

**ReEngine Consulting** would like to share with you how we optimize the advantages of remote project work, while simultaneously mitigating the disadvantages. This remote work can provide the same level of value and project accomplishment during remote projects as with in-person projects. You can use these techniques to enrich the most challenging and engagement-intensive projects. Mindfully accomplished, remote improvement projects may even go faster and accomplish more.

## The Challenge of Improvement Projects

Continuous improvement efforts are tough to facilitate and lead. Not everyone is “signed up” for changing the way they have always done things. Many participants need to be convinced and won over with the idea that improvement is in their interest, good for the organization, and important to customers. This is difficult to do in-person and, without the benefit of non-verbal communication, can seem impossible when attempted remotely. Plus, improvement projects require a high degree of collaboration, debate, and visual depiction of data or models. White boards and stickies are a must; participants need to be able to grab a dry erase marker and have a go at the whiteboard while their team-mates make suggestions. Can quality work be done remotely in improvement projects and other highly cooperative engagements that require critical thinking? YES! If you consider the following:

## Identified Advantages

**Asynchronous activities can be a time saver and offer team-members increased flexibility.** Remote projects should include more asynchronous aspects than traditional in-person projects. Many employees appreciate asynchronous project participation. They can prepare ahead of time, absorb concepts at their own pace, and use a variety of communication techniques. Examples of asynchronous participation include pre-meeting circulation of “read-aheads,” concept sketches, and “what good looks like” descriptions. Things like chat-boxing on upcoming topics, sharing a capacity model “theory,” and sending out pertinent articles or podcasts can get folks thinking and focused on the upcoming meeting. An informal “selfie” video recorded by a team-mate can lay out an idea and set the stage for a discussion. Project managers can also ask folks to send in their comments on the meeting and the ideas that were discussed. Facilitators can process the information and send out the key points and observations. You will find that quieter, more reflective team-mates will more readily share perspectives, help avoid groupthink, and further the team’s work.

**Increased productive potential according to recent studies.** A remote environment will likely increase the productivity of team-members assigned to “Tiger Teams.” Tiger Teams are several project team-members who are asked to work together to accomplish a sub-task as part of a more encompassing improvement project. Instead of trying to accomplish their assigned sub-task in the main project meeting, Tiger Teams meet separately to complete their sub-task outside the main project meeting. Traditionally, Tiger Teams are often seen by project members as a scheduling burden because sub-tasks are often assigned on top of their regular work and in addition to improvement project meetings. However, with remote projects and work-from-home arrangements, project team-members will be able to better accommodate demands stemming from their Tiger Team. Taking advantage of more schedule flexibility, they can support fellow teammates more robustly. Many Tiger Team members have discovered they can more easily fit the additional tasks into their work-life balance. (Deep Dive: <https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/15259-working-from-home-more-productive.html>)

**Quieter, more introverted participants often communicate more strongly in remote sessions (and before and after).** Introverted thinkers make their best contributions after they have had an opportunity to process and consider relevant data. They often want to sort out differences in opinion, new ideas, and

diverging data before weighing in on a debatable matter. Introverts like to first reflect and then share thoughtful conclusions, often in written format, like an email. Such inclusive opportunities before, during and after remote workshops will most likely improve the quality of the meeting and the project. (Deep Dive: <https://hbr.org/2016/04/run-meetings-that-are-fair-to-introverts-women-and-remote-workers>)

## Identified Challenges

**It can take longer for new facilitators and project leaders to win the trust and confidence of the project team.** Winning over circumspect team-members in an improvement project can be tricky in person; it can be problematic in remote work. This can be mitigated by exchanging team bios, spending longer getting to know one another, and starting meetings with ice-breaker exercises to help establish rapport and trust.

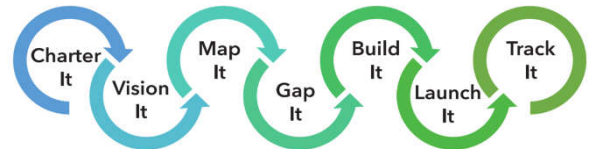
**Effective collaboration and communication require ongoing effort in remote online projects.** Yet communication is a crucial aspect of all projects. The principles and key points below are ways to mitigate this critical challenge:

## Principles of Remote Project Work

**Pre-meeting preparations are more important than ever.** Careful planning, activity prepping, and rehearsing needs to be conducted prior to each collaborative engagement. Whiteboard type activities, for example, need to be pre-set up and rehearsed.

## Maintain the same proven backbone methodology.

Closely follow an already established approach or structure. For instance, using established methods like ReEngine's *Map It, Gap It* seven phases creates a visual and mental reference point as to where participants are in the project and what must be accomplished today in the meeting. The group should always know as a team where they are and where they are going.



## Create a detailed “meeting plan,” with more detail and description than traditional agendas.

- Include who will be speaking on each point and allocate minutes for each discussion. If the group exceeds the time allocation, table the topic to an empty time slot at the tail end of the meeting.
- The meeting plan should state the goal for the meeting, list anticipated deliverables (meeting outcomes), and note how we know as a group that we are done.
- The meeting plan should include smaller, bite-sized activities. Larger activities should be “broken up” with short videos, cartoons, stretch breaks, or a funny story.
- Make sure that everyone understands that actual project work gets done in project workshops. Don't be afraid to get work done in project meetings that you label *workshops*. Participants should arrive prepared to get work done on the project for the duration of the workshop.

## Have a focus document whenever possible

**Rather than holding topic-based discussions that can wander, center meetings around documents on a shared screen whenever possible.** This will anchor team-member attention and ensure team focus. Participant focus is key: gain it, then maintain it. Facilitators need to pre-build models (or “theories”) the team can interrogate and critique. Postulating such pre-built constructs, such as capacity or predictive models, stimulate participants by bringing the process to life.

**Deliverable documents, on the other hand, can be constructed with the team and presented live to all as the deliverables are built.** It is exciting for teams to build products. Participants get an exhilarating feel that they are “in the room, working on a white board.” This occurs when a participant makes a suggestion and then immediately sees their idea written into the shared document visible to the entire team. They say it and then see it posted, real-time.

## **No participant left behind**

**Make a list of all participants** and “go around the horn” to ensure questions and perspectives are being asked of every participant. Everyone is afforded a chance to talk.

**Keep attendee attention by keeping meeting short;** offer several meetings a day instead of one long workshop. Kaizen improvement sessions are notoriously long because they are so intense and focused; two 90-minute remote meetings in one day will likely work.

## **Utilize asynchronous pre-meeting learning to complement in-meeting synchronous collaboration**

Consider “flipping the meeting room.” This concept is borrowed from education where you ask participants to do some asynchronous activity before the session. They watch a brief video, comment on a message board, express their “vote” to a few key questions, take a brief survey, or review a document, all before they come into the “meeting room.” For example, let’s say you want to conduct an interference diagram activity to solicit perspectives from 7 regional offices in a remote online meeting. Each participating office can pre-watch a 2 ½ minute video on Interference Diagramming (<https://www.reengineconsulting.com/training>) and rapidly gain a full understanding of their role in the upcoming activity. No one needs to miss a beat during a hands-on activity just because they can only call into the meeting.

## **Keep the meeting collaborative and engaging.**

**It is important for the facilitator to read the chatroom questions intently and ensure they are discussed in the meeting.** ReEngine has learned the importance of a 2<sup>nd</sup> facilitator to help in this. The 2<sup>nd</sup> facilitator also needs to keep a robust “Action Item Register” with *ALL* ideas, issues, and offered solutions. The team should go through the register even more frequently than in-person sessions.

**Project teams should fully explore and use all the features of their collaboration tool** (Zoom, Google Meet, MS Teams, etc.). Chat boxes, voting tools, live-document sharing, and use of breakout rooms should be built into the agenda-plan for the session.

Perhaps plan to break out into Tiger Teams for 20 minutes in **breakout rooms** and return to the main group to debrief. Then do it again.

Online **whiteboard applications** may be of use to your project team. Anytime new or fancy apps are used, make sure requisite time is put into prepping the whiteboard tool and training participants.

**Ideas and suggestions may have to be restated** by the facilitator and bandied back and forth a bit more than in an in-person meeting where we can more easily read each other’s expressions and body language.

**There is always a “mood”** during in-person collaboration sessions; aim to create a “mood” in remote online workshops.

## **Stress the importance of the improvement effort regarding the mission of the organization and team-member’s day-to-day contributions.**

**Apply adult learning theory** by emphasizing the positive impact of the project on their own work, especially how the improvements will enable them to accomplish more with less relative effort in the future.

As you amass experience leading projects remotely, these suggestions can help you achieve the same or higher level of value and project accomplishment during remote projects as with in-person projects. You can simultaneously optimize advantages of remote project work, while applying proven techniques to mitigate disadvantages of remote project work. Mindfully accomplished, remote improvement projects may even go faster and accomplish more. You might even have fun.