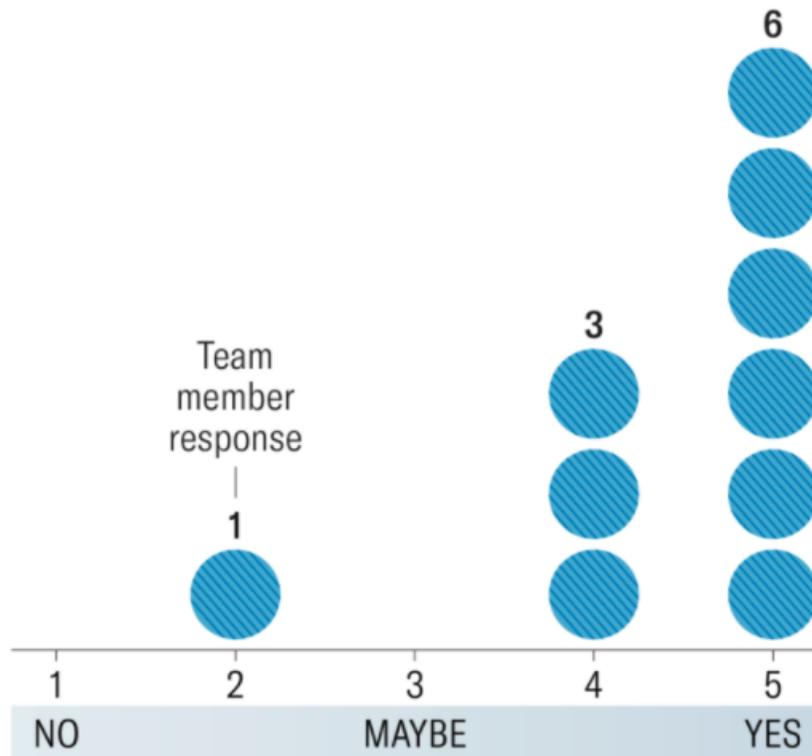
There’s Kathy’s “no.” And nine “yes” votes. The up/down voting gets her no further than looking into empty faces. Samantha moves on to the next topic with a gnawing sense that something just wasn’t right, and her frustration with virtual meetings went up yet another notch.

Option C – Poll the Group.

What if, after hearing Kathy’s concerns, Samantha uses Zoom to quickly launch a poll asking her team the following question: On a scale from 1-5 (1-No, 3-Maybe, 5-Yes), should we impose a 20% across the board pay cut?

The results look like this: One executive votes a two. Samantha assumes that was Kathy. Six vote a five, while three select four.

A Team Poll Taken at a Virtual Meeting Asks, “Should We Impose a 20% Across-the-Board Pay Cut?”



We call the executives who voted four, a “Yes, but.” They agree, but have some reservations. Interestingly, it’s not just Ian. Besides Kathy’s known opposition, three other members of Samantha’s team are also not fully onboard with the decision.

Sharing the polling results on screen with her team, Samantha asks “Looks like we’ve got some hesitation here. Why the 4’s? What’s standing in the way of three of you giving it a 5?”

Now Ian has the opening to raise his concern. Not only has Samantha asked, but Ian feels bolstered in his ability to air his concerns seeing that he is not the only one with

reservations. Since the “4s” have now been called on, he feels comfortable saying what is on his mind.

“Samantha, yesterday you and I talked about funding a bonus pool for service techs working at customer sites – about 10% of our workforce. If 10% of our employees are getting bonuses, it’s not really an ‘across the board’ cut. It’s a cut for most, but some will see higher paychecks.”

Ian is right. Samantha assumed everyone knew about increases for the service “heroes,” but she hadn’t discussed the idea with the full group. The pay cut wouldn’t be “across the board.” There are exceptions. Once again Ian’s attention to detail keeps his boss from a potential blunder.

Before her team switched from in-person to virtual meetings, Samantha could have used some form of polling. But our experience shows that managers rarely did so – especially in regularly scheduled, smaller meetings like Samantha’s staff meeting. Now Samantha can easily and quickly set up and launch a poll in less than a minute, and her team can vote anonymously or publicly. Polling gives individuals like Ian an opportunity to see they’re not the only ones with a concern. And it gives leaders who, like Samantha, have lost the ability to read non-verbal cues – a Superpower to help compensate by quickly surfacing areas of misalignment, including the “Yes, buts” and ensure an important conversation is not closed down prematurely.

2. Deconstructing the Two-Day Offsite

Brian, an executive from a \$3 billion global manufacturer, recently described his organization’s annual leadership conferences: “We kick off our new fiscal year every November. The CEO and his nine direct reports run a series of regional, two-day offsites with roughly 90 top local leaders attending each. We review plans, discuss strategies, talk about new products and key initiatives, conduct some leadership training, and do a lot of informal team building. These four two-day meetings in four

cities over four consecutive weeks – Sao Paolo, Shanghai, Munich, and Las Vegas – are our most important meetings of the year. How do we convert them into four two-day virtual meetings?”

The short answer is: You don't. Annual (or semi-annual) multi-day conferences became the norm for companies around the world because when you're meeting in person it's not economically feasible to have everyone fly in, check into a hotel, conduct a day of meetings and go home just to repeat the process weeks or a few months later. And since getting from China to Las Vegas and back takes days of travel time, global companies often met regionally to reduce the time executives spend away from their local markets.

We told Brian about Alan Shepard. He got it immediately. Airfare, travel time, and hotel costs – elements of the physics of in-person meetings – were the sole drivers of the “four, two-day regional meeting” format. Since none of them are factors in planning this year's meetings, why not change the structure to take advantage of the fact that we're now “on the Moon”?

Why not, for example, schedule four, focused half-day sessions across two or three weeks? While regions will certainly be part of the discussion, why not meet by function, level or by topic? If timezones present an issue, perhaps we tape parts of the meeting for re-broadcast, with some executives joining each geographic region for specific live modules. And as long as we're taping those sections, why not have them dubbed or subtitled into the 11 languages spoken by their 16,000 employees in 40 countries?

Like Lego blocks, we can decompose the whole “physics-of-Earth” based meeting structure and put it back together in entirely new ways, unconstrained by the former gravity of airfares and hotel costs. Perhaps this November a safety engineer in Malaysia – who would not have even attended prior in-person meetings – might take part in a half-day APAC regional session, a half-day operations session, a half-day

session on safety, and a half-day session for all attendees. From his laptop at home with no expenses or travel time limiting his involvement.

By the end of our first conversation with Brian, the “four, two-day regional meetings” format seemed limiting, rigid, and antiquated.

3. Redefining Collaboration

Andrew, the CEO of a \$500 million dollar manufacturer, needed to pivot. His company’s largest and most reliable revenue sources had suddenly dried up as a result of COVID-19, and it didn’t appear they would flow again anytime soon. Andrew believed major changes in focus were required. His team would have to sell a different mix of products to different customers just to survive the year, and move quickly to capture whatever limited customer spending was happening before competitors.

He set up a videoconference with his team of 12 direct reports. “I believe pools of opportunity are out there that we are well-positioned to pursue,” he said, “but I need your help in identifying them.” With the press of a button, the executives suddenly found themselves in one of three virtual breakout rooms, each group tasked with identifying five pressing market needs the company might be in a position to meet. Andrew had assigned people to each group carefully and appointed leaders for each room; for example, he put the three most opinionated, extroverted executives with the most forceful facilitator. That way, less aggressive executives in the remaining two groups would have a fighting chance to get their opinions aired. The leader in each breakout shared a virtual whiteboard on screen to capture ideas. Andrew, meanwhile, moved from one virtual room to another, spending a few minutes with each group listening and commenting before providing brief coaching points and moving on. After 30 minutes, the attendees were transported back to the main session.

As the spokesperson from each breakout read out their top five potential opportunities, a master list of customer needs was captured live and appeared on

everyone's screen. A brief question and answer session ensured ideas were understood. Similar ideas were consolidated. Some were refined. Within an hour of starting the meeting, Andrew stared at a pretty good list – nine potentially promising areas for growth, four of which never occurred to him.

He then shared his screen displaying a PowerPoint slide with a three-by-three matrix of boxes below.

The X-axis was called *“Customer Willingness to Spend Money Now To Address the Need”* with three columns labeled *High, Medium and Low*. The Y-axis represented *“Our Ability to Be the Best at Meeting Those Needs”* with three rows similarly labeled *High, Medium and Low*.

Andrew read out the first idea on the list, and asked: “Where should this idea go on the matrix?” He asked each team member to use the annotate function to initial the box in which they thought the idea should fall.

Within seconds a flurry of initials landed largely in two boxes in the matrix, with one outlier, as illustrated below. Andrew called on a few executives to explain their placements, and after a quick conversation, the group agreed the idea should be put into the “Medium-High” box – it was something they could do well, but for which customer willingness to pay seemed more difficult.

A Team Vote on Where a New Idea Should Fall Along Two Criteria

- Individual response/vote
- Team consensus after vote and discussion



Andrew then read the second idea. He asked, “relative to the first one, where should this idea go on the chart?” Again, team members cast their votes using their initials.

One after another, the remaining ideas were assessed in exactly the same way, typically taking five to ten minutes for the team to reach consensus around where to place each idea. The result was the following chart:

A Team Vote on Where 9 Total New Ideas Should Fall Along Two Criteria

● Team consensus after vote and discussion



After a 30-minute breakout, a 30-minute report out to refine and consolidate ideas, and 75-minutes of discussion among the team, Andrew and his team had pinpointed the three best opportunities to pursue.

Before COVID-19, could Andrew have the same brainstorming session in person? Of course. But it would have been by far less efficient. Just getting his team to and from breakout rooms sometimes took 20-30 minutes of “herding cats.” Some ideas may have never surfaced, and the conversation could easily meander over an entire day without a clear conclusion. Three virtual meeting tools – the whiteboard, breakout rooms, and the annotation function – combined to give Andrew more control, speed, structure, and clarity than he would have sitting with his group around a conference table.

These are just three illustrative examples of the many superpowers virtual meetings enable, regardless of which meeting software your company is using. It is by no means an exhaustive list. In fact, working together with clients we are discovering new techniques, new capabilities, and different ways to deploy tools every day in a continual effort to make online team interactions more effective.

Benefiting from the new, frictionless “laws of physics” that govern the world of virtual meetings requires a mindset shift. Accept that some aspects of the work are more difficult than they were before, or even impossible. But consider all the new things you can now do, and what you can do better, faster, and at lower cost than before. Embrace and explore this entirely new world we all suddenly find ourselves in. We’re going to be here long after COVID-19 recedes – video and virtual are permanent aspects of our lives as managers.

Welcome to the Moon! Like Alan Shepard, go pick up an improvised six iron and whack the ball a few miles. Encourage your colleagues to try it as well. You’ll find your life as an executive will never be the same.

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