

Tips for managing breakout rooms

You may be using virtual meeting platforms to conduct meetings and workshops remotely. Breakout rooms is a feature that is available on some platforms to enable you to separate participants into smaller groups with their own meeting rooms. This is helpful for activities where you want participants to engage in more in-depth discussion with each other, or to work collaboratively on a shared task. Below are some tips and best practices when it comes to managing breakout rooms.

1 Think about your breakout room set up

Most virtual platforms allow for flexible setup of breakout rooms. Up to 50 rooms can be created and up to 200 participants can be assigned to breakout rooms on platforms like Microsoft Teams and Zoom.

There are typically three options for assigning participants into breakout rooms:

- **Randomly/automatically:** Choose this configuration if you would like participants to be in groups selected at random. Placing participants in different groups each time can encourage exposure to more viewpoints and different ideas.
- **Manually:** Choose this option if you would like to place participants into specific groups. This can be helpful if you know that certain participants would work well together, or if you would like to balance the voices in a group.
- **Pre-assigned:** This option is another way to manually assign participants into groups but is done ahead of time instead of during the meeting.

2 Give a tech warmup

Dedicate a couple of minutes to demonstrate the features of the virtual meeting platform and breakout rooms. Consider conducting a short warm-up activity using breakout rooms to allow participants to be familiar with the technology in a low-pressure setting. Find some examples of activities you can do in a virtual setting in the Top five virtual icebreakers tip sheet.

3 Let participants know what to expect

Give clear instructions before sending participants into their breakout rooms for their activity. Here are some suggestions:

- Let participants know how long they will be in the breakout room before they're expected to rejoin the main meeting room. You may also be able to set a countdown timer during your breakout room setup. This gives participants a warning before the breakout room is closed.
- For an activity with multiple tasks or detailed steps, provide a written instruction sheet in addition to providing instructions verbally.
- If the activity requires the use of other documents or resources, input the titles and direct links to the resources into the chat so that participants can easily access them.
- If you would like to debrief or take-up the breakout room activity when everyone returns to the main meeting room, consider suggesting that each group choose a designated note-taker and presenter. This prevents anyone from being put on the spot in front of the entire group.

4 Check in

During the activity, join each individual breakout room to check-in on participants. This is a good opportunity to make sure participants are clear on the activity objectives and to listen in and give feedback to the discussions that are taking place. If you do not have enough time to join each room, you can broadcast a chat message into the breakout rooms to invite participants to message you if they have any questions or concerns.

5 Establish a safe environment

While people may be more comfortable to speak up among fewer people compared to a large group, discussions in small groups can be still be intimidating for some. Make sure guidelines are set for respectful and safe sharing. You can do this by establishing some group norms, such as listening to others in the group, withholding judgements, and keeping information that is shared confidential. Invite your participants to add to these norms to create a safe environment together. Then, make sure these expectations are applied in both small and large group settings.