


Hosting effective virtual events

A guide from StriveTogether



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For the past ten years, StriveTogether has brought the power of our national movement to one city for three days of connecting, learning and creating change.

In 2020, to ensure the safety and health of our network and staff, we held this gathering virtually for the first time. Though we couldn't be in the same room, we were committed to hosting an event that was as engaging, valuable and energizing as past convenings.

Our team tried new things, learned as we went and gathered feedback along the way. The result — the 2020 Cradle to Career Network Convening — was one of our best events yet. We're excited to share what we learned for other virtual event hosts as we continue to take advantage of the accessibility and creativity possible through online events.

About StriveTogether

StriveTogether is a national movement that helps over 12 million students succeed, cradle to career, for a more prosperous future. In partnership with nearly 70 communities, we amplify local actions into national impact by identifying best practices, measuring what matters and spreading what works. Learn more at StriveTogether.org.

event planning



STRUCTURE AND DESIGN

Your virtual event doesn't have to be an online replica of an in-person experience. Think expansively about how you can structure and design your event to increase access and engagement.

Spread your event out and schedule with all time zones in mind.

Virtual events are challenging to balance around work and home obligations, and video fatigue takes its toll. Joining a full-day online event might not be realistic for most of your attendees. Spread your event out over several days to keep your timing and content accessible for your audience. Your attendees might be logging on from four or more time zones. Schedule your event between the hours of 12:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m. ET (9:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m. PT) to ensure that all attendees can access sessions during business hours.

What worked: For the convening, we changed our two-and-a-half day in-person event to a six-day virtual event spanning Friday to Friday. Each day of the week had a theme tied to the learning goals for that day. Sessions were scheduled between the hours of 12:00 - 5:00 p.m. ET to ensure that all attendees were able to attend live and engage in sessions via break-out rooms.

Create a distinct themed experience each day.

The feeling and energy of an event can be harder to capture via computer screen. If your event spans multiple days, use themes to curate content and connect your attendees to the experience.

What worked: Structuring the days of the convening into learning themes created excitement over the course of the week. One attendee shared, "The structure and learning themes used gave us something to really look forward to each day and built the sacredness of the time in a way I'd not expected. It also honored that we all have additional work to attend to so we could really prioritize being present for each session."

Schedule long breaks between sessions.

Make sure your schedule lets attendees take care of themselves and their other responsibilities.

What worked: We spaced out our agenda to allow for one-hour breaks between sessions, which gave attendees time to restore their energy.

COMMUNICATION

Clear communication and logistics are even more important in a virtual format, since attendees rely on technology alone to engage in the experience. Here's what we learned about coordinating an event and communicating with attendees:

Send daily logistics emails.

There are just as many details in a virtual event as an in-person event, but since attendees aren't together, it can be challenging to share clear, aligned messages. Send daily logistics emails with information about what to expect each day and any important updates.

What worked: We made the daily emails engaging by emphasizing the day's themes, including having a different community leader welcome attendees in each email.

Communicate your schedule in all time zones.

If your event has attendees nationwide, be sure to share all four U.S. time zones when you communicate about your schedule to avoid any confusion around start and end times.

What worked: Applications like CrowdCompass automatically convert times into the participant's time zone, and we also listed all time zones in our communications.

Create a communication toolkit for stakeholders and attendees to share about the event.

To take advantage of the increased accessibility of a virtual event, involve your stakeholders and attendees in expanding your reach. Provide communication tools for your attendees and partners to use to invite others to attend, share what they're learning and post to social media.

What worked: We created two communication toolkits for the convening. The first toolkit was launched at the beginning of registration for attendees to invite other partners in their networks to the event. The second was a social media toolkit for all attendees to use in sharing insights and ideas with their networks.

FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTABILITY

Flexibility and adaptability are essential to achieving the results of your event. Here's how we created the time and space to respond to changing needs and circumstances during the convening:

Add in-time spaces and programming.

Adding spaces and programming to respond to emerging needs ensures that we can meet the needs of our attendees as people and as leaders.

What worked: In the middle of the convening, the news broke that Breonna Taylor’s killers had not been indicted. As an organization committed to anti-racism hosting an event centered on racial equity, we knew we needed to respond to this news and hold space for our attendees to process together. Our team gathered between workshops and created immediate communication and in-time racial affinity spaces for attendees to be together that afternoon. The affinity groups were widely attended, and we received positive feedback from attendees about this adaptation to our programming.

Adjust and improve during your event.

Make real-time adjustments in response to what you learn during your event to stay flexible and keep on track toward your results. Find out what’s working and what’s not from staff members and attendees, and use this data to make changes.

What worked: Every morning during the week of convening, we held 30-minute prep meetings with staff who had a role that day. At the end of each day, we held 30-minute debriefs. By checking in regularly, we aligned all team members heading into each day and captured insights on what to sustain and improve.

CO-DESIGN WITH STAKEHOLDERS

To ensure that your event meets the needs of your attendees, it’s critical to involve them in the planning process. Attendees from past events and those you know will be attending your virtual event are the most informed people about your event experience. These key attendee stakeholders know what they need from your event and can guide you in decision making.

Collecting attendee feedback is important, but so is co-designing your event with attendees — actually including them in planning.

What worked: We gathered input to understand what attendees needed and hoped to take away from the convening to accelerate their work. Using tools like surveys, journey mapping and qualitative interviews, we gathered insights and critical data from hundreds of Cradle to Career Network members. This feedback informed our decision to not replicate an in-person conference, but rather to spread out the schedule with a theme for each day of the week and space for attendees’ other obligations. Beyond gathering feedback, we also co-designed key aspects of the convening with Cradle to Career Network members, including the results, schedule, communication toolkit and community agreements.

event components



WORKSHOPS AND SESSIONS

A virtual format allows you to think creatively about how to curate, structure and design event sessions to have the highest impact for your attendees. For the convening, we tried new approaches based on the priorities and needs of our network, and the result was the highest quality content to date. Here's what we learned:

Create varied session types to meet different needs.

Find out what your attendees need from your event, and design session types in response to those needs.

What worked: At the convening, we offered traditional workshops, peer collaboration sessions, application and planning sessions, mindfulness spaces, affinity groups and keynotes. These different formats allowed attendees to engage in a variety of ways to meet their learning goals.

Provide coaching for workshop facilitators.

Make sure the people responsible for delivering content at your event have what they need to present engaging and informative sessions.

What worked: StriveTogether coaches provided one-on-one coaching sessions with each workshop and session facilitator on their results, design and agenda. Facilitators shared that they appreciated the support, and our sessions were the most rigorous and aligned yet.

Schedule technology preparation sessions for workshop facilitators.

To help prevent technology challenges, connect with facilitators before the event to test their internet speeds, offer tips about the virtual event platform and review technology logistics.

What worked: In addition to coaching calls, session facilitators were required to attend a short technology meeting with our technology director. This connection ensured facilitators were confident and ready to facilitate virtually.

Identify clear roles for support staff in each live session.

Determine what support you'll need during each session to make sure it's smooth and effective. Then, coordinate staff volunteers to fill these roles.

What worked: Two StriveTogether staff members played support roles for each session — a technology host to support technology needs and a learning lead to capture insights.

Incorporate prep time before sessions start.

Add time to your day-of event schedule to connect with facilitators to prepare session materials, review the agenda flow and ensure that technology is working properly.

What worked: Before each session, convening facilitators met 30 minutes early with their session's StriveTogether technology host to get ready for the session and resolve any challenges.

P L E N A R I E S A N D K E Y N O T E S

Every year, keynotes are the most well attended and highly rated aspects of our convening, and this year was no different. What did look different, however, were the logistics of ensuring a successful virtual plenary. Here's what we learned about planning and implementing a virtual keynote plenary session:

Re-think traditional keynote structure.

We all have shorter attention spans when experiencing something through a computer screen rather than in person. This means that a traditional keynote may not translate effectively to a virtual setting. Instead, consider hosting the keynote as a fireside chat between the speaker and a moderator. This structure creates more interaction, helping to energize and engage attendees as they're watching. Use pre-written questions combined with questions from the audience to ensure that attendees still connect with the messages of the keynote.

What worked: In addition to using the fireside chat format, we turned other aspects of our convening plenaries virtual in creative ways as well. We used a roll-call style segment to highlight the work of communities across the country, rotating speakers. For our annual awards, we featured our winners on screen and took screenshots of them receiving their awards. Have fun with the possibilities of the online format!

Incorporate performance art.

Art is a powerful way to connect people, even as hundreds of attendees sit in separate rooms on separate screens all over the country. A meaningful spoken word performance or art performance connected to the plenary message can ground attendees in the moment, cultivating a sense of presence and creating a special experience for all who are watching.

What worked: Spoken word poet Christian Paige opened and closed the 2020 Cradle to Career Network Convening with powerful performances that engaged and inspired attendees.

Turn on the chat box in your event platform.

At an in-person plenary, attendees can feel the energy of the room and can hear and see reactions to what's being shared on stage. The chat box of your virtual event platform can replicate that same energy and connectivity among attendees and create a shared experience.

What worked: Through the chat box, convening attendees engaged actively with the plenary, sharing insights and reflections that built off of other attendees' reactions. Additionally, the conversations in the chat box helped our event team note what attendees were thinking and feeling at different points in time to understand what parts of the plenary were most impactful.

Add closed captioning services, including translation, for accessibility.

Determine what features you need to ensure that all attendees can engage in the plenary sessions and keynotes.

What worked: We hired a closed captioning service that live translated what was being spoken, with captions available in both English and Spanish.

Designate clear roles for implementation.

Just like at an in-person event, there are many tasks and roles in a virtual plenary. Small technology errors can have a big impact on attendee experience, so ensure that you have specific responsibilities designated to different staff members — ideally, only one role per person. These roles could include: turning on and off the recording, monitoring the chat box, turning on and off speakers' cameras and microphones, cuing the next speaker via text message, spotlighting speaker videos, monitoring attendance, locking the video room for security, taking screenshots and playing videos or music. Note each of these roles for a “run of show.”

What worked: We assigned one responsibility per person, spreading out the tasks among 10 StriveTogether staff members. Breaking these details into different roles ensured smooth timing and effective technology.

Practice, practice, practice.

In the weeks leading up to the plenary and during the event, it's important to conduct multiple run-throughs with all speakers and staff with implementation roles. Have a “run of show” for each keynote that includes the scripts and moderator questions as well as cues for music, slide changes, speaker entrances and exits, prompts in the chat box, and other key activities.

What worked: Through these practice sessions, we caught dozens of errors that we were able to fix to ensure our plenaries ran smoothly. It also helped our speakers and behind-the-scenes staff feel confident about what to expect and how problems could be solved in real time.

AFFINITY SPACES

Caucuses and affinity group spaces give people the space to be and work with individuals who share similar racial, ethnic, gender identities and abilities. This releases groups from the undue burden of educating other communities about their experiences of racism and other inequities. Instead, affinity group spaces enable collective dialogue and learning among peers with similar lived experiences and identities while integrating care and community building.

During the convening, we held two different times for affinity groups — one planned before the event and one created during the week to meet the real-time needs of attendees. Here's what we learned from hosting these racial affinity spaces:

Make space for these groups.

Attendees find incredible value in having a supported and brave space in which to gather with those who share their identity and lived experience. Prioritizing including affinity groups in your event's schedule will create an engaging, connected experience for attendees.

What worked: Convening attendees reported that the affinity spaces were one of the most impactful parts of the event. Here's what two attendees shared:

"The multi-cultural affinity group was awesome! Not having to code switch, being able to use shorthand and still feeling understood was awesome!" — Carla Stough Huffman

"I can't put into words how impactful, insightful and deeply needed this Black affinity session was today! Thank you for allowing this authentic, comfortable place where Black leaders across the U.S. were able to breathe!" — Dr. Caprica Wells

Create differentiated, distinct affinity spaces and be clear about who each space is for.

The purpose, learning and agenda for each space should be designed to meet the specific needs of these groups. At the convening, we learned that it's important to be explicit in our communications about who these spaces are for and who they are not for. This clarity will ensure that only those who share the identity and lived experience of a group are in attendance, keeping the space psychologically safe.

What worked: Based on Cradle to Career Network member feedback, we created six distinct affinity spaces: Asian and Asian American, Black, Indigenous/Native American, Latinx and multi-racial affinity groups and a white caucus for racial equity.

Co-design the space with stakeholders who share the identity and lived experience of the affinity group.

We all have work to do to create a just and equitable world, and that work looks different across groups. To ensure that each racial affinity group meets the needs of participants, involve those who

share the racial identity and lived experience of that affinity group to plan and facilitate.

What worked: Each of the affinity groups were planned, designed and facilitated by Cradle to Career Network members in partnership with StriveTogether staff members who shared the identity and lived experience of the affinity group. The results and agenda of each affinity group was different and specified to hold the space needed for participants.

Get your organizational leadership's support to prioritize affinity group planning.

It's important to make sure that event planning team members are able to contribute to and engage in the affinity spaces with which they identify.

What worked: StriveTogether senior leadership and managers dedicated staff time and capacity to ensure that this work was prioritized.

A S Y N C H R O N O U S O P P O R T U N I T I E S

It's hard to fit virtual events into busy schedules among competing commitments. Asynchronous or on-your-own opportunities allow attendees to engage with content on their own timeline, offering a differentiated way to learn during the event. Here's how we incorporated asynchronous engagements into the convening:

Offer asynchronous programming.

Differentiated, on-your-own content offers a meaningful option for learning. This content could look like a video to watch, a podcast to listen to, an activity to experience or reflection questions to journal about.

What worked: As part of our mindfulness offerings during the event, we curated four asynchronous opportunities for attendees. The event schedule designated time to engage with this content, but it was available for whenever worked best for attendees. One attendee shared that an asynchronous engagement completely changed their perspective on their own leadership and was the most impactful part of their event experience.

Provide one-on-one connection opportunities.

Chatting in the breakfast line comes a little more naturally than connecting via an online session with dozens of participants, but making connection online is possible! Find ways to bring attendees together in one-on-one settings to facilitate deeper connections.

What worked: To create one-on-one opportunities, we connected coffee partners during the convening. We randomly matched each interested attendee with another attendee to find an hour during or after the event to talk on a call or video chat. Attendees who met in their pairs said they made meaningful connections — and some have continued meeting to support each other in their work since their original match!

technology safety and security



With 1,400 attendees joining us virtually for our 2020 convening, we prioritized the safety and security of our online space. Here's how we created a week of programming for our convening that was safe, secure and engaging for all of our attendees:

Find the right event platform for your audience.

Explore different event platform options and choose what's best for your event's specifications. Consider factors such as cost, attendee engagement, event management platform capabilities, video platform capabilities, data collection, accessibility and the technology's API integration with your current platforms.

What worked: For the convening, we used a combination of Cvent for event management and Zoom for video. This pairing allowed us to create a streamlined experience with a cost-effective, familiar and user-friendly platform that included break-out rooms for all sessions. Zoom now allows attendees to select their own break-out rooms, which makes it possible for attendees to choose the conversations they want to join and more closely mirrors an in-person experience.

Do not email out session links or post them on social media.

Making session links public could make your event susceptible to Zoom bombing, or unwanted intrusions.

What worked: We embedded all of our Zoom links into Cvent's CrowdCompass application (available on both desktop and mobile) to ensure that only registered attendees could access the sessions.

Lock sessions 10 minutes after they begin.

Our technology hosts closed each link after 10 minutes, and then used a registration list to admit confirmed attendees into the session. This measure ensured that our space was secure as facilitators began their workshops.

What worked: We learned that this policy was frustrating for some attendees, and we adjusted our communications during the week to emphasize this information and make sure attendees could plan to join on time. We also made all session recordings available the next business day so that those who missed sessions could access content.

ambiance and engagement



There is a natural buzz during an in-person event that comes from the excitement of being with old friends, meeting new people and connecting in a shared experience. It's possible to create a similar energy during a virtual event through some intentional ambiance and engagement.

Incorporate music.

Play intentionally chosen music as attendees enter your virtual spaces to create excitement.

What worked: At the beginning of every session and plenary, we played music that matched the theme and key messages of the day. Attendees moved to the music, sang on mute and even danced together as they waited for the sessions to start. The convening soundtrack created a shared joy and allowed attendees to ground in the space and find presence together.

Display trivia and other fun or useful information before sessions start.

Since attendees aren't sitting next to each other and chatting before sessions, this visual engagement can be a fun way for attendees to land in the present moment, learn something new and have fun together while they wait for the start of the session.

What worked: As attendees joined the virtual rooms, StriveTogether team members shared slides featuring event information, trivia and mindfulness tips.

Keep the chat box on in all sessions.

The chat box function allows attendees to share thoughts, reactions and questions throughout sessions to engage as active participants and learners.

What worked: Monitoring the chat box was a great way for facilitators to gather real-time data on how attendees were reacting to content. The chat also supported attendees to get what they needed out of sessions to apply insights to their work.

Create small group opportunities with break-out groups.

Rather than offering just sit-and-get learning, include break-out rooms in session design to create opportunities for attendees to connect with each other and process learning in a meaningful way.

What worked: Attendees shared that spending time in break-out groups allowed them to better think through how they could apply learning to their work and to build relationships that they've sustained beyond the convening.

Model and encourage using pronouns.

To create an inclusive environment for all participants, create norms or agreements around using pronouns in display names and facilitator and speaker introductions. As MyPronouns.org shares, “Using someone’s correct personal pronouns is a way to respect them and create an inclusive environment, just as using a person’s name can be a way to respect them.”

What worked: We reminded attendees to use pronouns in our technology tips and email communications, and we shared steps on how to update display names in Zoom.

Create community agreements.

Shared agreements help guide attendees and build a spirit of community throughout your event.

What worked: StriveTogether’s Member Advisory Council created the following community agreements, which we shared in event communications:

- Lean into brave space: By leaning into difficult conversations, you can disagree without being disagreeable.
- Be collaborative: Use the wisdom of the experiences in the room to advance your work with youth and families, building a better future.
- Have fun doing serious work together!