

THE CAMPFIRE METHOD®

GUIDE TO VIRTUAL PRESENTATIONS

You control more than you think.

GATHER  ROUND

gatherround.us/virtual-presentations



ENVIRONMENT IS A CHOICE

Even when it gets made by default. And sometimes presenting virtually is the right answer.

When the audience can't be in one place on the day it matters, or when the investment to get them there would create unintended consequences.

With in-person presentations, most of the environmental decisions are settled before you arrive.

Virtually, *you control more than you think*. The framing, the sound, the invite, the first ninety seconds, whether you use slides, or share your screen at all.

That isn't less to work with. It's a longer list of decisions, and every one is yours to make.

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PROLOGUE

WHEN THE ROOM ISN'T AN OPTION

Katrina runs a PR agency. She's a GatherRound client whose name we've changed to protect her anonymity.

It was the worst year ever for her company. Clients hadn't renewed. There had been a reduction in force. Their annual offsite was already booked. Kansas City, two days, 100 people, and about \$100,000 between travel and the event.

She cancelled it. Not to save the money, but because of what spending it would say to a company that had just watched their colleagues leave.

Flying everyone somewhere to talk about a hard year, in the middle of the hard year, was going to cost more in morale than it could ever return.

Nobody argued. Her leadership team knew what the decision had cost her to make.

They equipped her with sixty slides: her strategy, with inputs assembled from every department. And they scheduled forty-five minutes on a video call with a hundred people who already knew how the year had gone.

She cancelled the sixty slides too.



PROLOGUE, CONTINUED

SHE KEPT ALL FOUR PROMISES

SHE KNEW HER AUDIENCE

Katrina's leadership team generated questions employees were likely to ask, then published them in an FAQ. Every department head put the decision on a staff agenda eight weeks out, with talking points on the why, and took the harder conversations into 1:1s over the weeks that followed. By the time the invite went out, nobody was hearing anything for the first time.

SHE RETURNED TO THE ESSENCE OF STORYTELLING

Katrina and her leadership team built an intranet page designed to be lived in. A look back at what the year had produced. A look forward to the goals, what each person contributed, what it would take, and the bonus pool waiting for the people who hit their numbers.

The invite carried one word: **RISE**. She didn't explain it. That was for the meeting.

SHE KNEW HERSELF

Ninety minutes out, she raised her desk to standing, took down the books and photographs, and put greenery behind her — something to look at with nothing to read. She did not upgrade her camera or invest in ring lights. Ten minutes out, she went for a walk, told herself the story again, and meditated on what 100 people were feeling. Her notes sat on a second monitor. She barely looked at them.

SHE LEVERAGED HER ENVIRONMENT

She opened by asking for cameras on and distractions off, thanked them for a year that had asked a lot of them, and put nothing on the screen. She talked about the clients who hadn't renewed, the people reassigned, and the ones who weren't. When a storm in Dallas took twenty people off the call, a colleague texted a dial-in to every mobile number in the company. The list had been built beforehand. Breakouts ran immediately, scheduled weeks earlier, one brief for all of them: build the plan.

SHE EXCEEDED EXPECTATIONS

The survey went out that evening. It mostly measured how well people understood the strategy, and understanding came back **higher than the previous year's**, when everyone had been together for the annual meeting.

Over the following year, the remaining client base grew 15%, and net-new business replaced the revenue that had dropped.

Within three years they were back on plan.

The next year, they got together in Kansas City again. The offsite was part of the reward for reaching their goals.

“I missed being together with my team, but I LOVED the way the plan was laid out so thoughtfully, and how we could reference it throughout the year. Katrina did an amazing job, and I appreciate how real she was with all of us. I’m looking forward to next year’s meeting!”

- AN EMPLOYEE IN CHICAGO

PART ONE

we will
KNOW OUR AUDIENCES



ASK THEM

*In an in-person presentation, you can learn about your audience by being in the room with them:
The posture, the pen that stops moving, the glance across the table.*

Video calls silence that and hand back a wall of thumbnails. So knowing has to move. Earlier, mostly. And out loud.

DO THEY NEED A DOCUMENT BEFORE THEY NEED YOU?

Somewhere along the way, sending a pre-read stopped being a decision and became a habit. A decision somebody else made for you a long time ago.

The question was never whether pre-reads are good. It's whether this idea deserves it, and whether this audience wants it that way. A document can prepare the moment or compete with it. Which one it does is your call, and the default has likely been making it for you.

If you do send one, decide the harder half too: build the meeting to stand alone anyway. Some of them didn't read it. Some read it and would still rather hear it from you.

WHAT ARE YOU WILLING TO ASK THEM FOR?

Cameras on? Phones down? Questions brought rather than saved? A colleague's honest read on your open, a week before.

None of it requires anyone's approval, and all of it requires you to say it. Presenters spend enormous energy deducing what an audience wants, when the audience is right there and answers questions. Knowing your audience isn't the same as knowing about them. So ask, early enough that the answer can still change something.

VIRTUAL HANDS YOU NEW EYES

WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH YOUR NEW VIEW?

You lost the peripheral read and gained something no boardroom ever gave you: Their background. Their light. Whether they took the call from a car, between two other commitments.

Most presenters treat it as noise, but it's the richest audience data this channel offers and costs nothing to notice. Reading someone's context allows you to better understand them, serve them, and engage them.



THERE'S ALSO A MEETING YOU CAN'T SEE

The thread is already running.

In a physical room, you'd catch the glance that started it; here you only know your audience is talking to one another, in DMs, Slack and texts. You can't join them, so the only real decisions are what you want them typing, and whether you're willing to say it out loud, plainly enough that the version traveling is yours.

Katrina didn't wait to find out. Eight weeks ahead she generated the questions employees were going to ask, and published the answers with the strategy. Nobody had to raise a hand, or turn to a friend, to get an answer.

PART TWO

we will
**RETURN TO THE ESSENCE
OF STORYTELLING**



IT HAS TO TRAVEL WITHOUT YOU

In a physical presentation, your meeting doesn't end when the meeting ends. It carries on in the hallway, in the elevator, at somebody's desk. And you have the luxury to join some of those conversations.

Virtually, it also carries on. In a DM thread, a group text, a lunch.

You're in none of them.

YOUR IDEA HAS TO SURVIVE A RETELLING YOU AREN'T PRESENT FOR.



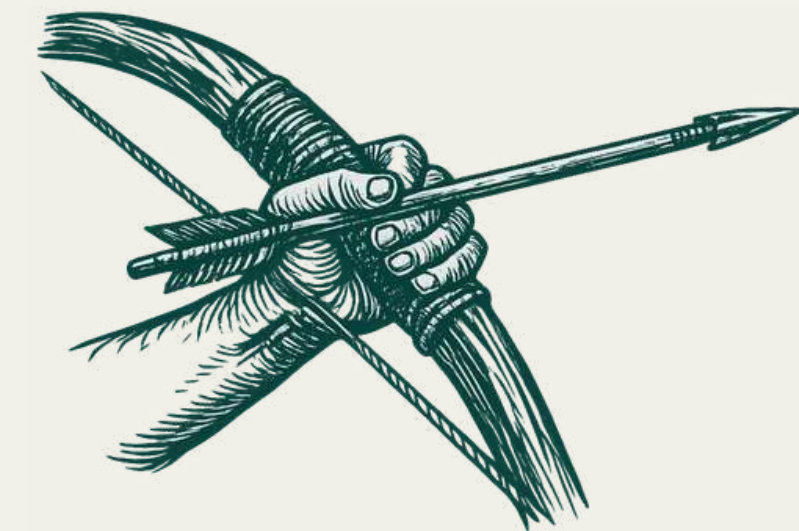
IT HAS TO TRAVEL WITHOUT YOU

WHAT WILL THEY SAY TO EACH OTHER TOMORROW?

At four o'clock the next afternoon, someone from your audience will type or text a message about your presentation to someone else.

If you haven't equipped them with a repeatable story, your idea becomes whatever they invent in its place. Everything you can't control about the retelling gets decided by how retellable you made it.

Make it simple, repeatable, and familiar.



IS THIS A STORY, OR A STATUS UPDATE?

In a physical presentation, leaving costs the audience something. They'd have to exit, and be seen doing it. Online, it costs nothing, so people have always drifted and now drifting is free.

Slides with bullets are random-access, so ninety seconds away costs a listener nothing. They can jump back in at any point.

But leave a story and you come back lost. Story is the only format where going away has a price, which is why it's the best format for holding a virtual audience's attention.

To add to this, reading words on a screen while somebody says the same words aloud produces worse comprehension than the words alone.³ The load lands on your audience. Story moves it back to you, and audiences who follow a story shift their intentions in ways audiences who receive information do not.⁴

SERVE THE IDEA, NOT THE FORMAT

WHERE DOES THE GRAVITY COME FROM?

When the stakes are high and belief has to move, people need to feel that this idea matters and that they matter in it.

In a physical environment, some of that weight is ambient. Everybody traveled. The door is closed. None of it arrives for you here. Whatever gravity the moment has, you put there yourself, in the first two minutes. And if you don't, it weighs exactly as much as the eleven other calls on their calendar.

WHAT ARE YOU WILLING TO CUT?

Brevity is your first proof of competence, and virtual presentation channels punish sprawl harder than any physical space. Working memory is limited everywhere, but here your audience is also managing a chat window, an inbox, and their own reflection.

The opposite of brevity isn't depth. It's the urge to prove you did the homework by showing every page of the notebook. Deciding what deserves oxygen is harder than including everything, which is why so few do it.



PART THREE

we will
KNOW OURSELVES



WHO SHOWS UP IN THE RECTANGLE

When did you last actually think about your video presence? Not your lighting. Your presence.

Everything that reads as presence in a room runs on space: movement, proximity, scale, stillness held. The virtual format takes the space, and presence was living in it. What's left of you now fits in a tiny, pixelated box.

WHO DO YOU WANT TO BE IN THERE?

Approachable or at arm's length? Funny or serious? Vulnerable or guarded? Answer these before you decide anything about the camera, because every other decision is downstream of it. Where you sit, what's behind you, whether you stand, how you open, whether you laugh... all of it is either serving your answer or inventing one on your behalf.

The [fourteen Persuasive Principles](#) are a mirror, not a rubric. On a channel where the viewer is narrow and the audience is elsewhere, a handful of them carry more weight than they do in a physical room.

WHAT ARE YOU CHOOSING VS INHERITING?

Levity is harder to land and more costly when it dies. No shared laugh, half a second of lag, most of the grid on mute.

Authenticity has nowhere to hide. This is a close-up, held for the duration of your presentation.

Flexibility has to run on signals you aren't used to reading, because the ones you're familiar with are gone.

Ownership is the one this channel actually hands you. Nobody built this room but you.

Attitude can survive the rectangle, but it requires intention.

WHO SHOWS UP IN THE RECTANGLE

CAN YOU PERFORM AND EVALUATE AT THE SAME TIME?

You can't. And self-view asks you to do both.

Rehearsal is where you evaluate. Delivery is where you let it go. Physical presentations separate those two jobs because they have to. Nobody argues a case, gives a eulogy or entertains a client while watching their own face do it.

Self-view collapses performance and evaluation into the same ninety seconds, and the evaluating wins, because it's the half that keeps asking for your attention.²

ONE CLICK. EVERYONE ELSE STILL SEES YOU.

WHAT SURVIVES WHEN THE SPACE IS GONE?

Eyes. Voice. Pace. And the willingness to stop talking. Silence is the one that costs. In a room you can feel a pause doing its work. Here you get a wall of still faces and half a second of lag, and every instinct you have says fill it. The presenters people remember hearing are the ones who didn't.

WHAT ARE THE TEN MINUTES BEFORE ACTUALLY FOR?

Not rereading. The material is finished, or it isn't, and ten minutes won't settle it.

Go for a walk and repeat the through-line out loud. Not the whole talk. Just the spine, in order. Spend two of the ten on what your audience is feeling. Put your notes where your eyes already are, as key points rather than sentences, because sentences get read.

PART FOUR

we will
LEVERAGE OUR ENVIRONMENT

TIME • LOCATION • ATMOSPHERE



THEIR CALENDAR, NOT YOURS

Most presentation preparation revolves around your time. It's a production. There are decisions you have to make on a certain timeline to affect the moment.

But your audience has a clock too, and theirs is more important than yours.

WHERE ARE THEY, IN THEIR DAY, WHEN YOU LAND?

If your audience is mostly parents, a three o'clock call isn't merely inconvenient. School lets out. You have asked a roomful of people to choose between your idea and their kid, and some of them will choose your idea and resent you for making them.

That's not a scheduling mishap. It's disrespectful, and your idea pays for it. Time zones, the Friday afternoon, the morning the sales data is published, the hour after an announcement nobody has processed... every one of those is answerable, and every answer comes from the work you did to deliver on the first promise.

You cannot decide time without **knowing your audience**.

HOW LONG ARE YOU ACTUALLY ASKING FOR?

The hour is a calendar default, not a judgement. Book what the idea needs.

Forty-five minutes is a decision, and so is ninety, and so is twenty. Ending early is a gift, but only available to someone who decided in advance. You can't improvise your way to respecting someone's time.



THEIR CALENDAR, NOT YOURS

WHAT ARE YOU ASKING THEM TO GIVE UP?

Saying yes to your presentation means saying no to thousands of other ways to spend the time. In a physical room, travel made that trade-off visible and everyone accepted it on the way in.

Virtually, the cost is invisible, which makes the meeting feel free. A meeting that feels free is one people multitask through without guilt. Naming what you're asking for, out loud, is most of what makes it feel worth showing up to.

Katrina started eight weeks out, and the first thing she sent wasn't to her audience (the broader company). It was talking points, arming the people (its leaders) who'd be asked about the vision in 1:1s.

WHEN DO YOU EXPECT THEM TO ACT?

The temporal divide between your audience hearing you and acting on your idea is the most expensive gap in this whole process. Still, it's the one hardly anybody schedules.

Decide now when the follow-up arrives, when you'll ask for feedback, and when the action actually begins. Then put those in the calendar before the meeting, not after it.



THE SCREEN IS A PLACE

Location determines what kind of conversation is possible. Virtually, you have two locations at once: the physical space you're sitting in, and the rectangle you occupy on other people's screens.

You control both entirely. Nothing below requires a purchase. But it does require you to make decisions.

WHAT DOES THE FRAME SAY BEFORE YOU DO?

A laptop flat on a desk shoots you from below and takes your posture with it. Books under the laptop fix that. Standing changes your voice more than it changes the picture.

Behind you, anything readable is a thing people read instead of listening: book spines, certificates, the whiteboard from last week. But the real question isn't tidiness. It's whether what they see matches the person you decided to be on the previous pages.

A wall of awards and a bare wall say different things, but both are saying something.

HAVE YOU FIXED THE SOUND, BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE?

Degraded audio makes listeners rate a speaker as less intelligent, less likeable, and the work less important.¹

Camera framing, lighting, eye line and sound are not trivial, cosmetic concerns. They're signals about care, effort and credibility, and when a presenter ignores them, audiences reasonably infer something else is being ignored too.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN IT BREAKS?

Recovery is not a skill to be practiced live. It's a set of decisions you made a week ago and hopefully didn't need.

Decide how you reach everyone if the platform fails, and give it to somebody other than you, because you'll be presenting.

THE SCREEN IS A PLACE

IN A ROOM THE DECK COMPETES WITH YOU.

Here, it REPLACES you.

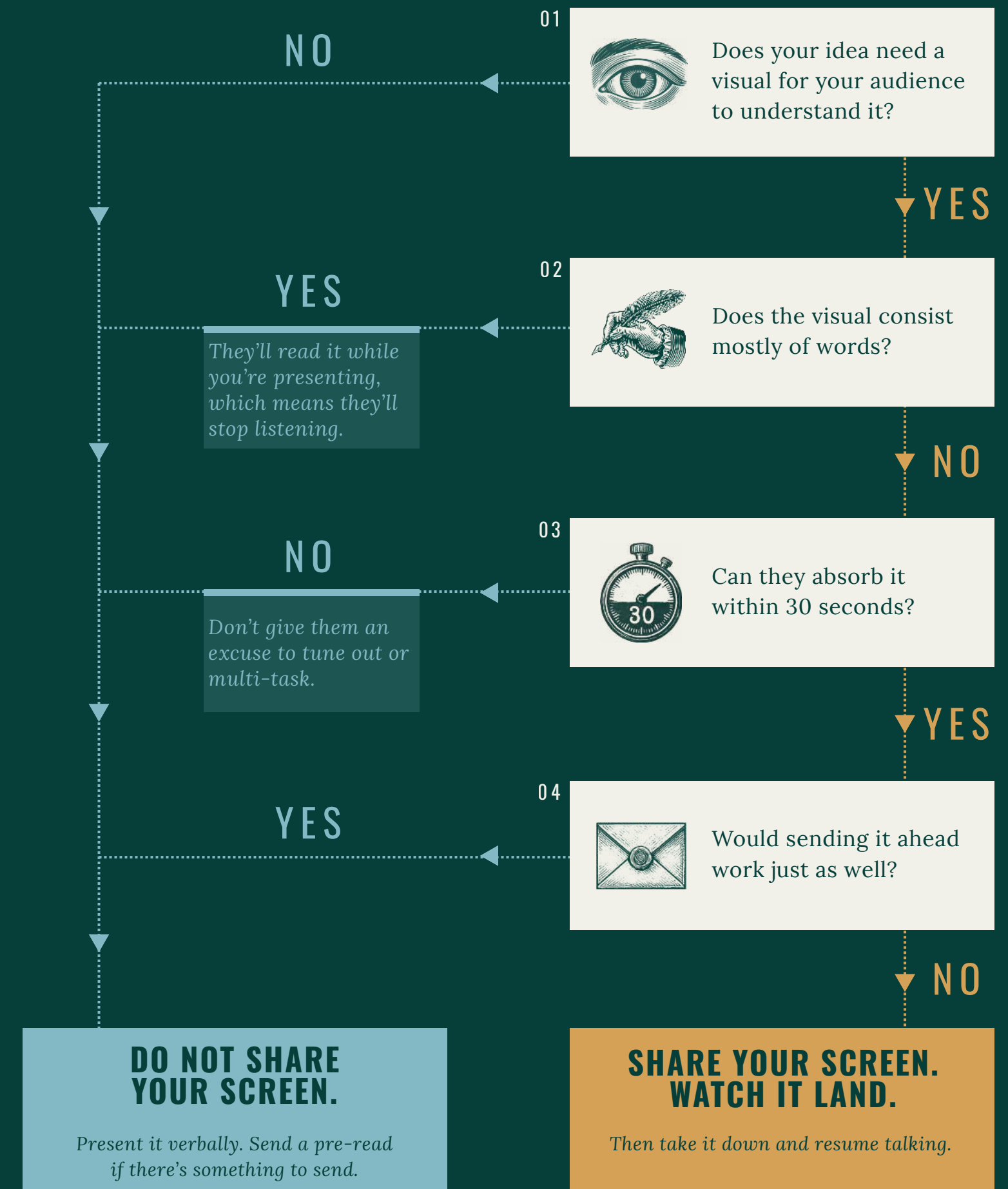
You click share, your face drops to a thumbnail, and a person talking becomes a document getting narrated. In a physical room you'd watch their eyes come back up and move when they did. Virtually, you keep going. And you won't see the moment you lost them, because the faces left the screen when your slides arrived. You'll finish feeling like it went fine.

WHAT'S IN THE RECTANGLE WHEN YOU'RE NOT?

If there is any chance you'll share, clear the desktop, close the tabs, and open the one window well before your presentation. Hunting for it live is the most expensive ten seconds in the meeting.

And when you do share, share for thirty seconds and take it down. A visual that needs longer is a document, and you already know the role documents play in presentations. **Send it in advance.**

SHOULD I SHARE MY SCREEN?



THEY'LL REMEMBER HOW IT FELT

Atmosphere is so much more than production value. It's the conditions under which meaning forms. Before anyone evaluates what you're saying, they register what it feels like to be there while you say it.

Presenters talk as though atmosphere happens to them. But it's always either being designed or inherited.

The only question is whether you designed it intentionally.

WHAT DO THEY HEAR BEFORE YOU SPEAK?

A presentation that opens on silence and a blank grid has already told everyone what kind of meeting this is. Rhythm (music, pacing, movement) regulates nervous systems in ways most virtual presenters never consider.

So: music before, or during, or not at all? Which songs, and why those? There are no neutral answers, because arriving to nothing is also an answer.

WHAT CAN YOU PUT IN THEIR HANDS?

The ceiling is so high here, and almost nobody looks up.

Ship candles to your audience with instructions to light them before the call, so the scent carries something the idea needs. Ship t-shirts to be worn on camera, so when the grid comes up it's visibly flooded with the idea. Ship a puzzle or fidget toy and ask them to bring it to the presentation.

Scent has a direct line to memory, bypassing most of the brain's usual filters. Texture grounds an idea in the body.

The cost here is obvious and it is the real one: you have to ask grown adults to light a candle, some of them will think it's silly, and you have to be the person who asked anyway. That is the single bravest thing in this document. It is also the thing nobody you're competing with will do.

Designing atmosphere is hospitality. It says: this idea matters enough to be delivered with care.

THEY'LL REMEMBER HOW IT FELT

WHERE ARE THEY TAKING THIS CALL FROM?

You can't set the temperature of a room you're not in, and you can't arrange the chairs. But you can ask.

"Take this one from somewhere other than your desk."

"Join from a room with a door you can close."

"Stand up for this one if you can."

Posture changes attention, and a person who moved to take your call has already decided it matters. In a physical room, you'd have booked the space with intention. Online, the booking is a sentence in the invite.

FACES, OR A BLANK SCREEN?

Whether a call starts with faces or with a blank screen is a choice, and it's yours to make. Ask for cameras in the first fifteen seconds, with the reason attached, before anybody has the chance to become a passive audience. Some of them won't, and now you can see exactly who.

Then, thank them for something specific — not for attending, but for an action they took. And put nothing on the screen while you do it.

The first thing that appears should arrive because your idea needed it, not because the meeting started.

**AUDIENCES RARELY QUOTE WHAT WAS SAID.
THEY REMEMBER EXACTLY HOW IT FELT TO BE THERE.**

PART FIVE

we will
EXAMINE THE DEFAULTS



MAKE THE BRAVE DECISIONS

*Every decision in this guide comes with an answer already waiting.
Those answers are inherited, and unless you decide differently, they lead to whatever the last presenter did,
repeated until nobody remembers choosing it.*

In the left columns, the choices you'll make. In the right, the answers your habits give when you leave the question alone.

BEFORE YOU BUILD	
THE DECISION	IF YOU DON'T MAKE IT
Does this need to be a presentation?	It could read as any other meeting
Does it need to be virtual?	Whatever the invite defaulted to
Who's actually in the audience?	Everyone on the invite, unexamined
What do they want from you?	What you assume they want, unless you ask

AS YOU BUILD	
THE DECISION	IF YOU DON'T MAKE IT
What's the one sentence they repeat tomorrow?	Whatever they invent to fill the void
Is there a deck?	Yes, there's always a deck
Does a pre-read earn its place?	It goes out, because it always goes out
What are you cutting?	Nothing. Everything prepared is delivered

MAKE THE BRAVE DECISIONS

AS YOU SCHEDULE

THE DECISION	IF YOU DON'T MAKE IT
When, in their day?	The first open slot on your calendar
How long are you asking for?	Whatever the calendar defaults to
What's the meeting called?	The title from last time
When does the follow-up land?	Whenever you get to it

THE FIRST NINETY SECONDS

Cameras on?	Up to the audience
What's on screen?	Your slides, from the first second
How do you open?	An apology and an agenda

THE HOUR BEFORE

THE DECISION	IF YOU DON'T MAKE IT
What's behind you?	Whatever happens to be there
What are they hearing you through?	The laptop microphone
Where's the camera?	Possibly somewhere unflattering
Is self-view on?	Yes

DURING AND AFTER

If it breaks, how do you reach them?	You don't. You wait
Do you let the silence sit?	You fill it
When do you ask for feedback?	Anecdotally, or you don't
Where does the recording live?	An email thread nobody opens

HOLD THE LINE OUT LOUD

*You read that list and found your own habits in it. Most people never look.
Now you choose differently, and somebody objects.
They ask for the deck. They want the hour. They wonder why the cameras matter.*

The lines below carry your responses in one sentence.

WHEN THEY PUSH BACK			
“Can you send the deck ahead?”	“You’ll get a document, but your time is precious and I’d rather spend it on the part you can’t read on your own.”	“Can we just get the recording?”	“You’ll get that too, but this one’s worth being here for live.”
“Why aren’t we using slides?”	“Because you spend enough of your day reading. I’d rather have a conversation.”	“Can you make it shorter?”	“Yes, here’s what’s cut-able, and here’s what we’d risk losing if we do that.”
“Why do we have to have our cameras on?”	“We’re talking through some meaty stuff here, and it deserves our full attention.”	“We all read it, skip ahead.”	“I’d still rather walk you through this than risk making assumptions.”
		“This isn’t how we do it here.”	“True, but that’s a standard for how we’ve <i>always done it</i> . I’d like to proceed with the version we designed for this purpose.”

THANK YOU FOR READING

NOW YOU CAN'T UNSEE IT

Before reading this, most of your virtual presentations ran on autopilot.

Now you know what the invite decides before anybody opens it.

You know what a pre-read costs when nobody asked for one.

You know the four questions that settle a screen share, and you know who owns the silence after a hard sentence.

None of it required a purchase, and nobody had to approve any of it.

The next meeting request you open looks different. You see the hour somebody picked without thinking, the title carried over from last quarter, the deck already assembling itself in your head.

You lost the ability to do this by accident.

You control more than you think.



NOTES

1. Newman, E. J., & Schwarz, N. (2018). Good sound, good research: How audio quality influences perceptions of the research and researcher. *Science Communication*. The studies cover conference video and radio; the mechanism is processing fluency, applied here to videoconference.
2. Fauville, G., Luo, M., Queiroz, A. C. M., Lee, A., Bailenson, J. N., & Hancock, J. (2023). *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*. Mirror anxiety predicts videoconference fatigue and is the strongest measured mediator of the gender gap.
3. Mayer, R. E. The redundancy principle: identical narration plus on-screen text produces worse learning than narration alone. Pairs with Sweller's cognitive load theory.
4. Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2000). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79. Meta-analysed across 76 studies by van Laer, de Ruyter, Visconti & Wetzels (2014), *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40. Zebregs et al. (2015) find narrative evidence exerts a stronger influence on intention, statistical evidence on belief.

about
GATHER ROUND

HOME OF THE CAMPFIRE METHOD

What is

GATHERROUND?

GatherRound is a leadership communication consultancy that supports organizations turning business-critical ideas into belief.

Founded by Eric Harris, GatherRound works with established and aspiring leaders to strengthen their ability to communicate the value of complex ideas in high-stakes moments.

Workshop Participants Say:

“I am going to incorporate this into every aspect of my communications.”

“This will allow me to turn on the more strategic part of my brain.”

“I was blown away by the psychology of the simple practices.”



What is

THE CAMPFIRE METHOD?

The Campfire Method is GatherRound’s framework for persuasive leadership communication. It helps leaders transform ideas into stories that build understanding, belief, and action.

Most presentation training focuses on speaking techniques or slide design. The Campfire Method starts with something deeper: how people actually process new ideas. It empowers leaders to think about persuasion through the lens of four promises:

Know Your Audience

Leaders must understand what their audience values, fears, and hopes to achieve before presenting an idea.

Craft Your Story

Ideas must be structured in ways that help people understand what’s changing and why it matters.

Know Yourself

Effective presenters understand their communication style and rehearse deliberately to increase clarity and confidence.

Leverage Your Environment

Every presentation takes place in a context shaped by time, location, and atmosphere. These environmental signals influence how ideas are received.

Together, these promises equip leaders to create presentations that generate buy-in for their ideas.

ERIC HARRIS
Founder, GatherRound

WORK WITH US

WORKSHOPS

GatherRound facilitates interactive Campfire Method workshops with teams of all sizes, with your story and your next high-stakes presentation on the table.

[GatherRound.us](#)



READ THE BOOK

THE CAMPFIRE METHOD

This guide is a companion. The book makes the case this document assumes: why story does the work slides cannot, and how to build one that transforms a presentation into an experience for your audience.

[TheCampfireMethod.com](#)