

Learn Video Communication Skills

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Suddenly, more of us are working remotely. When our workplaces shut down, we scrambled to set up makeshift home offices, which we share with family members who are also working or learning remotely. As if this isn't stressful enough, video conference calls can make it challenging to effectively meet and collaborate with our teams.

"Communication is, in fact, more difficult and stressful when we're meeting with others on video. We can't make real eye contact, read nonverbal cues, or have side conversations like we do during in-person meetings," says Eileen Sinett, president of Speaking that Connects, a communications coaching firm.

We may also worry about looking professional on screen, minimizing background distractions, and navigating technology glitches. "We feel the pressure of being 'on' constantly when we meet via video. Most of us don't have the luxury of our own production crew, so we must be the video producer, director, and on-screen talent," says Donatella Giacometti, executive communications strategist and founder of CEO MEDIA COACH, Inc.

For better or worse, video calls are here to stay. As work-from-home restrictions are slowly lifted and we return to our workplaces, video conferencing will enable us to maintain appropriate social distance. For example, one or two members of your office-based team might participate in a video call with colleagues who are just down the hall, rather than getting together in a conference room. Or, your division may hold a virtual conference in place of its annual offsite event.

These tips can get you "camera ready" and improve your video communication skills so you can have a polished, professional presence on screen.

Systematize call preparation. "Establish a checklist so you don't have to reinvent the solution for every video call," says Giacometti. Your checklist should include reminders for checking audio and video quality, muting all devices, and setting up your slides and background.

Learn the platform. Your company is likely to standardize to one video platform, such as Zoom, Go-To Meeting, or Microsoft Teams. Take the platform's online training or set up a practice meeting with a coworker. You will become more proficient when you rehearse essential tasks such as muting your audio, sharing your screen, and communicating via chat.

Dress professionally. While you do not need to wear a suit on camera, you should not be in your pajamas. "The same rules apply for video as face-to-face meetings. You

need to look presentable," says Lisa Marie Latino, executive producer, Long Shot Productions. "Wear a collared shirt and skip the loud patterns. Bright, jewel-tone colors are more flattering on camera," says Latino.

See to your surroundings. Tidy the area that will be visible behind you, so others are not distracted by overflowing bookshelves or cluttered countertops. If this is not possible, search the video platform's online help function to learn how to set up a virtual background, which can mask the mess. In addition, "Lighting is key to looking professional on screen," says Latino. "Put your laptop in front of a window for natural light. You can also purchase an inexpensive ring light with filters to soften harsh lighting."

Control environmental noise. Set yourself up away from high-traffic areas, mute the TV or radio, and put your phone in airplane mode, advises Latino. If you are not speaking, mute your audio. When you are speaking, if background noises are unavoidable, get a noise cancelling app. Krisp and Noisli are among the downloadable applications that can improve your sound environment.

Respect others' time. "Meeting participants may have back-to-back video calls. If you are the meeting facilitator, start your meeting on time. Ask if anyone has a hard stop because they need to jump on another call," says Giacometti. "Follow a meeting agenda and allow time for a recap and questions." If you are a meeting attendee, show up on time. If you get on a call after it is underway, give the host a moment to acknowledge you. Use the chat function to apologize for your lateness without disrupting the call.

Share concise, clear content. "Each video call competes for share of mind with everything else on an attendee's crowded agenda," says Giacometti. "If you're the host, move the discussion along in an orderly way." Use slides or a shared screen to walk through your content so participants retain the call's key take-aways. If you're a participant, try to speak concisely and don't ramble.

Resist multitasking. Focused listening is critical to communicating effectively via video. "Don't multitask. Listen to others on the call as if you are in the room with them. Take notes so you keep focused," says Marise Textor, manager of regulatory affairs at Marathon Petroleum Co.

Be compassionate. As we get used to this new way to work, we need to stay calm through technical glitches, strange background noises, and other disruptions. "Be forgiving of others and maintain your sense of humor and you'll help others get through this as well," advises Sinett.

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