



## Presentation Skills



# Crush Your Next Virtual Presentation

A little prep can go a long way. **by Gia Storms**

# Crush Your Next Virtual Presentation

A little prep can go a long way. **by Gia Storms**

Published on HBR.org / January 06, 2021 / Reprint [H063CP](#)



HBR Staff/ Matthias Kulka/ Getty Images

**My coaching client, an engineer named Carlos,** is a magnificent in-person storyteller. He talks with his hands and tells lengthy, animated stories replete with humorous metaphors and plot twists. His wit and warmth used to be received positively.

But when giving presentations over video, Carlos' stories tend to fall flat. His recent feedback reveals that he frequently trails on for too long, losing his audience amid unnecessary detail and failing to deliver succinct, concise communication.

Carlos is not alone. While virtual platforms help us connect with one another across distance, they also pose a challenge for leaders accustomed to presenting in person. Reading the room online requires more focus, and a digital environment makes it harder to comprehend nonverbal cues like tone, pitch, and body language. For example, when connecting with people in person, the human brain relies on microexpressions of the human face to interpret receptivity and inform judgment while communicating. In a virtual meeting platform, a presenter may only have access to a few faces (or none at all). Add to that remote work's myriad distractions and inconsistent internet connectivity interfering with video and audio quality, and it can feel impossible to gauge your performance and reception in real time.

Leaders must tap into a different skill set to effectively deliver their messages and be engaging in a remote environment. Virtual venues require you to transition from reading nonverbal cues in the moment to getting curious about your participants before, during, and after presentations to ensure your message lands. Here are six ways to deliver well-received presentations when you and your audience are bound by the limitations of virtual communication.

**Use the tech's features.** While certain video platforms can limit a presenter's ability to engage with audience members' faces in real time, built in-features like polls, chats, whiteboards, thumbs-ups, or raised hands can help you get and keep people's attention. Incorporate these engagement tools early in the presentation to get people in the mood to participate.

**Open with a story that speaks to your audience.** Gather some information about your participants beforehand and build in a personal story that will resonate with them. Keep it short and specific to avoid meandering and losing them. Stories, anecdotes, and metaphors

are proven to increase engagement — as long as they're delivered with authenticity and vulnerability and clearly reinforce your desired message. If you're not sure if your story is relevant, consider running it by a trusted colleague as you prepare for your presentation.

**Solicit participation in advance.** Research shows that facilitating meetings in an active way, including calling on participants to share, is key to increasing engagement and effectiveness. Give your audience an early heads-up that you'll be asking for two or three volunteers to share during the meeting — this will help people stay attentive and poised to participate, and it will minimize their likelihood of multitasking or checking out. Also, before the presentation, ask a few selected people to contribute, then call on them early.

**Be clear, be brief, and be quiet.** Keeping your message concise, simple, and clear has never been more important than when battling the many distractions inherent to a virtual room. Keep lengthy monologues to a minimum, and don't avoid silence. When you ask a question, wait confidently for someone to answer, rather than automatically interpreting silence as a lack of engagement. It can take longer for participants to digest and respond to information over video, so use the extra seconds as an opportunity to listen deeply before asking a follow-up question or calling on a volunteer.

**Don't discount nonverbal cues entirely.** A 2007 study found that people can read information and emotions better if their body language and facial expressions are also on display. Before you present, encourage participants to have their cameras on, and identify one person to whom you'll aim your delivery throughout your presentation. Watch that person's face and body language for signals of how they're receiving your talk. Head nodding, smiling, sustaining eye contact, and leaning in are good signs, while yawning, crossed arms, a stoic look, or

eyes cast downward or sideways can signal disengagement and that you need to change your approach.

**Follow up for feedback.** After your presentation, solicit feedback from one or two trusted participants to see if you delivered your intended message successfully. If the meeting was recorded, watch the video, paying special attention to how participants responded to your attempts to engage them. Identify two or three techniques you can incorporate next time to improve your connection with the audience.

Before his next 200-person, virtual all-hands meeting, Carlos decided to take a new approach to engaging the room. In advance of the presentation, he asked three senior staff members he could count on to participate and contribute within the first five minutes. He asked his team for topics ahead of time in order to curb his tendency to deliver unilateral storytelling, and during the meeting, he opened up the floor for shares and chats, which led to an active discussion of the team's concerns. As a result, his audience was more engaged and participatory than normal, and he got feedback that it was his best presentation so far.

*This article was originally published online on January 06, 2021.*



**Gia Storms** is a leadership coach and member of The Boda Group. She facilitates team and executive coaching from Los Angeles.