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Lens flare

Online meetings still require nonverbal communication

One of the unintended consequences of online meetings is the verbal faux pas. We've all done it: Spoken at the same time as another person and taken a quick pause to allow them time to talk, only to quickly realize they're doing the same thing before beginning to speak again, just as they do the same.

It's an awkward situation that happens during most meetings, unless there is a structured discussion or the meeting is moderated by someone who indicates who should be speaking and when. But both strategies can break up the natural flow of discussion. After all, some of the best ideas can occur when employees riff off each other's comments; but in an online meeting, those riffs can be difficult.

Unlike their online counterparts, face-to-face meetings include small and large nonverbal cues that help keep the conversation moving. Even something as seemingly insignificant as a person taking a quick breath, opening their mouth slightly and leaning in over the conference table indicates that they have something to say.

Now remove the table, the room and the others and put that person in front of a camera in their home office or at their kitchen table. Do those gestures make the same point? Alison Henderson, a Chicago-based body language expert, says they do. But meeting participants, whether on Zoom, Microsoft Teams or various other online programs, have to not only make those same gestures but be mindful of others when they make them as well.

"Obviously, body language is different on Zoom mainly because a weird brain is happening," says Henderson, founder and owner of Moving Image Consulting, which helps companies and individuals understand and improve non-verbal communication. "We're telling ourselves that we're in a meeting and we're in the same place, but we're not. Our brain knows that we're not together and that this is different, so we're constantly overriding that natural feeling."



Virtual meetings can be more awkward than meeting in-person.

Henderson, one of only 23 certified movement pattern analysts in the world, also points out that the screen "flattens" meeting participants, "It moves us from 3D to 2D so there's a little bit of an energy drop," she says. "Think about a few months ago when we started meeting online. There were a lot of missed signals. People would assume a negative reaction because people would give shorter answers or wouldn't be as animated. People seem to be over that but that's why it's important to lift up your energy level a bit when you're online."

In your face

To exhibit a more active presence, Henderson suggests avoiding sitting all the way back on your chair. "By just sitting up, you will naturally have a little bit more energy and you will tend to gesture more. And that's really great for Zoom. If nothing moves, it conveys that you're participating in a boring conversation," she says.

Still, that doesn't mean Henderson wants you to get right up on the camera. "You may be putting more focus on your facial expressions, but that means you're also giving out the negative facial expressions that are floating across your face — micro-facial expressions that may have nothing to do with the conversation. Maybe you have a quick negative because you just realized you forgot to put your clothes in the dryer or because you heard the cat knocking something off the kitchen counter," she says.

"Even if you're distracted for just a moment, if you're too close to the camera, everybody's assuming that you're angry or disgusted about something that's taking place in the conversation."

Eye contact confusion

Patrick Byers, a marketing consultant in Brooklyn, New York, says he sometimes has trouble looking at people's faces. "It's like you can never look away," he says. "At least in a meeting in a conference room, I can look around the table, look at my notes, look at somebody's watch. But in Zoom, it's all about the eyes and I feel like I'm being rude each time I look away."

Byers' situation isn't unique. In fact, making eye contact with others during an online meeting is often a source of frustration for meeting participants. Henderson says she's often asked where people should look, which she says reinforces the fact that people aren't yet comfortable meeting online.

"If your camera is pretty close to the people you're talking to — if it's the top of your screen or on your phone — just look at the people," she says. "Looking into a camera is not looking at a person. You're not making eye contact, despite what you might think. Just look at the people on the screen as long as the other people in the meeting are aligned with your camera."

Problems can occur, Henderson says, when people use two screens or a camera that's off to the side. "It could look weird if you're looking off to the right or left," she says. "You look like you're disinterested or like you're not paying attention."

Cue the camera

Does the camera on the top of your screen still make you feel and act awkward? Henderson has a few suggestions on how you can convey a more natural, open presence during online meetings:

- Approach each meeting like it's one-on-one: "When you meet someone for coffee, you nod and smile and react to what the other person is saying," Henderson says. "Take that same approach during Zoom. React to what people say."
- Avoid the resting (expletive) face: "You have to really be aware that somebody might be watching you all the time so you have to keep pleasant thoughts in your head," she says. "You don't have to be Guy Smiley or anything, but you should look like you're in a good mood and that you're interested in the conversation."
- Indicate when you're about to speak: "If you're going to comment, you need to make a gesture when you have something to say," Henderson says. "You're going to have to indicate a half-second ahead of time that you have something to say. Maybe you lift your head, maybe you take a breath, maybe you come closer to the screen. Just indicate that you have something to say."

— Marco Buscaglia, Careers

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