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On the Edge

## Do you have executive "tele" presence?

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As an executive, you've carefully cultivated and refined an elusive quality called "executive presence." Perhaps it's about the cut of your suit, or your swagger. Or how you talk, how you listen, how benevolent—or intimidating—you seem.

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Whatever the particular traits, they have become a critical part of the way you communicate. Most important, perhaps, a sense of presence is frequently correlated with leadership.

Now, a new medium, the videoconference, is rapidly emerging as an important way for executives to communicate with their employees, upper management and customers. By understanding the medium and mastering its dynamics, you can significantly improve your effectiveness as an executive.

So how can you enhance your executive “tele”presence?<sup>1</sup>

Many see the videoconference as an extension of TV for personal communication; others see it as a more “realistic” extension of telephone communication. Unfortunately, neither perspective is apt or useful in learning how to use the medium.

Most video we see on TV is carefully choreographed, shot with multiple cameras and edited—and is meant to be a one-way broadcast. TV anchors (or actors) do not see their audience, nor do they expect to be interrupted. When we’re talking on the telephone, although we do not see the person at the other end of the line, we do have the real-world experience of talking to people without seeing their faces.

The only reference point we have for videoconferences is a meeting in the physical world. But videoconferences are different in three important ways.

**Cameras, not people, make eye contact.** Whether your videoconference is via a laptop with a webcam or a more sophisticated system with a large display, what the people at the other end see is what your camera sees—and nothing else. We know

this on an intellectual level, but our genetic and social conditioning makes us think we are looking at the face of the person we are talking to, not at an inanimate object.

The good news is that when there are multiple people on the other side of the videoconference, you’ll make eye contact with every one of them if you stare straight into the camera. The bad news is that if you turn away from the camera, you’ll lose eye contact with every one of them.

Here’s a subtle point to keep in mind. Imagine you are talking to three colleagues, A, B and C, seated from left to right. If they were across the table from you in a physical meeting, three pairs of eyes would be looking at you. However, if they are on the other side of a videoconference, only one eye—the camera—is looking at you, and what the camera sees is what everyone on the other side sees. So if you rotate your head even slightly, say, to look at A, something funny happens: C thinks you are turning away from him to look at B, B thinks you are turning away from her to look at A, and A thinks you are turning away from him to look at something to his left!

**We see each other, not what each other sees.** In a physical meeting, not only do you see the other attendees, you also see what they see. They, too, see what you see as well as the other attendees. In other words, you share the same physical context in a 3-D world.

In a videoconference, your image appears on other attendees’ screens, and vice versa. It’s easy to assume that your image will be seen on a display that is about the same size as your own screen, in a room with the same physical layout as yours. But there is no way for you to know exactly how much of what’s in your

1. In this article, *telepresence* refers generically to videoconferencing, not to any specific product.

physical space will be seen by other videoconference attendees. You could just as easily be shown on a giant screen, viewed by a large audience seated together in one room.

For that matter, you don't know if your image will appear on only one screen. If, for example, you are giving a presentation to many attendees who are gathered in one physical location, you and your presentation may be displayed on two different screens: one on each side of a room. If this is the case, when you turn to look at your own presentation, some viewers would see you turning away from them.

**Videoconferences have a different conversational rhythm.** We use many subtle signals to coordinate conversations in the physical world. If you are speaking and you want to elicit a response from someone else, you would make eye contact with that person and pause. Alternatively, if someone wants to interrupt you, they would make eye contact with you and lean forward.

Videoconferences distort such visual cues and often have a time delay. As a result, video conversations proceed in fits and starts, arbitrary interruptions and apologetic withdrawals.

### **Getting the basics right**

To be effective in videoconferences, you need to think like a cinematographer. Camera angles, lights and sound are three critical elements you need to get right. When using a personal computer with a camera—a common scenario for conferences from home or while traveling—this is what you need to do.

*Camera.* Laptops come with webcams that have wide-angle lenses. During a videoconference, most people sit 12 to 16 inches from the camera both to see the screen clearly and to stay close to the built-in microphone. This means that the tip of

your nose is about two inches, or 12 percent, closer to the camera than the tip of your ear, which creates the so-called “fish-eye distortion.” If you get yourself a good-quality, narrow-angle camera and sit about three feet (a meter) away from it, you can dramatically enhance how you look to your audience.

*Lighting.* You should be the brightest object the camera sees, with light evenly distributed across your face. That means never sit with a lighted window behind you—you'll appear as a silhouette. Overhead fluorescent lighting will make your skin look pale and sallow. Turn desk lamps toward the wall so your face is lit evenly by the light bouncing off the walls.

If you wear glasses, wipe them clean before you start your meeting and find an angle so that light does not glint off the frame or obscure your eyes. You should avoid wearing jewelry or anything else that's shiny.

*Sound.* If you sit far enough away from your screen, you need a microphone. An unobtrusive lapel mike is one option; alternatively, an echo cancellation speaker/microphone combination, placed between you and your computer, will project your voice very well, especially if you are giving a presentation. Unless you want to look like a call center operator, avoid headphones with microphones sticking out at all cost.

### **Frame yourself**

In a videoconference, you are nothing more than a few thousand pixels in a rectangular frame on a remote display. Imagine this frame and how you want to look inside it, and everything else will follow.

There should be nothing in the frame that takes the viewer's attention away from you. Avoid sitting in front of a picture, bookshelf or moving objects. In particular, make

sure there are no plants or protruding objects behind you; since the frame is only 2-D, any such objects will seem to be coming straight out of your head or shoulders.

The simplest way to frame yourself is to sit in front of a neutral-colored wall. Make sure the camera is at eye level—if not, you'll either be looking down at the people you're talking to or looking up to them. If you are presenting from your computer, to ensure that you maintain eye contact with the remote party, move anything you need to see—your notes, for example, or your computer screen—as close to the camera as possible.

The more of the frame you fill with your face, the more authoritative you will seem. However, recent studies show that if the remote party sees more of your body—particularly what you do with your hands—the better the chances they will form an empathetic connection with you. Therefore, an astute way to frame yourself is to gently zoom yourself out when talking and zoom in when listening.

Beware of excessive movement during a videoconference, however. What seems like a small movement in the real world looks highly exaggerated inside the small frame. Remember, too, that videoconferencing systems compress the video before transmitting it, sending only those pixels that change. When you move back and forth, you—or your pixels—clog the network, and you'll either seem frozen or blurred to your viewers.

If you are going to be videoconferencing with a room full of people at the other end, you have to be conscious not only of how you look inside the frame but also how the frame looks within the remote environment. Is your frame going to be on a large screen or a small display? Where is your audience sitting in relation to your frame? If you are

presenting to the remote audience, where is the presentation going to be displayed? By knowing the layout of the remote location and how it's being used, you will know how you appear to your audience, which can help you manage your presence within their setting.

In many videoconferencing setups, there are multiple cameras in a meeting room, and you may be able to take control of the remote cameras and see around the room or ask a participant to describe the layout. If you are presenting an important proposal to a group of clients or senior management, make sure you are not on a small display in one corner of a big room. If that's the only video option, you may be better off skipping the videoconference altogether and presenting to them by phone.

### **Manage the rhythm**

In the physical world, we use body language to signal an interruption, so the speaker knows it's coming before it actually occurs. Further, in the physical world, we typically interrupt a speaker at a sentence boundary or during a pause. But in a videoconference, the tiny delay between the two locations means that by the time the viewer senses an opportunity to interrupt, the speaker has moved on. As a result, the speaker gets interrupted mid-sentence.

Knowing this, you can use more explicit cues to coordinate a conversation. Imagine a thought or a concept—rather than a sentence—as an atomic unit of speech. When you speak, explicitly state that you have a certain number of ideas that you want to discuss. After you convey one idea, pause long enough to give viewers an opportunity to react. If you need to interrupt, be forceful but polite, prefacing your question or statement with: “Sorry for interrupting, but ...” or “May I interrupt for a second?”

Humor may work well for you in real life if you have mastered your sense of timing. The human mind works at a certain pace, and a lot of humor relies on delivering the punch line at the precise moment when the mind has processed the previous thought. But because of the time delay inherent in most videoconferencing systems, humor that works well in real life often falls flat during a videoconference.

If you are responding to questions from a group of people at a remote location, you cannot reliably use their appearance or body language to manage the Q&A. Instead, you should consider appointing a local moderator to solicit questions and call on people to talk.

Similarly, if you are the organizer or moderator of a discussion between two groups of people—say, your local team in Chicago and a remote team in Boston—you can create a fluid conversation across the two locations if you have a designated counterpart at the other location and the two of you coordinate the conversation with cues like “Jane, does anyone in Boston have comments?”

Although the videoconference is still at a relatively early stage as a technology, it is rapidly gaining traction as a corporate communications medium. Meanwhile, as a savvy executive, remember Rule No. 1 of videoconferencing: Always have the backup phone number to call in the event your connection fails.

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