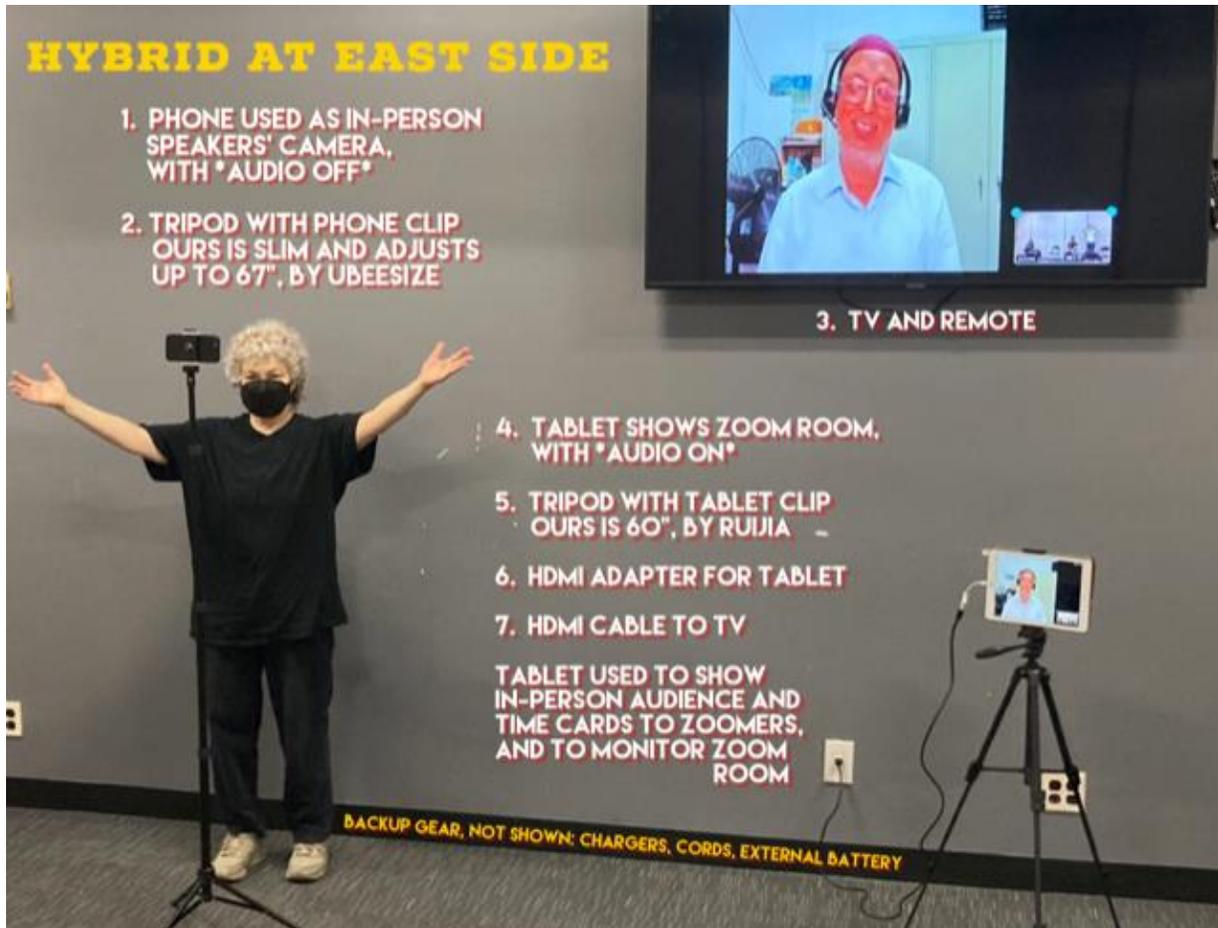


HAPPILY HYBRID FOR HALF A YEAR NOW

The Hybridizing History of East Side Toastmasters in District 46



Here's the story of East Side Toastmasters, which before the pandemic had been coming together every Friday night to a bright, spacious, and FREE room at 92Y. Then the pandemic changed everything. With awesome leadership, especially by President Heena, VPE Barb, and Greeter*/Co-President Frankie, we kept going brilliantly on Zoom, but missed the human connection of seeing each other in person. A series of picnics in Central Park helped.

At the end of May of 2021, we became hopeful that we might soon be able to safely get back together. Heena reached out persuasively to 92Y and they said YES!

At the time, 92Y was not requiring proof of vaccination for entry, as long as everyone stayed masked and socially distant. I met with 92Y staff and got permission for East Side to meet undistanced and unmasked, as long as our meetings consisted entirely of fully vaccinated people with POV. Back in May, that seemed like an excellent deal.

* East Side Toastmasters use the term Greeter, which is called Sergeant-at-Arms at other clubs

Why not meet **only** in person? Our reasons are probably the same as most clubs. In the year on Zoom, the club acquired many new members who live too far away to come in person to 92Y. We also saw an opportunity to keep or bring back old members who have moved away, such as Chad in Florida and Heena with her new baby in Seattle. There were international guests—last year we even had a joint meeting with a club in Wuhan. Some old members who used to make the trip now prefer Zoom all or some of the time for safety or convenience, or in bad weather. Some members are not vaccinated. And who knows what surprises COVID-19 may have in store.

The board decided that weekly hybrid meetings consisting of simultaneous virtual and in-person attendance would be our first choice for the new semester, and that we would try to make such hybrid meetings work. As a community club, we also decided to experiment as cheaply as possible, using existing equipment.

At 92Y: After discussion and research, adventurous club members Freda, Noel, Aaron, and I met at 92Y in mid-June to scope out the room and make a plan. The following Friday, I attended the club meeting from the room at the Y. The next week, Co-President/Greeter Aaron joined me. By July, we were ready to invite the whole club. VPE Alexandra, VPPR Rachel, and Secretary Uriel made it 5 officers in the room. Former board members Aisha and Sarah showed up. Our past District 46 International Speech and Table Topics champion Hill Krishnan spoke at the first hybrid meeting of the new semester. Next time, Jay and Shurui and Rachel's boyfriend Ray from NYTM were there. Then VPM Ralston, and Barb. Kerstin and Kenny came back. Elena and Dan joined.

On Zoom: Area 21 Director Eula Beckford installed the new officers; Area 25 Director Dennis Sumlin made his area visit. Mark Baker the Head Hybridizer dropped in for a table topic, with some Zoom glitches, but so what? Stephen Chin and Kory May of San Francisco Storytellers, both WCPS semi-finalists (Stephen moved on to the final), presented their contest speeches.

We were rocking.

August 6 was an ecstatic night. 16 people who hadn't gotten together in ages piled into the room at 92Y, and, after selfies, most ended up at Ilana's for pizza after the meeting.

That same night, 92Y tightened its requirements in light of the Delta variant. From now on, everyone would have to stay socially distant and wear masks the whole time—even while speaking. Is that better than Zooming from home and seeing everyone's faces? Can you even give a speech in a mask? Yuck.

How about Central Park? Nope: that would mean noise, rain, lack of privacy, darkness, mosquitos, no chairs. How about my apartment, already used for small, unmasked, hybrid and all in-person meetings? Nope: with Delta variant, a large indoor crowd risky. What to do? The board decided to try to make masked and socially distanced meetings

at 92Y work, by making them fun. If schoolchildren can mask up and stay socially distant all day, we figured we could manage for 90 minutes.

Only Aaron, Uriel, and I showed up the first night. Despite the masks, we still had a fun time. Uriel brought a tape measure to keep us six feet apart. That was August. Once again, we slowly built up the 92Y presence. By September, we often had more people at 92Y than on Zoom. And by mid-October, the happy news came that social distancing is no longer required at 92Y! We are still in masks.

Over time, we have greatly simplified our tech setup. When Mark visited again in September, we were streamlined and smooth. Fortunately, 92Y has WiFi, plus a giant TV on the wall. It turns out that the devices we already had were enough. We didn't need a new camera, didn't need a new mic—the quality of our existing Apple devices is just fine. Besides Zoom itself, we needed to buy only adapters, cables, batteries, and tripods. We connect my old iPad, set on a RUIJIA tripod that comes with a tablet clip (\$30) and Zoomed-in, to the TV with a lightning-to-HDMI adapter (\$40 from Apple, less from other outlets) and an HDMI cable (\$18). We have a little external Mophie Powerstation battery pack (\$18) on hand in case the iPad runs out of juice. This alone can be the entire hybrid setup. Assuming you already have a tablet or laptop available, and a TV or monitor for Zoom display, the cost for this most basic setup comes to about \$110.

We liked this very basic setup but have opted for a slightly more complicated one.

Because we want the Zoom people to see the Y audience, and we like to be able to monitor the Zoom room from inside 92Y, we usually have our Greeter seated near the iPad which displays the Y audience in one frame of the Zoom room. Or anyone else can serve as a Zoom tech.

Each Y speaker stands a few feet in front of my [Zoomed-in with AUDIO OFF] iPhone 7, which is mounted on a fabulous slender UBeesize height-adjustable tripod (\$30) and has its own battery pack (\$18). So, about \$50 for the iPhone gear.

In all, \$160 gets us a nice, sleek setup:

Two existing Apple devices, two new tripods, two new little battery packs, one new HDMI cable, one new Lightning to HDMI adapter.

\$150 more for club Zoom account (D46 has a Zoom incentive, and someone's personal account could be used instead, to save money)

We keep wall chargers and cords on hand in case the battery packs conk out. If my iPhone conks out, many other people have smart phones that can be our camera. If the iPad conks out, we can use just the iPhone, but with AUDIO ON.

Obviously, if you don't have a smart TV, you will need some way to display the Zoom room to the in-person crowd.

We tried but did not need: a wireless Bluetooth conference speaker/mic, a long extension cord with USB, an iPhone telephoto lens, a multiport adapter for a MacBook.

I would definitely consider buying the new \$320 iPad with Center Stage. If you have buckets of money, the big new iPad Pros could be sweet. Some members have MacBooks and these are very nice, but the old iPad shows the Zoom room and audience well and the tripod clip can hold the iPad. You would need to hold the MacBook up some other way—a table would do.

Our new board all lives in NYC, and so far, six out of seven have been able to attend in person. The seventh (our Treasurer Fatou) helps to monitor the Zoom room.

We've figured out some tips for running smooth hybrid meetings:

Feedback: Zoom people write feedback in the Chat. One Zoomer copies and emails the Chat to our Greeter, who passes along feedback to Y people. Y people write feedback on slips of paper and hand these to Y speakers or to the Greeter. Greeter takes pix of feedback slips to send to Zoom speakers.

Timing: If Timer is a Zoomer, they do the job normally. The Greeter at the Y simultaneously displays colors when Y people are speaking. If Timer is at 92Y, they display colors to Zoom speakers on their own Zoomed-in AUDIO OFF phone or on the iPad. Timer at 92Y displays colors to Y speakers normally.

If there are weird noises in the Zoom room, the Zoom people need to figure out who's got the audio problem and ask that person to mute.

If the iPhone fails, we can always fall back on the iPad as the only device. If the iPad fails, we can use just the iPhone, but that means the Y people can't see more than 4 people in the Zoom room. The old iPad can display up to 25 frames in Gallery View. If enough people start coming to the meeting on Zoom, we may want to invest in a new iPad Pro that can display 48 frames in Gallery view, and has Center Stage, to be our camera. We would also need a new tall tripod that can hold a large tablet. Or we might save money and just display 25 Zoomers at a time on my old iPad, but scroll to a new page of frames if there are more than 25 Zoomers.

What ifs:

1. What if 92Y speakers wish to display visual aids? Either they bring the aids to 92Y, or a helper in the Zoom audience can show slides in screen share. Aaron used his MacBook and a clicker at 92Y to give a great slide show, and Leah and Barb came in with cardboard signs for their speeches. Someone on Zoom can also do a screen share slide show in conjunction with a Y speaker.
2. What if people are sad at not seeing the faces of Y speakers? Using more movement and vocal variety helps (it's great that Pathways improved level 1 focuses on these skills) Having Zoom people's faces visible also helps—it's not a faceless meeting. Zoom and in-person makes a nice balance of faces and bodies.
3. What if Y speakers want to use big gestures but Zoom audiences can't see those big gestures? Y speakers can move back for those big gestures, and then come closer to the iPhone (our camera) for closeups. We've all learned how to use Zoom skillfully, and we are learning how to use the hybrid setup for optimal value to all.
4. What if a Y speaker wants to move around the stage area? The Y speaker can grasp and move the iPhone tripod for some situations, it's sturdy and lightweight. In other situations, the Greeter can serve as camera person for more customized filming of the speaker. Handheld, the iPhone camera can be jittery, so keep it on the tripod.
5. What if someone who usually comes to 92Y wants to give a particular speech that involves a lot of facial expression or intricate visuals? Maybe they Zoom in from home.
6. What if guests just show up? Not good, We require guests to attend twice on Zoom before coming to 92Y, and only with advance proof of vaccination by email. All members and visitors also must send POV before coming to 92Y. Members of other clubs must send POV but don't need to attend twice on Zoom before visiting. What if the weather is terrible? Barring illness or a blizzard, I'll be at the Y because I have all the gear and live close by. If everyone else wants to Zoom in, we know exactly how to do that!
7. What if I can't come and other people can? We need a Plan B for either getting the gear from my home to 92Y, or giving someone else a second set of gear, or doing without gear. We've already managed fine when I did the setup but had to leave early to take care of a sick dog. Someone else brought the gear to me. But even if we had no gear, and were at 92Y, everybody could simply Zoom in on their phones—voila! a hybrid meeting.
8. What if meeting at 92Y becomes too dangerous because of pandemic developments? Again, we know how to have happy meetings on Zoom.
9. What if we have to stop meeting in person and go back on Zoom indefinitely? We will be glad to have had this joyful experience of meeting in person, as soon as we could, as safely as we could, and for as long as we could.
10. What if the pandemic ends? May we live to find out.

Can the experience of East Side help your club? Is there a hybrid setup that would work for your room configuration and club culture, and within your budget and resources? Obviously, East Side lucked out with the free venue, clear COVID guidelines, and a giant TV with WIFI—plus a committed, enthusiastic executive board. Ramping up gradually was smart.

Hybridizing East Side turned out to be easier and cheaper than we expected, and tons of fun. It's also working fine on a smaller scale in my other clubs. Whatever your circumstances, if you want to try going hybrid, I bet you can figure something out, with district help if needed. Mark or I can visit your club if you like. If you're already hybrid, please share your successes and challenges, with an eye to helping other clubs. Let's talk!

Jill Tallmer, Hybrid Club Working Group
(415) 401-5556
Jtallmer@me.com

In addition to the material available on the District 46 website, the following articles could be useful:

[“Hybrid Harmony,”](#) by David F. Carr, DTM, Toastmasters Magazine, April 2021
[“Technology for Hybrid Meetings,”](#) by Cajetan A. Barretto, DTM, Toastmasters Magazine May 2021
[Create hybrid Toastmasters ZOOM meeting using low-tech equipment and free software.](#)
[Markus Seppälä YouTube playlist of hybrid meeting tip](#)
[Markus Seppälä equipment recommendations](#)