



Small Scenarios for Changing Times:

# Meeting Palindromes

*Sometimes Leading Means Letting Go*

By Heather Bussing, Jon Stross, and John Sumser

*Spring 2020*

# Meeting Palindromes: Sometimes Leading Means Letting Go

*Two weeks after laying off 28% of the company, we were getting ready to start an all hands meeting and watching 300+ people pop into a Zoom room. Our agenda was to lay out the financial plan and adjusted OKRs for the rest of the year, accounting for our new reality. But then we noticed someone's Zoom background was showing text in reverse. Someone made a joke about palindromes, leading to a chat pile-on of everyone's favorite palindromes. It was weird and organic and hilarious.*



*Workers Advisory Board in Manufacturing Plant, National Archives, Records of the U.S. Information Agency*

In a private Slack conversation, my co-founder and I were talking, “Just wait ... don’t kick off the meeting yet ... I think these palindromes are the meeting.”

Our company is inherently unsettled at this moment. From a financial perspective, our previously predictable business suddenly feels way less in our control. From a human perspective, scores of awesome employees were just laid off, with the remaining workforce left feeling both relieved and guilty. Our customers are recruiters, many of whom

are also losing their jobs.

All of our interactions are mediated through this weird, low-fidelity video chat. We have employees mourning, struggling with intense loneliness, running ragged trying to work and homeschool their kids, and feeling enraged they aren’t safe even going for a run. The lived realities of our employees have diverged from everything familiar or comfortable.

So, the question is, what kind of leadership

is necessary in this moment? When perfect clarity isn’t possible and our employees feel so personally in peril, our normal plan for how to communicate rang hollow and insufficient. What we needed was the agility in the moment to understand people are craving a new type of engagement and that outweighs the norm of “always start meetings on time”. One of our

jobs as leaders today is to stay open and flexible in figuring out new ways to communicate, create community, and simply cope as humans in this moment.

Empty suits look even emptier these days. Our new environment favors leaders who make observable contributions to the actual work.

In that moment, the OKR our company needed was:

*Go hang a salami! I’m a lasagna hog.*

## In considering what our employees need from leadership right now, here are some of the questions we keep in mind:

### ***Are you leading as a human, not just repping an executive title?***

My co-founder has maintained a periodic vlog for the company since this began. It sometimes contains important company announcements. Mostly, it's a window into his world. The weird wallpaper at his in-laws' house, the struggles of parenting an 8 year old while working, and the fears he feels for himself and his family. He's implicitly showing everyone that it's ok to be having a hard time. The feedback suggests that people like that he can relate to their own difficulties.

### ***What is the opposite of presenting to 300 muted people?***

Find venues where you can interact with people on a level playing field. As leaders, we need to explicitly create spaces to interact that aren't so one-way. I've embraced the informal, immediate connection of Slack, and employees have appreciated the surprise of me actually being there and participating.

### ***How do you effectively communicate with an employee base experiencing such wildly different situations?***

We thought our company was diverse before. Now it's even MORE diverse. People quarantined alone have one experience. People with kids and no childcare are having a totally different one. People who are higher health risk are having a still another. How do you do a single all hands session that meets everyone where they are and connects?

It turns out, the skills we were starting to learn in our DE&I practice of using radical empathy to truly understand what's happening with our employees just became even more important.

### ***When opportunities for informal/spontaneous communication are reduced, how do you continue to create/adapt your culture?***

How do you create rituals to replace the kitchen conversations? How do you break down big meetings into small group conversations? How do you avoid the trap of just attending a few structured meetings and never having unstructured conversations?

### ***Can you spot the moments where the culture is creating and healing itself?***

Learning when to let the organization drive itself is a necessary skill in our new world.

*Sometimes, the palindromes are the meeting.*

## About the Small Scenarios series:

Massive change is afoot. The pandemic gives us the opportunity to rethink and reappraise. The small scenarios project is designed to provoke thought about the medium-term future and how it will be different. The goal is to help HR prepare for the future we will encounter in a few short months.

## The Small Scenarios Team



**HEATHER BUSSING** Heather Bussing is an employment attorney, HR Tech analyst, writer and editor where she explores the intersection of people, technology, law, and work. She also teaches internet law. She's appeared in the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, CNN, Mashable, Business Insider, and NPR discussing employment issues and tech.

**JON STROSS** Jon Stross is President and Co-founder of Greenhouse. At Greenhouse, Jon drives product strategy and works closely with customers and partners to build a platform that improves hiring performance.



**JOHN SUMSER** For 25 years, John Sumser has been chronicling the comings and goings in HRTechnology. These days, his primary focus is on intelligent tools (AI) and People Analytics. He is a Senior Fellow at the Conference Board, the Intelligent Tools columnist for HRExecutive magazine and the founder/principal analyst at HRExaminer.

## About HRExaminer

HRExaminer is a research and publishing company focused on the evolving edges of HR and HRTechnology. The publications team includes a 25 member editorial advisory board who deliver insight and opinion. The company also produces two award winning podcasts (live on Thursday and Friday mornings at 8:00 AM Pacific). Each year, HRExaminer delivers the market benchmark report on the evolution of Intelligent tools in HRTechnology.

### Contact

Web: [hrexaminer.com](http://hrexaminer.com)

Phone: 415.683.0775

### John Sumser,

*Principal Analyst*

@johnsumser

[john@hrexaminer.com](mailto:john@hrexaminer.com)

+1.415.683.0775

### Heather Bussing,

*Principal Analyst*

@heatherbussing

[heather@hrexaminer.com](mailto:heather@hrexaminer.com)

+1.415.683.0775