

Make Your Video Conferences More Productive by Incorporating Nonverbal Communication Cues

The in-person work environment of shared office space, watercooler conversations, team meetings – the Old Normal – is gone, vanquished by the coronavirus. In the New Normal, the workplace collegiality of the office has been replaced by the chaos of working from home. Even though we try to approximate the Old Normal nothing is really exactly the same. We miss the collegiality of an office.

Communication is one of the most important components of in-person work environments. At the office, we run an idea by a colleague in the next office, kibitz at the coffee machine, and collaborate in team meetings. This need to communicate continues, but connecting remotely is not the same. Today, we are dispersed, working remotely from wherever we are sheltering in place. Under these circumstances, communication becomes more difficult and the risk of miscommunication is greater.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

The difference lies in the context. Ninety-three percent of our communication is nonverbal: 55% of what we know about someone else we learn from their body language, 37% from their tone of voice, and only 7% from words. In Old Normal workplace meetings, conversation occurred within a visual context in which people understood who and what was important through participants' body language and speaking tone. They could see who was invested in the decision under discussion by the way they sat, their gestures and the intensity of their facial expressions. Body language made it easier for participants to stay involved and on task.

Now communication occurs in videoconferences, over the phone and in writing through texting or email. Even with video, most of the in-person psychological and emotional contextual information is lost. Connection via video seems less authentic, less personal and less emotionally fulfilling because of both the physical and psychological distance.

We all miss the Old Normal personal contact – the teamwork, gossip, camaraderie. Video conferences can feel stilted and awkward, filled with faces you hardly recognize and incongruous settings. Often a series of such meetings during the day leaves participants feeling drained.

We can still find fulfilling personal workplace connections if we try. We can each take intentional measures to make online connections, especially meetings, more emotionally satisfying. Let's look at some of these actions.

APPEARANCES

One of the delights of remote work is the ability to dress down. But don't take the comfort theme too far. This is still work, so you still want to be seen as professional, present, in control, a voice of clarity and preciseness during discussions. You need to dress the part.

As part of your morning routine, consider the "Friday casual" outfit you plan to wear. Comfortable but not beach party. Fix your hair as if you're going to work. Not only will you now look professional for video meetings, your actions will also tell your brain that

you are preparing for the workday. Clothing, posture, and attitude combine to create a positive emotional response through our mind-body connection. When you look "put together" your brain responds in a positive, attention-focused way.

If you plan to participate in video meetings, select appropriate clothing. Dress like a news anchor. Simply cut, jewel-tone tops work well on video. Avoid white, beige or colors that clash with your visible background. Ties for men or designer dresses probably go too far these days but pants should be high-end leisure or athletic wear, not sloppy sweats.

Now consider the context in which you will be viewed. In her New York Times piece on May 4, Amanda Hess noted that "the bookcase has become the background of choice for television hosts, executives, politicians. . . . The bookcase offers a visually pleasing surface and a gesture at intellectual depth."

When choosing your background for business video conferences, think about your message. Create a professional niche that reinforces your personal brand.

For example, my brand is as an experienced, honest, tell-it-like-it-is strategist and coach. My office was filled with personal mementoes and piles of work in process. At first, I chose a clearly fake bookcase background, then a colleague pointed out that its fakeness clearly contradicted my brand. I retired the fake books and cleaned up my office so it could be a more authentic backdrop. Think about the perception you want others to have and create your background accordingly.

There are many websites that offer free alternative backgrounds. In the work context, ignore the settings that encourage distraction such as those that move or that suggest beautiful vacation destinations.

VIDEOCONFERENCE DO'S AND DON'TS

To make online meetings more closely approximate in-person meetings, you have to consciously create space for those important nonverbal cues. Begin with these three techniques:

1. Eye contact is a key body language cue. Online, instead of looking at whomever is speaking, or at members of the group listening to you, you should approximate the impact of in-person eye contact by looking at the camera. This takes some practice, and it also requires that your camera

be correctly positioned above you at eye level or higher. If you are using your phone or laptop for the meeting it is important to pay attention to the camera's position.

For example, when Susan Rice, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, was on PBS' "Firing Line," for the entire time she talked, her eyes were directed downward, responding to the program moderator but creating a feeling of awkwardness and disengagement among viewers. Lighting is another factor that can impact the ability to share body language cues. To eliminate shadows that hide your face, place light in front or to the side of you.

2. The same body language positioning rules apply on camera as in person. To convey authority and confidence, sit tall with your back against the chair and your feet on the ground. Lean slightly forward to indicate participation. Indicate listening by tilting or nodding your head and smiling or laughing as appropriate. Use gestures to convey meaning just as you would at in-person meetings. Position yourself in the camera frame so that some of your body language is visible. Advice varies as to your appropriate distance from the camera. If you sit four to six feet away from the camera your colleagues will be able to see you from the waist up. Remember you are always on camera and visible unless you click "stop video." So, don't multitask. Turn your phone off, remove extraneous papers, leave lunch until after the meeting. The impact of any of these activities is amplified online. Similarly, when you look inattentive, bored or preoccupied, the visual itself can become a distraction. It cancels out the attentive professional image you want to display.
3. Understand how the video conference app you are using works. Know its bells and whistles. In in-person meetings there is always the slight background noise of chairs shifting, people breathing, coughing, moving papers, etc. Online, such noises are magnified and become distractions. Know how to mute and unmute yourself so that your mike is only open when you are speaking. Use the chat box feature to demonstrate your thought leadership and your involvement in the discussion. Ask questions, offer access to relevant articles, and add your support to the ideas of the person speaking.

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE SUCCESS OF EACH MEETING

If you are the meeting leader, create an inviting, collegial atmosphere by greeting people as they sign on and engaging in small talk. When you are speaking, aim for a friendly tone, offer authentic smiles and eye contact. Use active listening skills to improve the feeling of personal connection with meeting attendees.

- Structure the meeting to create many opportunities for participation. Use video conferencing tools such as the chat box, Q&A or polling to involve everyone. If the app offers breakout rooms, send small teams into them to work on key issues.



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Building Professional Practices

- At the beginning, initiate participation and set a personal tone by inviting people to introduce themselves or answer a question about what they have been thinking or feeling or doing. Direct questions to individuals rather than the whole group to avoid awkward pauses as people look for hard-to-see cues as to who should answer first.
- Speak slightly louder than you would at in-person meetings to project authority while striving for a conversational tone.

Participants have equal responsibility for ensuring the quality of a meeting. We are used to being passive observers of the entertainment or educational content on the screen. But in meetings you are the action. As such, you have to practice active listening, participate and be helpful. When participants disengage, meetings fall flat and people leave them feeling let down.

- Prepare as you would for an in-person meeting. Review the agenda, do relevant reading, think about your contribution to the meeting.
- Arrive on time.
- Dress for success.
- Be aware of ways in which you can use nonverbal language to ameliorate the tendency for online meetings to seem depersonalized, leading to negative feelings among the participants.

Yes, video conferencing can lead to depressing meetings. But you can do something about it by remembering the importance of nonverbal communication at in-person meetings. Despite the confines of the camera frame, incorporate body language including posture, eye contact, smiles and gestures to warm up the meeting environment. It may be difficult at first, but continue to practice. As it becomes more comfortable, you will leave meetings with positive feelings of accomplishment.

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