Safe and Equitable Engagement Spaces in the Age of COVID-19

A Conversation with Cicely Belle Blain and Alia Ali

Summary Notes
WEBINAR: SAFE AND EQUITABLE ENGAGEMENT SPACES IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

Monday, March 30
1:00 - 2:30pm PST
Free online webinar

Speakers

Cicely Blain
CEO of Cicely Blain Consulting
Founder of Black Lives Matter Vancouver

Alia Ali
Female Empowerment and Leadership
Instructor for Voices of Muslim Women
SUMMARY NOTES

In a time of social-distancing, there has been an unprecedented uptake in virtual connections for workplace and community engagement. While online platforms can be more accessible for many, and offer an opportunity bring people together in inspiring ways, they also raise concerns about equity, safety and inclusion, particularly for members of marginalized communities. This interactive webinar explored key considerations, innovations and recommendations for creating meaningful and respectful online engagement spaces.

Acknowledge the Crisis

In the rush to adapt to rapidly shifting realities, there is a risk of trying to return to “business as usual” without acknowledging the underlying crisis and the deep emotional impact it has on people. This response reflects many of the characteristics of white supremacy culture articulated by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun in their Dismantling Racism workbook. Cicely Blain reminded the group that in our settler colonial state, we all exist — and inadvertently participate — in a system of white supremacy and capitalism which are the root causes of many issues of equity and accessibility.

Our conversation emphasised the importance of holistic engagement that makes space for the emotional and physical realities of the COVID-19 crisis:

- **Pause to recalibrate and reconsider and priorities:** What is most pressing now? What can be put on pause until after the crisis?
- **Consider the root of the issues:** What systemic inequities have been highlighted in this crisis that need our attention? What can we learn from this experience to improve the future?
- **Accept potential disengagement:** Many people are in a state of shock, fear, grief, stress, and confusion and therefore may not be ready to engage, even if they are at home and have the time!
- **Embrace the chaos:** Online engagement and remote work may be messy—and that’s ok! We can share tips (such as how to hide messy apartments from videoconferences), but also relieve the pressure to look perfect and operate at normal levels.
- **Build in transition time:** We may not be able to switch immediately to online engagement. Make time for people to set up online access, adjust to new working and living conditions, and overcome the learning curve for digital literacy. Transition time is also valuable within our online engagements (e.g. scheduling breaks within and between meetings, increased time for check-ins).
- **Make space for personal connection:** For many, the COVID-19 crisis stripped us from social connections overnight. Increase opportunities for personal and informal conversations and open space to share of feelings. This is a good time to challenge standard stereotypes associated with emotional expression, such as the tendency for women of colour to be seen as hysterical, aggressive, or having a bad attitude if they express their emotions.
Equity Considerations

The rapid shift to online engagement can exacerbate existing inequities and create barriers to access for diverse people, which may lead to long-term impacts on individual’s education, professional achievements and civic engagement. For instance:

• **Marginalized communities often face harassment and hate speech in online spaces.** The COVID-19 crisis has also increased racism against individuals of Asian descent.

• **Lack of access to internet and/or technology creates a “digital divide”.** Even those who have access to internet and technology may face lower bandwidth due to increased demand, tech issues, limited digital literacy to navigate diverse platforms, or the need to share online access with others in their household.

• **Inequitable power dynamics in meetings are exacerbated online.** Members of marginalized communities are often silenced, interrupted, or lack the confidence to participate due to internalized oppression. In an online space, it can be harder to speak up or indicate a desire to speak through visual cues.

• **Individuals working frontline jobs may lack the time for online engagement.** People of colour make up a greater proportion of the workforce that isn’t able to stay home.

• **Unsafe or uncomfortable living conditions can create barriers for online engagement,** such as for individuals facing domestic abuse, or individuals who are unable to set up a home office.

• **Unpaid household labor may be divided unequally between genders.** Women may face greater burdens of caregiving, homeschooling, cooking, cleaning which limits their opportunities to engage.

• **Neurodivergency, mental health and learning disabilities** can increase the difficulties of online engagement and working from home.

• **Digital spaces can increase concerns of data security and privacy,** particularly for marginalized communities who face systemic issues of surveillance.
Addressing Inequities

Alia Ali noted that addressing inequities starts with intentionality: asking ourselves who is left out? Is everyone’s experience the same, and if not, for whom is this not accessible? Recommendations to increase equity and safety in online spaces included:

- **Enact accommodations that are long overdue.** The disability justice movement has long advocated for measures that can increase accessibility in online spaces, such as the use of livestreaming, closed captioning, image descriptions, etc. The COVID-19 crisis encourages us to dedicate resources towards a shift that can support accessibility in the long-term.

- **Consider different communication needs,** including the need for translations, or audio accompanying text.

- **Trust the experience of targeted communities.** Do not “gaslight” individuals by negating their experience if they express that they feel unsafe or unable to engage in online spaces.

- **Reduce anonymity.** Online hate speech is often emboldened by anonymity; as we create online engagement spaces it is important to balance privacy and safety needs.

- **Set the tone for respectful engagement.** Clarify “community guidelines” within online spaces to set norms for participation and interaction. Reflect on and re-commit to the values you wish to enact in your workplace culture.

- **Use structured facilitation to ensure all voices are heard.** Invite a “round of responses” or call on individuals by name (while allowing people to “pass”), while encouraging individuals to reflect on their own privilege and make space for others.

- **Provide diverse avenues of participation,** such as dedicated meetings with marginalized groups to provide a safer space, or different tools for participation within an online engagement.

- **Slow down.** The speed of online engagement, especially when using simultaneous channels of communication (videoconferencing with chat functions) can be overwhelming. Schedule time for reading breaks and pause after asking questions to make space for thinking. Be comfortable with silences.

- **Address needs.** Equity involves giving people what they need in order to succeed and thrive. Employers and engagement practitioners alike should explore ways of offering tangible support to bridge inequities (e.g. increasing access to technology, software, internet).

- **Increase transparency and consent for data security and privacy.** Review and explain privacy policies in accessible language, ask about concerns, and request people’s permission to continue with specific platforms or tools (e.g. using video or recording meetings). When possible, switch to platforms that provide secure servers, end-to-end encryption, and password-protected access.

- **Work to build trust.** If trust is missing within a team or with a community, the COVID-19 crisis and use of online engagement will not provide a “short-cut” to building trust. Slow down and take the time to build relationships, listen to concerns, and address inequities.

- **Encourage empathy and kindness in online engagement.** Explore exercises to gain listening skills, and build the “muscle” of empathy.

- **Encourage virtual relationship-building.** Building relationships is easier and more fluid in a physical space, however we can make space for “downtime” in online meetings such as by making time for informal conversations before and after the event, or opening alternative avenues of communication such as chat forums in webinars. When possible, connect face-to-face using video to better communicate non-verbal cues such as encouragement and affirmation.