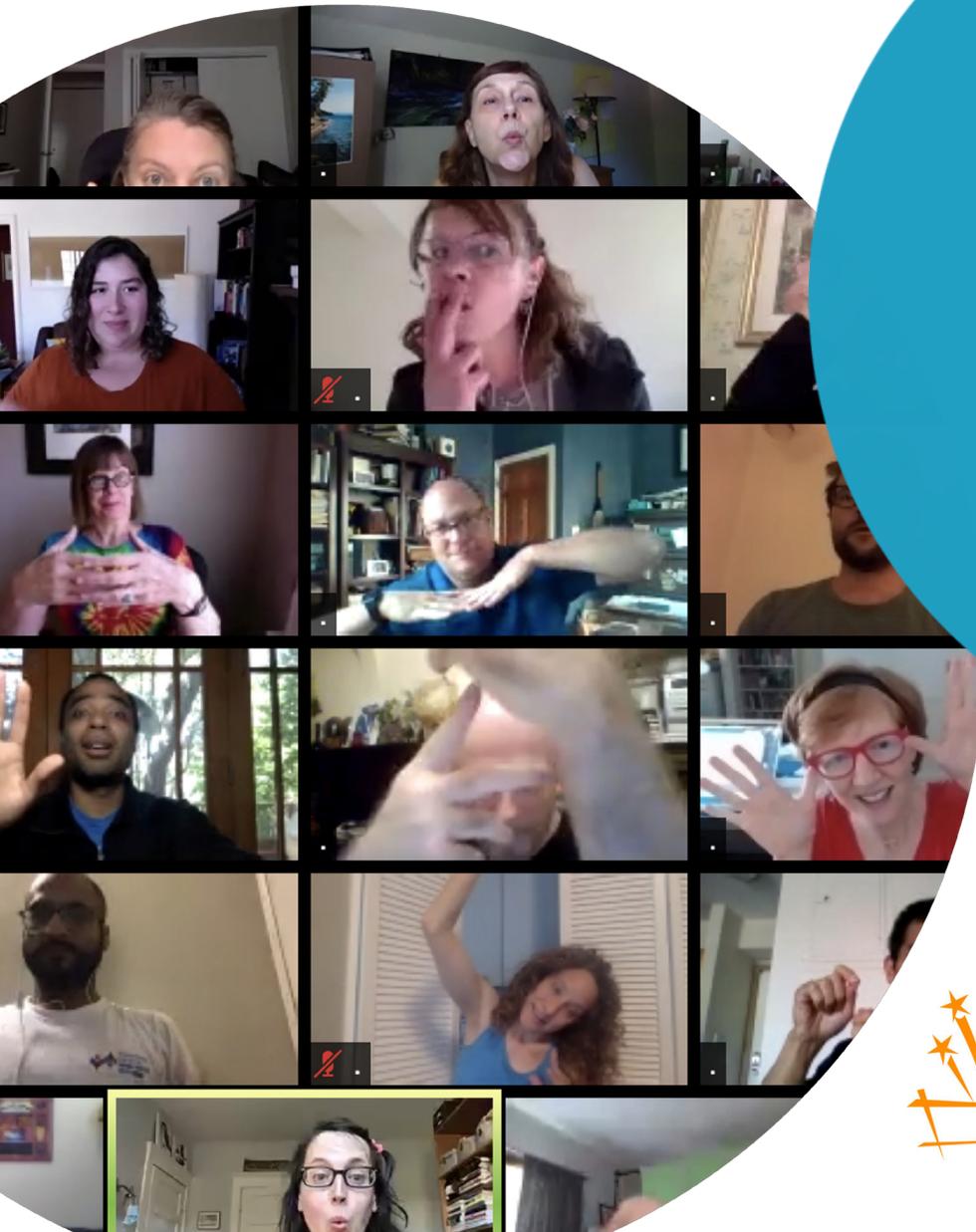




for **INSIDER SECRETS** HOSTING ENGAGING VIRTUAL MEETINGS WITH CONFIDENCE



by Melissa Dinwiddie of



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Let's face it—most virtual meetings suck.

And *leading* virtual meetings fills a lot of people with unnecessary anxiety.

- Will my tech crap out on me?
- I hate the way I look on Zoom!
- How do I deal with those awkward first moments as people arrive?
- What I did worked great in-person—why can't I just do the same thing on Zoom?
- How can I create a sense of connection when we're not in the same room?
- How can I keep the energy up?
- Why do my meetings always seem to run overtime?

And most of all:

- Do virtual meetings have to be so darn boring?

The answer to the last one is, unequivocally, no!

When done right, you can actually achieve engagement, connection, and yes, even intimacy on platforms like Zoom.

That's why I've put together this guide (with my hand-drawn graphics) of my own, hand-picked insider secrets, to help give you a leg up when you gather a group together for your next virtual meeting.

With these tips you'll be more relaxed and confident as you start your meeting, you'll come off more professional in your meeting, and your participants will be more engaged throughout your meeting.

Enjoy!

Melissa Dinwiddie



Virtual Meetings: Pre-Meeting Checklist

When I'm leading a virtual session with an important client like Facebook, Uber, or Stanford, I need to make sure everything goes smoothly! This is the exact checklist I run through before every client session I deliver.

30-45 Minutes before start:

- Restart internet modem/router
- Restart computer
- Make tea/coffee
- Check for Zoom updates
- Set up or tidy office background
- Start up secondary computer/device (*if using*)
- Shut down/pause applications that drain resources (*such as Time Machine, cloud backups, Adobe Cloud, Google Drive, Dropbox sync...*)
- Turn off notifications (*Slack, iMessage or other messaging apps*)
- Close email

Minimize local distractions:

- Shut door
- Close windows
- Silence phones

15 Minutes before start:

Set up for meeting:

- Set up lights
- Re-check that unnecessary applications are shut down
- Re-check that you have tea/coffee/water
- Dance/power-pose

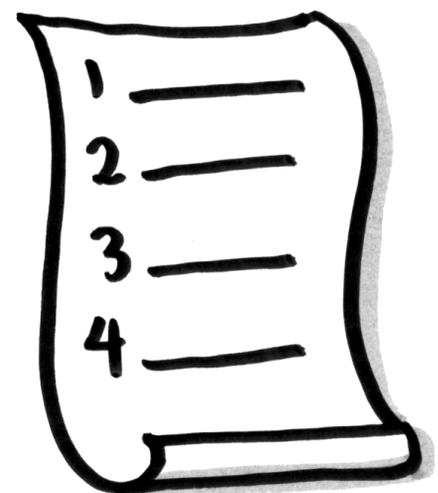
10 Minutes before start:

- Start meeting
- Test tech

After Meeting:

Congrats! You did it!

- Restart Time Machine and cloud backups
- Celebrate and take a break!

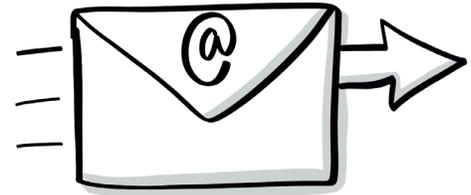


Virtual Meetings: 8 Best Practices

These are just a few of the best practices I've learned from experience.

Pre-Meeting

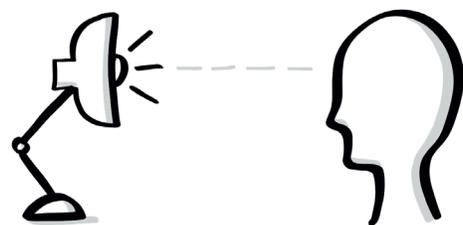
1. **Set expectations in an email to attendees prior to your meeting.** Should they expect to have video on? Do you expect one person to attend per device (answer: yes!)? Do they need to have pen and paper nearby? And always advise them to update to the latest version of Zoom before the call!



2. If you have participants register for the meeting via a Zoom registration page, **don't email them the Zoom link!** Instead, direct them to their unique link inside the confirmation email they will have received from Zoom.

Presentation

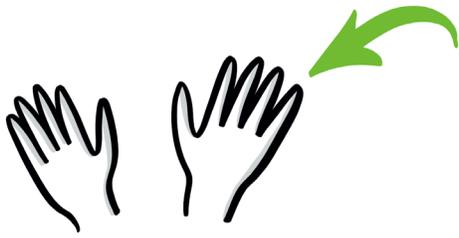
3. In order to appear as if you're looking at your meeting participants, **move any notes you have as close to your webcam as you can**, so your gaze is as close to your webcam as possible. You may also find it helpful to "Hide self view" so as not to be distracted by your own image!



4. Set your lighting up in front of you, or in front and to the side of you, **so your lighting aims towards your face** (or bounces off a wall towards your face). If the brightest light is behind you, you'll appear silhouetted, and hard to see.

5. For optimal energy, **set your computer up so you can stand** (as opposed to sitting) during the meeting.

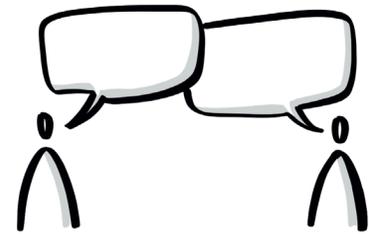




6. Position yourself so you can get your hands in the frame. Some assessments say that 93% of communication is nonverbal, and hands are our trust indicators. (Plus some of the activities I facilitate are movement-based!)

Facilitation

7. Focus on connecting with participants right away. Keep in mind that connection is more important than whatever content you have to share or discuss, and it's even more important in virtual meetings than in-person ones. Something as simple as asking people to answer a question in chat can start to establish connection. And if it's a small enough group, you might go around the room with, "Hi, [Name], how are you?" to each person as a quick microphone check. (Hat tip to my colleague Doug Shaw, who does just that!)



8. Assume that the first 5-10 minutes of your agenda will be eaten up by late arrivals and technical issues. It sucks, but this is reality. If you build this buffer time into your plan, you'll feel less stressed. And nobody will complain if you end early!



Virtual Meetings: 3 Favorite Activities

These are three favorites that I use all the time, whether I'm leading a customized virtual "offsite" for a company like Facebook, or a private creativity retreat.

1. Pre-Meeting Drawing

That period of time when you're waiting for those last few folks to trickle in can be deadly. If people disengage, you'll struggle to get them back, which is why it's always a good idea to have a "pre-activity" up your sleeve!

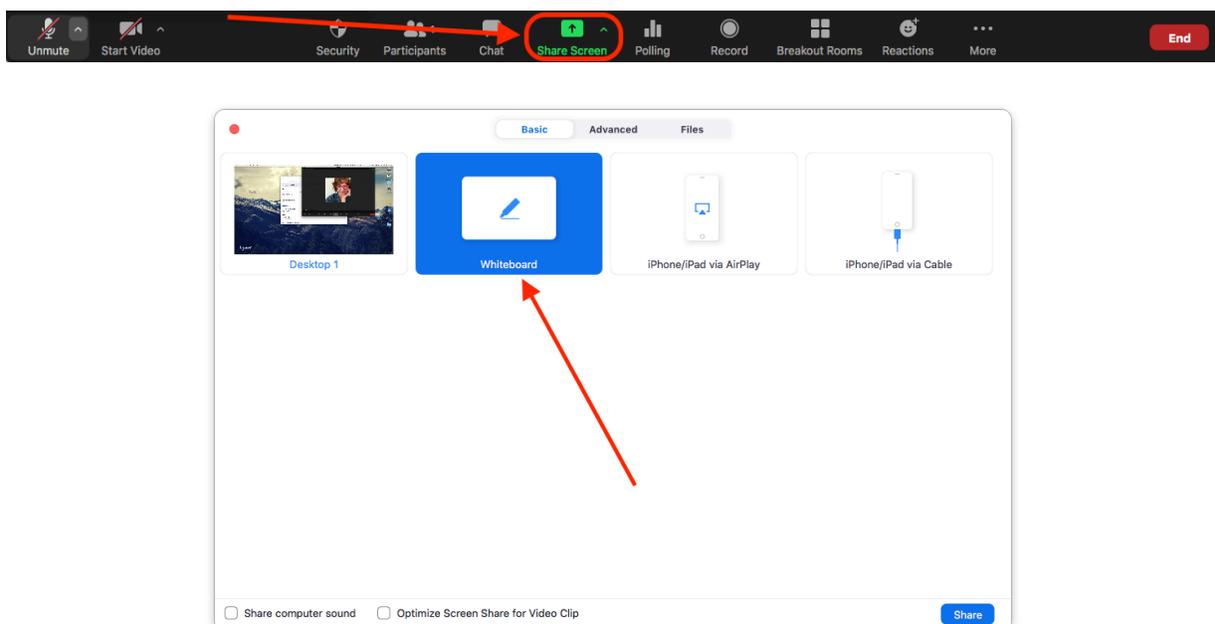
I love this tip from fellow facilitator Debra Schifrin, which prompts participants to draw on the whiteboard in response to a question. Ask them to draw what they hope to get from the session, or what they did over the weekend, or anything you want.

To make this a low-stress activity, it's important to emphasize that drawings can be either representational or abstract.

Here's how it works:

Step 1:

Before your meeting starts, open up the whiteboard by clicking on *Share Screen* > *Whiteboard*.



Step 2:

Type something like the following:

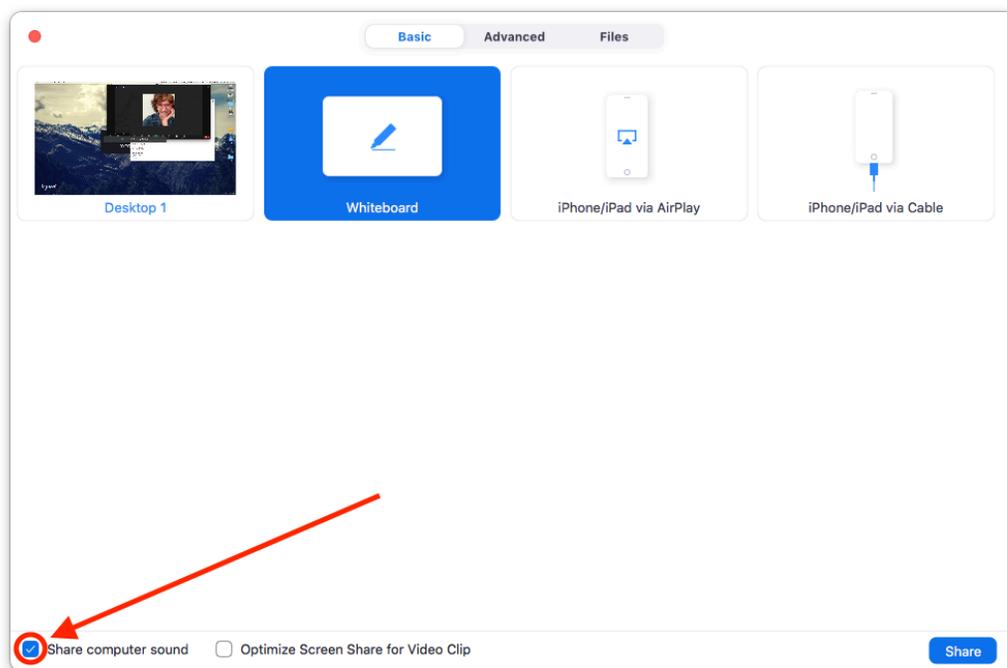
Welcome! While you wait, draw [insert a drawing prompt here]. It can be either representational or abstract.

If your participants are not familiar with Zoom annotation tools, you'll want to add the following:

On your Zoom bar there should be a green bar with a button on the right that says VIEW OPTIONS. Click and find ANNOTATE in the drop down menu. Next, click DRAW. Pick your brush size and colors in the FORMAT option. Have fun with it!

Hint: You may wish to have your text ready to copy and paste into the whiteboard, so you don't have to type it.

To add some extra ambience, check the "Share computer sound" box in the lower left hand corner of the Share Screen panel before clicking the Share button, and play some music from Spotify or iTunes while everyone draws!



2. Spotlight/True of Me

This is one of my favorite connection activities, to help participants in a group get to know each other. It takes 5-10 minutes, and is a great “icebreaker,” energy builder, warm-up, and team building activity, and works for groups as small as 8 and as big as 100.

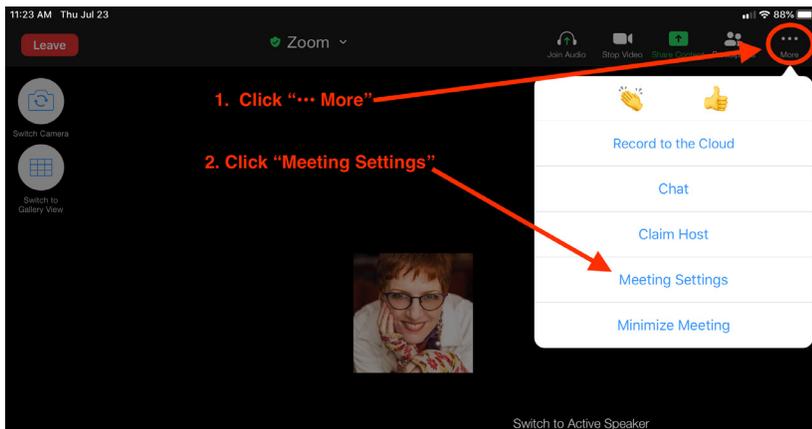
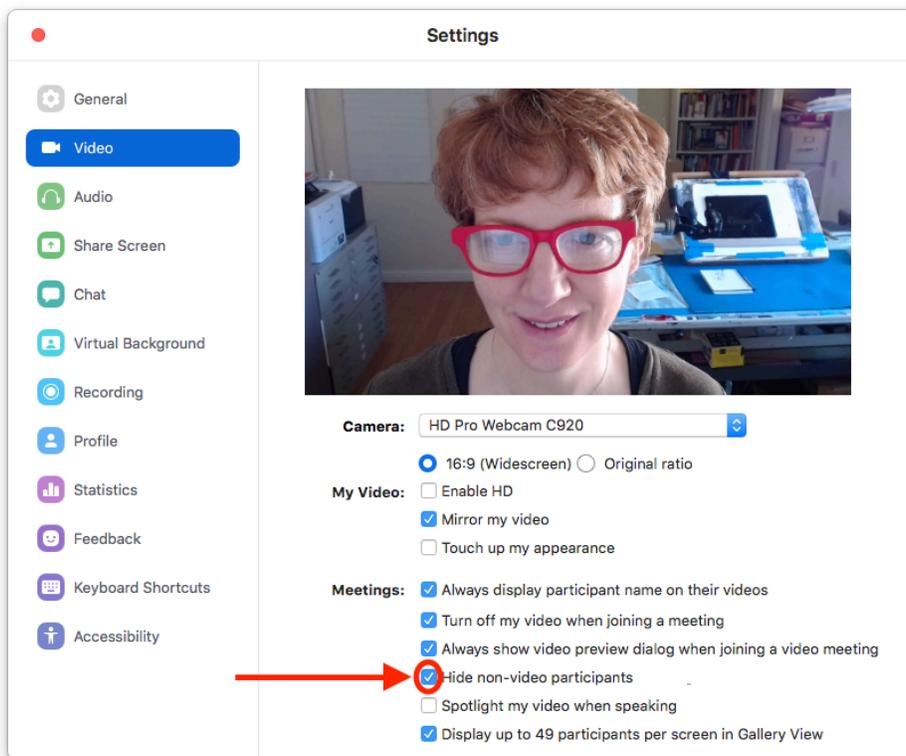
One at a time participants make statements that are true for them, while everyone else either shows their video to indicate agreement, or hides their video to indicate non-agreement.

Here’s how it works:

- Tell participants that you’re going to make a statement that is true of you, such as “I love cats.”
- Explain that everyone for whom that statment is also true should leave their video on, but if it is *not* true of them they should turn their video off (or cover their webcam).
- Take a moment to acknowledge who is “in the room,” then use your favorite technique to call on someone else to make the next true statement.
- Again, participants show or hide their video depending on whether the statement is also true of them.
- Take a moment to acknowledge that the people “in the room” have probably changed! You may want to say something like, “This is the People Who Traveled to Europe Last Year club.”
- Prompt whoever made the statement to choose who takes the next turn, using your established turn-taking protocol.

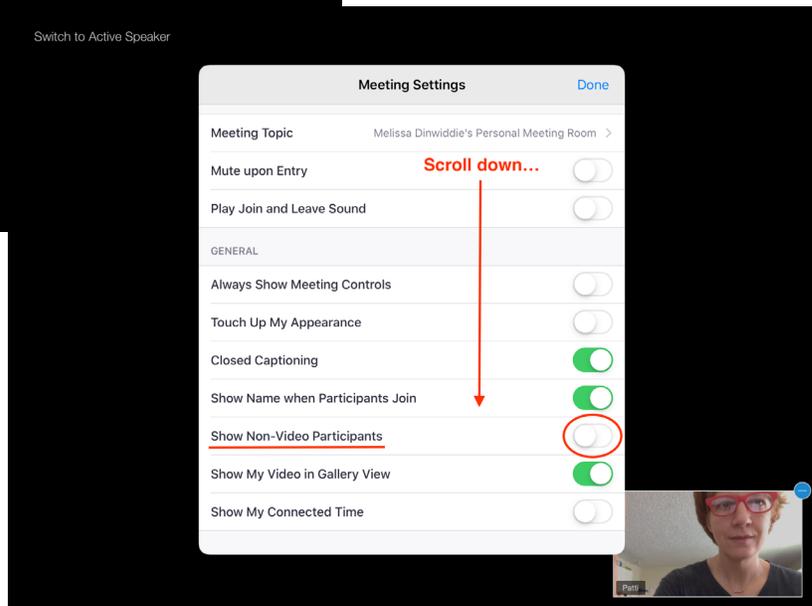
Tips:

- Highly recommended, especially for groups of over 25 people: before starting, have everyone change their video settings to “Hide non-video participants” (see image on next page). This will make it very clear how many people agree with each statement, as they will be the only ones who appear “in the room” each time. Everyone else will be hidden.
- You may notice participants starting to say things that aren’t “true of me” statements. Gently prompt them to share something that’s true for them, like “I love...” or “I hate...” or “I visited...”
- There may be some statements that some participants feel ambivalent about. In these cases, they may wish to:
 - alternate between showing and hiding their video
 - show their video, but alternate between covering and uncovering their webcam with their hand
 - show their video, but step out and in frame



Changing settings on computer (above) and iPad (left and below) to Hide non-video participants. (iPhone is very similar.)

Not required to do this activity, but adds a fun element of making people appear to leave the "room."



3. Sound Ball

This is a classic improv warmup, which I first learned as a beginning student at BATS Improv. It works quite well on Zoom, with some slight modifications.

Most adults don't get to use our imagination as much as kids do. Sound ball is a quick energizer that gives everyone a chance to tap back into the creative imagination we used all the time when we were kids.

Mime holding an invisible ball in your hand. Instruct everyone that you are going to throw the ball to someone, and that the ball has a sound, and that they should catch it with the same sound that you throw it with.

You'll say the name of the person you throw the ball to, then mime throwing the ball while making a sound.

Have that person throw the ball to someone else with a new sound.

It will go something like this:

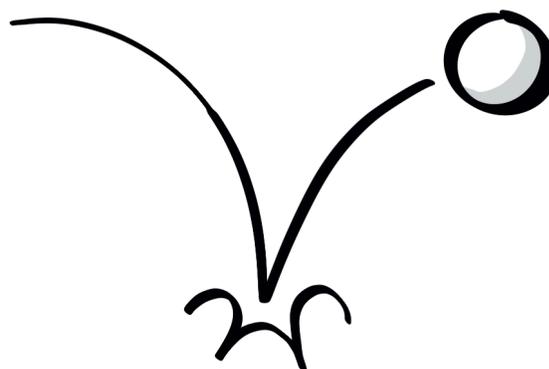
You: "Randi, whoosh!" (*Mimes throwing the ball.*)

Randi: "Whoosh!" (*Mimes catching the ball.*) "Joseph, splat!" (*Mimes throwing the ball.*)

Joseph: "Splat!" (*Mimes catching the ball.*) "Amelia, urgh!" (*Mimes throwing the ball.*)

Amelia: "Urgh!" (*Mimes catching the ball.*) "Terrance, zoom!" (*Mimes throwing the ball.*)

Etc.



Tips:

Now that people know how to throw invisible balls, you can use this technique as a way to "pass the microphone" in your meetings. Why just call on someone when you can add a little delight to your virtual meeting by tossing them an invisible ball?

Prompt people that the ball is like a hot potato. Their goal is to throw it as fast as possible. And to catch on the same sound, and throw with a new sound, but not to try to be clever or impress anyone — any sound is fine.

Now what?

When you start to solve the problem of approaching your virtual meetings with anxiety, there's so much more to consider.

You'll want to think about:

- How to keep your participants engaged throughout your meeting, so they're less tempted to click away or multi-task
- How to fully exploit the features of a platform like Zoom so they're working *for you*, rather than you trying to squeeze your meetings, classes, and gatherings into the box Zoom created
- How to effectively shift programs that used to work so well in-person into a virtual setting, so the goals and outcomes don't get lost in translation
- Building out a menu of activities to draw from for a wide range of situations
- How to manage the inevitable, unexpected technical glitches with resilience, so they don't throw you off your game
- How to show up with the same kind of energy you bring when you're in-person

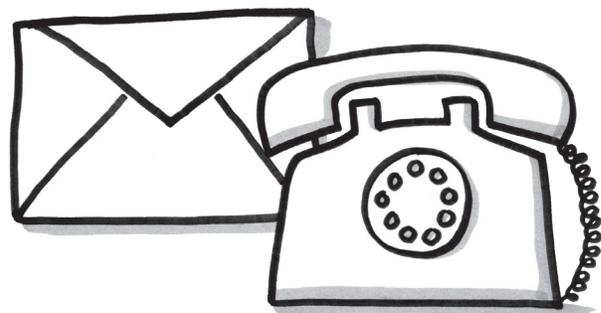
Helping folks with these kinds of challenges is my speciality.

As a facilitator, I work with my clients to develop [customized virtual programs](#) that solve the issues facing their teams.

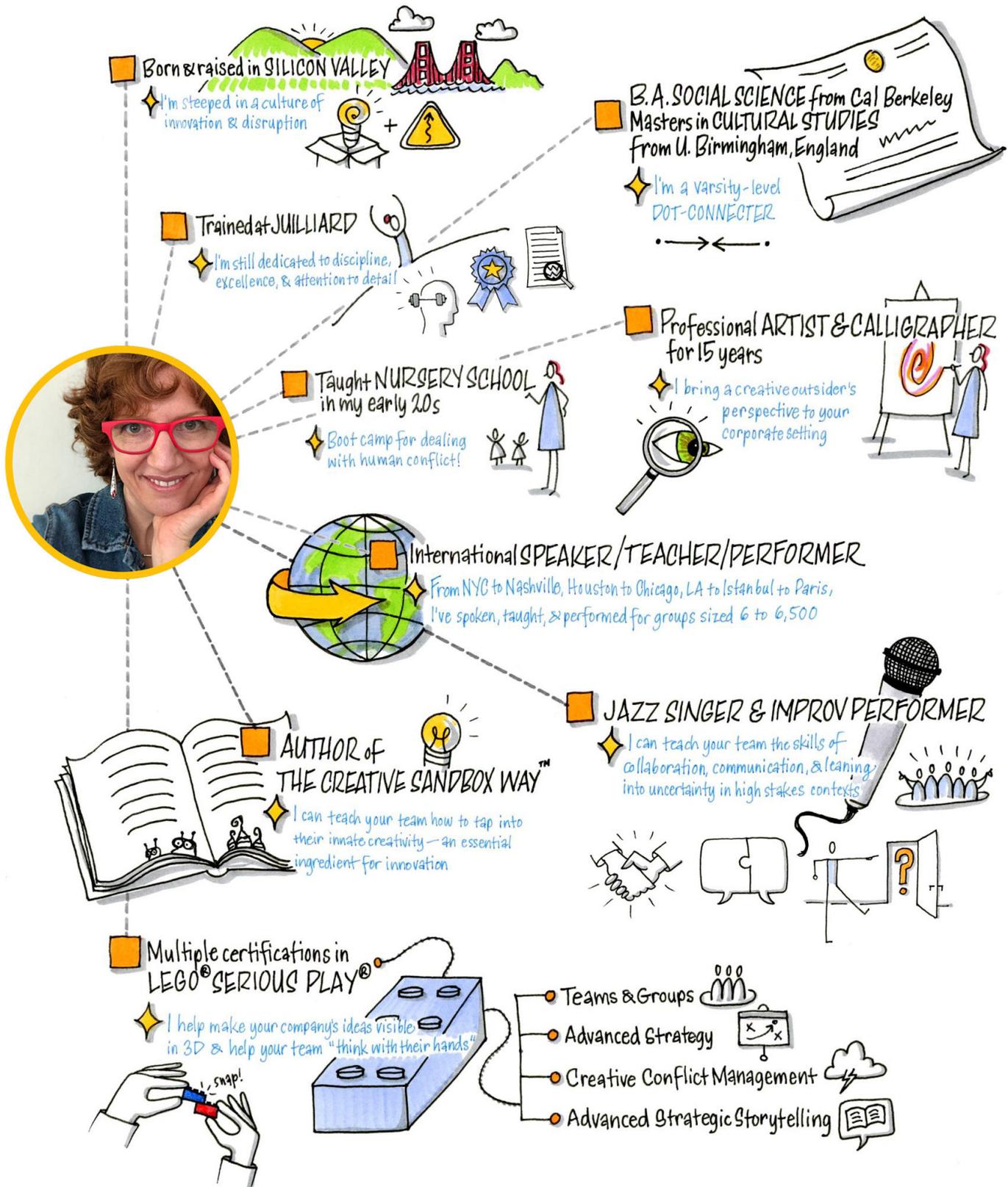
And as a trainer, I work with other facilitators, teachers, coaches, consultants, and managers — anyone who needs to lead groups on Zoom — to master the art of [virtual facilitation](#).

If you'd like to learn more about how I can help you, email melissa@creativesandbox.solutions to set up a call.

[Click here to schedule a call](#)



About Melissa Dinwiddie: Visual Bio



About Melissa Dinwiddie

I help take the “bored” out of virtual boardrooms, through play and live-drawn graphics.

I help corporate teams become more productive and effective.

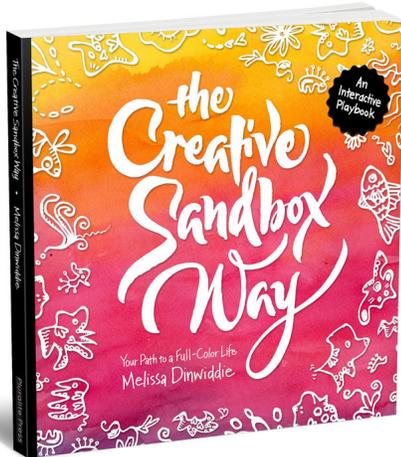
And I help managers, team leads, trainers, facilitators, teachers and coaches lead more engaging, more effective, “non-boring” virtual meetings.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic I’ve become sought after for my expertise in play-based techniques for leading engaging, interactive virtual meetings.



When there isn't a global pandemic going on, I perform improv with a number of different groups in the San Francisco Bay Area.

I'm the author of [*The Creative Sandbox Way™: Your Path to a Full-Color Life*](#), and hosted [The Creative Sandbox Way™ podcast](#) from 2015-2019. I live with my husband in Silicon Valley and spend my free time doodling, playing ukulele, or chasing kitty fluffs that have fallen off our Siberian cat, Nika.



Melissa

Ready to take the “bored” out of your virtual boardroom? [Let's Chat!](#)

