Hosted by Tom Henschel

How to Create Engagement Online

256 | June 2025

Convinced that participants need to engage in order to learn, a leader is discouraged after the cheerless rollout of her online learning program. She turns to her coach for help facilitating virtual groups.

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Staring into the Void

Brenna was excited when she was given leadership of a company-wide management skills program. There was six hours of content which she divided into two sessions of three hours each, two weeks apart. She'd be delivering the program globally to cohorts of about 30 people at a time. And there'd be about 30 cohorts. This project was going to be a major part of her year. And she was stoked.

Until she had her first session.

Soon after, during our coaching session, she said, "This is supposed to be interactive, like it would be in a classroom. But, golly, that was like pulling teeth. If that's what this is going to be like, I'll never make it. That was brutal."

"Because...?" I asked.

"I couldn't get them engaged. It's one thing when it's like an all-hands meeting. Everyone has their cameras off anyway, and no one's really expected to speak, except the executives. It's

no surprise you don't get engagement there. But my material isn't meant to be a one-way lecture. I have to get them talking. If they're not talking, they're not learning."

I shook my head in sympathy. "I get it."

"I have no problem getting groups talking in person, but I could not get this group going."

"Isn't it weird how different it is when it's online?" I agreed.

"You don't deal with this, do you? Your work is one-on-one, right?"

"But I'll confess, figuring it out was hard work.

"Most of it, yes. But I facilitate a lot of online groups. I used to feel like you, but the last year or so, online facilitation has finally gotten fun. But I'll confess, figuring it out was hard work."

"Then you know what I'm talking about – how helpless it feels to have this void staring back at you with no way to engage with them."

"For sure," I said, "and that doesn't happen to me much anymore. I've found some tricks."

She pointed her pen at me like a knife, saying, "You have to tell me."

I laughed. "Happy to. I do three things right at the very start. It's tone setting. Altogether it takes a few minutes, but it creates the engagement you're talking about."

"Like an icebreaker," she said.

Engagement Through the Chat

"I'd never thought of it that way, but yes, exactly like an icebreaker. The first thing I do is get people using the chat. I will have a prompt or two ready to go. And I say, 'I'm going to give you a prompt, then I'm going to give you some time to write, so there's no hurry. But don't hit send. We'll all hit send together.' Then I give them a minute of silent writing, then I say, 'Okay. Hit it!' And the chat goes wild. All these ideas go flying by. And people are interested. They're engaged. If they don't start commenting to each other, I'll invite someone to add a little detail to something they wrote. There's always a way to be curious about something. And suddenly there's engagement."

"Were you serious about giving people a minute in silence? A minute can feel like an eternity."

I laughed. "I know! But I'm happy to wait. I like sending the signal that I'm okay with silence. That's good tone setting all by itself."

She gave a little grunt. "That is so on target for me. It's agony for me to wait in all that silence. Oh boy, that'll be hard. But it'll be good for me. Okay. So listen. Can we go back a little? You said you have a prompt or two ready to go. What kinds of prompts?"

"It depends. If it's a gathering and the starting time is a little loose, while we're waiting to get started, I'll ask people to put in the chat what they see out their window. Or three words about the weather where they are. Something like that."

"Oh, okay. Sounds fun."

> **Their ideas become the springboard into your content.**

"But if it's a meeting with a hard start, the prompts will be related to the topic. You could start with a yes/no statement. 'I feel pretty comfortable with my management skills at the moment. Yes/No.' They hit send. Then you ask them why they feel that way and give them a minute to write. Then everyone hits send together. Their ideas become the springboard into your content."

"If their comments are good, that could last longer than just a couple minutes," she said.

I nodded in agreement, saying, "That's another thing I've learned. I'm way more flexible about time when I facilitate online. One minute of them talking with each other is just as valuable as me covering my content."

"Within reason, but I take your point" she said, smiling. "This is great. You know what I like about it? As long as someone puts something in the chat, their thinking is engaged, even if they're not speaking up. Okay, use the chat to create engagement. What's next?"

Ground Rules & Self-Assessing Engagement

"Ground rules. How will we be together for the next 90-minutes, three hours, or whatever. So, for example, I ask people to turn their cameras on, and I tell them why I think it's important.""What do you say?" she asked.

"I say that I am not the only expert in the room. I am an expert in the room, but not the expert. And that I think it's easier to learn from each other when we can see each other."

"Slick," she said.

"Well, I really believe it. Plus, talking about ground rules – no matter what they are – can get people thinking about how they're showing up. That is engagement. To me, that's what ground rules can do – create engagement."

She nodded, made a note, and said, "Okay, then what's number three?"

I said, "Number three is about showing up, too. It's one quick thing in the chat. The first time I heard it was when I was a participant in a big online group. There were about a hundred of us on the call to hear this speaker and he opened with this question, and I loved it. He asked how engaged we wanted to be – from one-to-seven. One would be, 'I'm going to be doing my emails,' and seven would be, 'I cannot wait!' Hearing that question from him put me into learning mode. It made me more engaged."

"So now you do it?"

"Yep, that's number three."

"Does anyone ever put a one?" she asked.

> **Most people are 5's and 6's. Which is fine with me.**

"I don't think I've seen a one," I answered. "But I don't think I've seen a seven either. Most people are 5's and 6's. Which is fine with me. I don't spend any time on this, at all. I do it because I hope it hits them the way it hit me. They get to make a choice about how engaged they want to be. I can't get them engaged, but I can make them think about it for a second."

"That one intrigues me," she said. Then she asked, "What about breakout rooms? I wasn't at all certain what was happening with people in the breakout rooms."

Before & After Breakout Rooms

"Before they went in, did you give them specific things to do?" I asked.

"Well, I thought so. Maybe they weren't as good as I thought. I'll send them to you and you can tell me what you think. What do you do with breakout rooms?"

"It might be the same as you. Before putting them in rooms, I ask a question each of them can answer, or a situation they can share. I try to find something where people might have

different experiences to share."

"A lot of time I gave problems to solve together. I wonder if that was a mistake."

"I think that sounds engaging. What did you ask them afterwards?" I asked.

"I asked what answers they got," she said.

"And they wouldn't share that?" I asked.

"No, they did, but it never had any momentum. Maybe it'll be different if I do those tone setting things at the top."

"Maybe," I said. "There's a question I ask after most breakout rooms, and it seems to get people talking. Not every time but most of the time. I ask, 'What do you know now that you didn't know 10 minutes ago?'"

"I like that," she said.

"There still can be a long silence before the first person answers, but someone usually does."

She shrugged. "I just ask, 'What did everyone talk about?'"

"I've used that, too," I said. "It works."

"What else do you do after a breakout room?" she asked.

> **I try not to be the hub to their spokes.**

"Same thing I do in person. I try not to be the hub to their spokes. I try not to answer every comment. If someone shares something, I'll say, 'Thanks. Who else?' and stay quiet."

"There's that silence thing again," she said. Then, with a change of voice she said,

"If I get exhausted like that every time I deliver, I'm going to be a wreck by the end of this."

"I know how you feel," I said. "Leading an online meeting takes way more energy than being in person. In person, you get the energy back from the people in the room. Doesn't happen online."

Brenna used the three tone-setting tools at her next session and got things off to

a very different start. As she delivered more and more sessions, she learned about keeping repeated material fresh and the power of open-ended questions. Soon, she felt confident she was facilitating with *The Look & Sound of Leadership.*

In the podcast, this ending is only the halfway mark. Listen to the episode for additional tools, coaching and commentary.

Core Concepts

- Online engagement is difficult to sustain
- Leaders must have techniques ready to create engagement
- Use the chat to give people time to reflect, then see others' thoughts
- Establishing ground rules (like "cameras on") can boost engagement
- Ask people to declare their level of engagement

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