BEP 359 – Virtual Teams 1: Video Conference Meetings

Hello and welcome back to Business English Pod. My name's Edwin, and I'll be your host for today's lesson on English for video conference meetings.

The business world has seen an explosion in video conferencing. With tools like Zoom and Microsoft Teams, more and more people are working from home. And more and more meetings are happening virtually instead of in-person. Staff meetings, client meetings, project meetings, even social functions are happening online.

This shift in how we work in virtual teams brings many new challenges. And if you're leading a team, or managing a group, or facilitating a meeting, you need a new set of skills in addition to the ones you already have. You have to manage the group in different ways, and manage the technology effectively.

This all begins with establishing ground rules at the start of a meeting. You'll also want to provide clear advice on how to use different meeting software. And you might also have to interrupt the meeting to deal with sound or video problems.

Interacting in virtual meetings feels different. It doesn't flow the same as a face-to-face meeting, so you might find yourself asking people to take turns, or trying to facilitate open discussion.

In today's dialog, we'll listen to a weekly check-in meeting at a business consulting firm. The meeting is being led by Heather, a skilled and experienced manager. We'll also hear Dave, Cathy, and Adam, three members of her team. During the check-in, Heather has to juggle the technology and the people.

As you listen to the dialog, try to answer the following questions:

1. What ground rules does Heather establish at the beginning of the meeting?
2. What does Heather do when there is some background noise?
3. How does Heather get an open discussion going at the end of the conversation?

Vocabulary

To mute: to make a sound less strong or turn it off completely; "As host of the videoconference, you should have the ability to mute the participants."

Update: a short report of the latest news or information; "Oh hi Sara, I'm just calling to give you a little update on the software project before the weekend."

Brief: short in duration; "Can we make this meeting brief? I've got a ton of work to get done today."

To cover: to include in a meeting, course, or presentation; "I was hoping the presenter would cover the new tax regulations, but I guess he didn't have time."

To lead off: to be the first among many to do something; "Okay, so Tanis, could you please lead off our meeting with news from the European office?"

To prep for: to prepare or get ready for; "Can we postpone today's meeting? I'm really busy prepping for next week's big product launch."

To check in: to ask someone for news or information; "We haven't heard from Grant all week, so maybe you could just give him a call and check in?"

Background noise: noise that you can hear in addition to what you're listening to; "Sorry Carl but I couldn't hear you because of all the background noise… are you in a coffee shop or something?"

Input: advice or ideas given to someone to help create something or make a decision; "After today's meeting, I'll email the draft proposal to everyone and you can email me back if you have any input on it."

To give back: to give time, money, or other contribution to your community; "We actually saw sales increase after deciding we should give back by sending our employees into community as volunteers."

To throw it open: to open a meeting up to free discussion; "All right, our final agenda item is the office renovations, and I just wanted to throw it open to discussion. Anyone have any ideas on this?"

In touch with: in contact with; "If you're looking for a good trainer for Microsoft Teams, I'm in touch with a great consultant. How about I connect you?"

United Way: a charity that raises money for organizations that provide social services; "With thousands of offices across the U.S. and Canada, United Way raises billions of dollars every year to help the communities it serves."

Hands: help; "Doing year-end inventory is a lot of work, so we'd appreciate all the extra hands we can get on this."

The elderly: old people; "Our company sells e-health solutions to the elderly and to the nursing homes where many of them live."

Dialog

Heather: Okay… Hi everyone… I think we're ready to get going now. First off, can I get everyone to turn their video on. It's good to actually be able to see you all. And just remember, when you're not talking please **mute** your mic.

Dave: Umm… question: Can you guys see me? Not sure my video's on…

Heather: Hey Dave - look at the bottom left of your screen. There's like a video **icon**. If it has a red line through it, then your video is off. Just click it to turn it on.

Dave: Bottom left… oh… yeah! You guys can see me now?

Cathy: All good!

Heather: All right then, let's just get some individual **updates** here. Let us know how you're doing and what you're working on this week? Try to keep it **brief** as we've got quite a bit **to cover**. Adam, could you **lead** us **off**?

Adam: Riiight… okay, happy Monday everyone. All things considered, everything's going pretty much as expected. Really focused on **prepping for** the meeting with Healthwise later this week. But I've also got to **check in** with the team over at Conner Enterprises. Just see what they need there. So yeah, that's what's going on with me…

Cathy: …anyway, if I can get some help on this , that'd be great. I think all I need is for someone to have a look at it and give me some feedback.

Heather: Okay… Okay, just a sec there Cathy. Can everyone check they're muted? Getting a lot of **background noise** from someone.

Heather: Okay, great. So what were you saying Cathy?

Cathy: Yeah, just saying all I need is someone to look at what I've done so far and make some suggestions. Some **input** from someone who's familiar with this type of thing. But that's all for me.

Heather: Okay, thanks. When we're done here I'll connect you with Josie in marketing. She'll have some good ideas for you. Great work, by the way.
So… at this point I'd love it if we could talk a bit more about our ideas around community support. Everyone seems to like the idea of **giving back** in some way. And… we just need to decide how to do that. So let's just **throw it open** to discussion. Maybe we can start with Dave? I know you had some ideas.

Dave: Yeah, well, I've been **in touch with** the local **United Way**. They mentioned a couple of projects that could use some extra **hands**. One was called "mealtrain." They've got people making meals for **the elderly**, and they need some help to deliver them. So I thought that was something we could get involved with…

Debrief

Now let's go through the dialog again and look at the language and techniques Heather used to run the video conference.

Heather: Okay… Hi everyone… I think we're ready to get going now. First off, can I get everyone to turn their video on. It's good to actually be able to see you all. And just remember, when you're not talking please **mute** your mic.

When you're running a virtual meeting, it's important to get everyone using the technology in the same way. That's why Heather is establishing ground rules about the technology right at the start.

Ground rules serve a couple of purposes. Asking people to "mute" their mics – or turn them off when they're not speaking – helps to avoid background noise or interference. So ground rules can help prevent problems. But they can also create a sense of togetherness. By asking people to turn their video on, Heather is helping people feel connected, which is really important if you're not meeting in person.

What are some other ways of establishing ground rules around technology? Let's run through some more examples.

- Can I get everyone to turn off their mic unless they're speaking please?
- If you have a question, just click the "raised hand" icon.
- Please keep your mic muted until you'd like to say something.
- If you have a message for just one person, please use the private chat.

Of course, even if you establish some ground rules, you can still face some technical challenges. Let's listen.

Dave: Umm… question: Can you guys see me? Not sure my video's on…

Heather: Hey Dave - look at the bottom left of your screen. There's like a video **icon**. If it has a red line through it, then your video is off. Just click it to turn it on.

It's very common to have one or more people in a virtual meeting who aren't very comfortable or familiar with the technology. In these situations, you need to be very clear and direct about how to solve the problem.

Heather doesn't "um" and "ah" or say "maybe this" and "maybe that." She just tells Dave exactly what he should do. Technical problems can really disrupt a meeting, so you need to be able to give clear advice on how to solve them.

Let's practice some other ways of giving clear and direct instructions on technical issues.

- There's a button at the top right that says "gallery view." Just click that.
- From the menu, select "audio input," then select "headset."
- Hover over your name in the participants list, then click "change name."
- To send a file, click the document icon in the dashboard.

So, is Dave able to follow Heather's instructions?

Dave: Bottom left… oh… yeah! You guys can see me now?

Cathy: All good!

Heather: All right then, let's just get some individual **updates** here. Let us know how you're doing and what you're working on this week? Try to keep it **brief** as we've got quite a bit **to cover**. Adam, could you **lead** us **off**?

Now that everyone's got their video working, Heather begins the meeting. A common way to engage everyone on a team is to have people take turns speaking. This is especially common in video conferences, since it's harder to have a free-flowing discussion.

Heather asks for individual "updates," or information about how each person's work is going. Notice that she asks people to keep it "brief," or short. That's an important reminder, because the danger of turn-taking is that someone will go on for too long. One way to prevent that is to ask someone to go first who you know won't talk too much, as Heather does by choosing Adam.

There are several other ways of asking people to take turns, and of calling on people to start. Let's run through some more examples.

- How about a round of introductions? Let's start with you Jamie.
- I'd like to hear what each of you are doing this week. Who would like to go first?
- Let's just take turns stating our preferred colors for the new site.
- All right, quick updates everyone. Marketing team can go first.

Now, let's hear how Adam gives his update.

Adam: Riiight… okay, happy Monday everyone. All things considered, everything's going pretty much as expected. Really focused on **prepping for** the meeting with Healthwise later this week. But I've also got to **check in** with the team over at Conner Enterprises. Just see what they need there. So yeah, that's what's going on with me…

We just heard that Adam is "prepping," or preparing for a meeting with a company called Healthwise later in the week. I wanted to call attention to that because you're going to hear more from Adam and how he runs the meeting with Healthwise in later lessons.

For now, however, let's rejoin this meeting as the last person is finishing her update.

Cathy: …anyway, if I can get some help on this , that'd be great. I think all I need is for someone to have a look at it and give me some feedback.

Heather: Okay… Okay, just a sec there Cathy. Can everyone check they're muted? Getting a lot of **background noise** from someone.

Heather: Okay, great. So what were you saying Cathy?

As you heard, Cathy's update gets interrupted by some noise. We call this "background noise," which could be anything from a dog barking to a loud computer fan. It's Heather's job to solve this problem. Instead of letting the sound continue and distract everyone from Cathy's update, she stops the meeting. As she shows, it's important to deal with sound problems or technical issues right away.

Besides the expression "background noise," we have several other common ways of talking about sound and video problems. Sometimes the sound "breaks up," or cuts in and out. Sometimes we get an "echo," so you hear everything twice. And sometimes the video "freezes," or gets stuck on one image.

Let's try some of these expressions for interrupting a meeting to solve sound or video problems.

- Hang on a sec, your sound is breaking up.
- Sorry Glen, hearing a lot of echo. Could you put your headset on?
- Excuse me, looks like Evan's video has frozen again.
- Just a moment Briana, looks like we've lost a couple of people.

Now that the sound problem has been solved, Cathy can continue her update.

Cathy: Yeah, just saying all I need is someone to look at what I've done so far and make some suggestions. Some **input** from someone who's familiar with this type of thing. But that's all for me.

Heather: Okay, thanks. When we're done here I'll connect you with Josie in marketing. She'll have some good ideas for you. Great work, by the way.

So… at this point I'd love it if we could talk a bit more about our ideas around community support. Everyone seems to like the idea of **giving back** in some way. And… we just need to decide how to do that. So let's just **throw it open** to discussion. Maybe we can start with Dave? I know you had some ideas.

So, everyone has finished their individual updates. And Heather has thanked the last speaker and commended her on her work. At this point, Heather wants a more free-flowing or open discussion. In particular, she wants the group to talk about the idea of "giving back." When a person or company "gives back," they make some contribution, of money or time, to the community.

To encourage discussion, Heather says "let's just throw it open." That's just another way of saying "open up" the discussion. In this case, she follows up by asking Dave to start, just to get the conversation going.

How else can we facilitate open discussion in a virtual meeting? Let's try some more examples.

- Let's open it up for discussion… how does everyone feel about these changes?
- Sounds like there's some different options on this, so let's hear what everyone thinks.
- You can all unmute your mics now, and jump in if you've got any ideas to share.
- Great point Nick. Anyone have anything else to add to that?

Let's hear how the discussion gets going.

Dave: Yeah, well, I've been **in touch with** the local **United Way**. They mentioned a couple of projects that could use some extra **hands**. One was called "mealtrain." They've got people making meals for **the elderly**, and they need people to deliver them. So I thought that was something we could get involved with…

All right, it sounds like Dave has some ideas for giving back to the community by helping feed its elderly residents. And with that, Heather has successfully steered the meeting toward a more open discussion. Good facilitation is necessary for good meetings, and Heather has shown us clearly what that involves.

Now let's practice some of the language we learned in today's lesson. Imagine you work as a manager in the marketing department of a big company. You're running a weekly check-in meeting with your staff. You'll hear a cue from an employee, then I'll give you a suggestion for what you can say in response. We'll guide you through each step in the practice and provide an example answer for each response.

Ready? Let's give it a go.

Begin by saying you'd like to start by asking everyone to turn on their video.

Answer: _____

Cue 2: Sorry but… I'm not quite sure how to do that.

Now tell the person to click on the camera icon at the top of their screen.

Answer: _____

Cue 3: Ah, right. I see. Should be on now. Sorry about that.

Next, say it's no problem and ask for everyone to give a short update on their work.

Answer: _____

Cue 4: Okay, well, if I can start… I've been working on the new website and would love to get some input on our draft.

Now interrupt to say you can hear some noise in the background.

Answer: _____

Cue 5: Yeah…. let me see what I can do…. There. Should be fine now.

Now say thanks, and open things up for input on the website draft.

Answer: _____

Answer 1: Okay, let's get going. Can everyone make sure your video is on please?

Answer 2: Just click on the camera icon at the top of your screen.

Answer 3: No problem. So, could I get everyone to give me a short update on their work for this week?

Answer 4: Hold on a sec… hearing some loud noise in the background.

Answer 5: Great thanks. So, let's open this up for input on the website draft.

Now let's practice some of the vocabulary we've covered in this lesson. In a moment, you'll hear a series of sentences with a word replaced with a beep. Repeat each sentence, *including* the missing word.

For example, if you hear:
Example Cue: Okay, I just want to give everyone a quick **<beep>** on the project.

You can say:
Example Answer: Okay, I just want to give everyone a quick **update** on the project.

After each response, we'll provide the correct answer. Let's begin.

Cue 1: Sally, have you been in **<beep>** with finance about this problem?

Answer: _____

Cue 2: Can we do something to get rid of all that background **<beep>** on the call?

Answer: _____

Cue 3: So let's just throw it **<beep>** to the whole group for feedback.

Answer: _____

Cue 4: I'd like everyone to please **<beep>** their microphones when you're not talking.

Answer: _____

Answer 1: Sally, have you been in **touch** with finance about this problem?

Answer 2: Can we do something to get rid of all that background **noise** on the call?

Answer 3: So let's just throw it **open** to the whole group for feedback.

Answer 4: I'd like everyone to please **mute** their microphones when you're not talking.

We've reached the end of this lesson, the first in our series on virtual teams. We've learned how to establish ground rules, give advice on technology, and ask participants to take turns. We've also looked at how to interrupt the meeting to solve problems and how to facilitate open discussion.

Thanks for listening and see you again soon!

Language Review

A. Review Quiz

For each question, you must choose the sentence that best fulfills the given language function or purpose.

1. How might you establish tech ground rules at the start of a videoconference?

a) All right, could everyone keep their video on during the meeting please?
b) James, I really need you to reduce that background noise.
c) Okay, is everyone generally comfortable with Microsoft Teams?

2. Which of the following demonstrates giving clear advice on how to use technology?

a) If you could just unmute your microphone, that'd be great.
b) Have a look at the bottom of your screen. Anything there that might help?
c) In the top-right corner you'll see "gallery view." Just click that.

3. How could you ask for meeting participants to take turns?

a) So, does anyone have any ideas on this? Feel free to jump in any time.
b) I'd like to hear updates from each project team. Developers, you can go first.
c) Nicola, could you maybe share that document that outlines your team's mandate?

4. What is a good way to interrupt in order to solve sound or video issues?

a) Sorry, but it looks like Frank is frozen. Let's figure that out before continuing.
b) Excuse me, but just so you know I'll be posting some useful links in the chat.
c) Hang on there, did you just say that you don't think we should bid on this project?

5. How can you facilitate open discussion during a videoconference?

a) All right, so let's hear what everyone thinks about this. Anyone?
b) So, perhaps we can just go around and hear what each person feels.
c) What's your take on this little issue Bernice?

B. Vocabulary and Idioms

Fill in the blanks with words from the box below. Be sure to put any verbs in the right tense.

| prep | brief | open |
| touch | cover | noise |

1. If you're looking to relocate, you should get in _____ with my real estate agent.

2. Okay, I'm going to give you a really _____ presentation on the problem so we can have lots of time for discussion and questions.

3. Could we just throw this conversation _____ to the whole group and see what everyone thinks?

4. I'm sorry but it's really hard to understand what you're saying with all that background _____.

5. Sorry it took me so long to get back to you Tom, but I've been really busy _____ for a big presentation.

6. In our next training session we'll _____ some more advanced techniques for selling online.

Study Strategy

Videoconferencing technologies have enabled us to connect with colleagues, teammates, and clients without having to be in the same physical location. This is convenient and efficient, but it is only effective if we use these technologies well. And that means creating clear ground rules during videoconferences and being able to instruct people on how to use the technology.

Think about the videoconferences that you are involved in. What kinds of ground rules have you found improve effectiveness? You might think of guidelines related to video, sound, chat features, or others. Make a list of ground rules that you believe are effective. Next, what features of the technologies you use do some people struggle with? Do people have difficulty muting themselves, for example? Or do people have troubles finding a specific feature, like the "raise hand" feature? Choose two or three challenges, and outline the steps that you would explain to someone who isn't clear on how to use these features.

Now, with a colleague or friend, imagine you are facilitating a staff meeting. Start by explaining the ground rules that you've chosen for the videoconference. Then imagine that people have the problems that you've identified. Explain to them clearly and directly how to solve the problem or use the technological feature. When you're finished, switch roles and let your partner try.

Answers

Listening Questions

1. Heather asks everyone to turn their video on and mute their mics when they're not talking.
2. When there is background noise, Heather interrupts the conversation to solve the problem.
3. To get an open discussion going, Heather says she wants to throw it open and starts by asking Dave for his ideas.

A. Review Quiz

1. a; 2. c; 3. b; 4. a; 5. a

B. Vocabulary and Idioms

1. If you're looking to relocate, you should get in **touch** with my real estate agent.
2. Okay, I'm going to give you a really **brief** presentation on the problem so we can have lots of time for discussion and questions.
3. Could we just throw this conversation **open** to the whole group and see what everyone thinks?
4. I'm sorry but it's really hard to understand what you're saying with all that background **noise.**
5. Sorry it took me so long to get back to you Tom, but I've been really busy **prepping** for a big presentation.
6. In our next training session we'll **cover** some more advanced techniques for selling online.