HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

Digital Article / Business Communication

How to Elevate Your Presence in a Virtual Meeting

Six tips for making an impact from a distance. *by Joel Schwartzberg*

Illustration by Michał Bednarski

Even before the COVID-19 crisis started, 5.3% of Americans — more than 8.2 million people — worked from home, according to a 2018 U.S. Census report. And with the outbreak turning more office workers into work-from-home employees, video conferences are becoming more routine for a wide range of business purposes, from staff meetings to brainstorming sessions to major announcements.

But communication tactics that work well among colleagues in a conference room may not translate seamlessly to Brady-Bunch-style quadrants on a computer screen. Organizational behavior professor Andy Molinsky recommends seeing virtual meetings as "an entirely different context, not simply an in-person meeting or a class on a screen."

Elevating both your point and your presence in a Zoom, Skype, or similar virtual meeting, requires not only engaging in video conference-friendly tactics but also disabusing yourself of potentially detrimental misconceptions about the medium.

To help keep your impact actual when your presence is virtual, consider these six recommendations:

1. Focus on your camera, not your colleagues

Every presentation coach will tell you that direct eye contact is a vital way to reinforce your point. In a video conference, this means looking into the video camera, not at the smiling faces of Marcia, Greg, Cindy, Peter, Jan, and Bobby. Speaking into a cold black circle will not feel natural or comfortable — as humans, we're trained to look at the people we're talking to — but know that entertainers and politicians have been doing it for decades.

It's challenging to focus on your camera for an entire meeting — especially while others are talking — but know that you increase the impact of your points when you look deep into the dot.

Practice looking into your camera during video conferences when you speak, even for brief moments. The more you use it, the more comfortable you'll become with it.

2. Maintain a strong voice

I always counsel my students and clients to use a louder-than-usual voice because, in addition to being audible, strong voices convey authority, credibility, and confidence. This concept is just as true in virtual conferences as it is in actual ones. So even though you're using an external or internal microphone and thus may be tempted to speak at a conversational volume, maintain a strong, clear voice as if you're in a large conference room.

Using a loud voice will also keep you from mumbling and from speaking too quickly due to the amount of breath required.

3. Frame yourself wisely

Proximity plays a big part in how audiences perceive you as a communicator. The farther away or more obscured you appear, the less engaging you will be. In a video conference, your head and the top of your shoulders should dominate the screen.

If your head is cut off at the top or bottom, you're too close. If your entire torso is in view, you're too far away. If only half of your head is in sight, please adjust the camera.

Also be mindful of your background. Cluttered rooms make communicators seem disorganized. Distracting elements will pull attention away from you. Find an environment where the background is simple, reflecting your professionalism.

Preparation is critical, so take time before the meeting to pick your location and put your head fully in frame to ensure you're putting your best face forward.

4. Be present and mindful

In a conventional meeting, participants are typically very mindful of their presence. But in a video conference where you're muted (and maybe in your pajama pants), it's easy to forget you're still being watched. You may be tempted to check your email or attend to other work, but multi-tasking is perilous because you don't want to be caught unprepared if asked a sudden question.

Even if you don't need to be fully engaged in the meeting, your professional reputation can suffer if it even looks like you're not paying attention. So close those other windows, turn your phone upside down, and remember that you're always "on camera."

Because you're less aware of social cues in a virtual meeting, it's also important to be mindful of how long and how often you speak, if you interrupt other people, and if you make a comment that might offend someone present but out of sight. My advice: Don't consider yourself "at home." Consider yourself "at work." Your behavior may follow.

5. Don't become your own distraction

In a live meeting, you never have to worry about talking while muted, annoying ambient noise, or the interference of pets and children. But these are all common pitfalls of virtual meetings, and they can quickly sabotage your point. Your job is to make sure you're remembered for what you did right, not what went wrong, so be mindful of the power you have over both your virtual and physical environments.

Start by training yourself to stay on mute whenever you're not speaking and unmuting yourself only when you do speak. Staying on mute shuts out sudden noises as well as routine noises you may not be aware of, like the ticking of a wall clock, the clickety-clack of your typing, or even your own breathing. Unmuting yourself obviously enables you to speak, but

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— perhaps more importantly — saves you from being on the receiving end of the embarrassing colleague chorus, "You're on mute!"

Make sure to turn off your camera when you're doing something visually distracting as well, such as moving to another room or eating. (Drinking is not very distracting, but chewing is another story).

Finally, if boisterous children (or pets) want to participate in your call, your colleagues will probably laugh or relate, so don't be worried about or embarrassed by spontaneous distractions. However, if you're tasked with giving a major presentation, try to have someone supervise them in another room, far from the temptation of your presence, or at least create an engrossing activity for them. Parenting and presenting cannot happen simultaneously, and truly important messages require not only your colleagues' full attention, but yours as well.

6. Use the chat window as your partner

Consider the chat window as not just a discussion platform, but a presentational appendage. When you refer to an article or shared document, link to it in the chat. If you run the meeting, put a link to the agenda in the chat. When others are speaking, respond with support or questions in the chat. The chat window is a unique opportunity in virtual meetings to elevate your presence, add dimensions to your ideas, and demonstrate that you're fully present.

Whether you've been participating in virtual meetings for years or just started this month, it's important to realize that a video conference isn't just a conference over video — it's an entirely new interactive experience, which requires adapting your perspective, habits, and tactics to make it work effectively for you.

This article was originally published online on April 8, 2020.

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