



How to Improve Your Virtual Communication: Tips for Leaders

By The Center for Creative Leadership

For most of us, communicating with colleagues through a computer screen doesn't come naturally: How do you make meaningful eye contact? How do you avoid interrupting, particularly if you're on a conference call with multiple people? What do you do when the screen freezes mid-sentence?

Even though we may not feel as comfortable with virtual collaboration as we do with sitting together in person around a conference table, this form of communication isn't going away anytime soon. In fact, it's becoming increasingly clear that even after the COVID-19 pandemic ends, compelling virtual communication will remain paramount for both individual and organizational success.

"Leaders at all levels must be able lead effectively without a continuous physical presence," notes Jerry Abrams, who serves on our Innovation Lab team and who developed basic training for leaders who want improve their virtual communication, leadership brand, and remote leadership skills.

Your audience's perceptions of your virtual persona matter, he notes, because your virtual persona reflects your priorities and values, and shapes your personal leadership brand, which can help you build relationships, achieve your goals, and sustain partnerships. These are all especially important when you're geographically separated from your colleagues, leading a hybrid workforce or a fully remote team.

“As a telecommuter myself for almost a decade, my biggest fear — and I suspect I’m not alone — is that I’m losing my audience, that I am not engaging them,” says Abrams. “And let’s face it; in the virtual world, if you lose your audience, you’re done.”

Strengthen Your Virtual Persona & Virtual Communications

3 Keys for Virtual Communication That Drives Engagement

Just as leaders can work to improve their communication in general, there are a number of simple improvements you can start making today that will have a big impact on the effectiveness of your virtual persona.

You can strengthen the quality of your virtual communications and drive greater engagement with your virtual audiences by focusing on 3 key factors of your virtual persona, in this order:

Immediacy;

Receptivity; and

Composure.

When successful, the result is more effective virtual communication and an increased feeling of connectedness between the audience and the presenter.

Here’s what our research and experience designing engaging virtual leadership programs have taught us.

(Note that many of the following tips presume that you're able to stand and move freely within a reasonable area in front of your computer, and that it has a functioning camera, microphone, and speaker.)

1. First, create immediacy with your virtual communications.

Immediacy refers to the presence, attraction, and warmth your audience perceives when you're engaging in virtual communication. In other words, what is the impact you have on your audience? The following actions will improve your immediacy by demonstrating an intense involvement in the conversation:

Convey enthusiasm about the topic you're presenting. If you're bored, your audience will pick up on that.

Vary the pitch, volume, and pace of your speaking.

Be "animated" when presenting to and interacting with the audience.

Speak with your hands too, using gestures to reinforce your words.

Be aware of and use facial expressions to reinforce your points.

Increase your use of present tense verbs and inclusive pronouns like "we" and "our."

Look directly at the camera for several seconds at a time when speaking.

Lean in towards the camera to reduce the sense of "distance" between you and the audience.

2. Increase receptivity to your virtual communications.

Receptivity refers to a mutual sense of interest, openness, and trust. Convey a willingness to really listen to your colleagues in the virtual space, as well as an openness to their ideas and suggestions, through the following actions:

Smile when interacting with a member of the audience.

Look directly into the camera when listening and responding to a member of the audience to create the impression that you are “facing” them.

When appropriate, don't be afraid to laugh along with others, as it signals receptivity.

Use nods appropriately to acknowledge others' feelings and thoughts.

Be honest and authentic.

Ensure you're using active listening techniques and affirming the experiences, problems, and stories of others.

3. Build composure for more effective virtual communications.

If you feel calm and relaxed when engaging in virtual communication, your audience will sense your composure. Alternatively, when you're visibly paying attention to yourself, your appearance, or your own thoughts, your audience will sense your distraction and feel a lack of confidence in your authority. The following behaviors convey to your audience that you feel relaxed, confident, and composed:

Be aware of your body language. Avoid holding your posture rigid, frequently shifting, or appearing tense.

Refrain from “nervous” actions like playing with your hair or fidgeting.

Maximize your speaking fluency by eliminating repetitions or noticeable pause fillers (um, er, ah...).

Speak at an audible, but not extremely loud, level so that your volume doesn't detract from your message.

Be appropriately “animated” by tailoring your behaviors to reinforce your message and content.

More Tips for More Effective Virtual Communication

Improve Your Stage Presence

According to Abrams, there are several parallels between the performing arts and virtual communications. "Namely, the more you practice, the better, more confident, and more comfortable you will become," he says.

"Several coaches put it this way — amateurs practice until they get it right. Professionals practice until they can't get it wrong!"

If you lack significant experience communicating "face-to-face" on virtual platforms or are concerned about your leadership image, Abrams suggests improving your "stage presence" by recording a few virtual practice sessions and evaluating them using the above tips.

"Don't take on too much at a time when trying to improve your virtual communications," Abrams says. "Pick the things you notice the most and start there."

Before performers go on stage, they'll often take a moment to close their eyes and visualize an experience that brought forward an emotion they want to project. This trick works for presenters in a virtual setting, as well.

"For example, when trying to convey warmth or enthusiasm, take a moment before you start your session to recall a topic, event, or time when you really had a strong feeling of warmth toward others — or felt a strong feeling of enthusiasm for something you were saying or doing," says Abrams.

“As you visualize the experience, pay attention to all the various feelings and sensations you can recall, including sights, sounds, and smells. These memories help you ground your virtual persona in real experience and add authenticity to your virtual stage presence.”

That authenticity is key. Our experience facilitating successful virtual leadership development programs has taught us that creating authentic connections is one of 3 keys to amplifying the benefits of online learning.

Assess Your Virtual Communication Effectiveness

Once you've taken steps to improve your virtual persona, seek feedback on how you're doing, and also take time to reflect yourself.

Use our free Virtual Communication Effectiveness Quiz to assess the effectiveness of your virtual persona's performance, and continue to develop with recommended next steps:

You may also want to use our easy email template to send a version of this quiz to your colleagues to get their candid feedback on the effectiveness of your virtual communications, too.

Upskill Your Team's Virtual Communication Skills

As a leader, you're responsible not only for your own performance, but also for that of your people — many of whom likely share your insecurities and struggles with virtual communication effectiveness.

As you manage remote teams, work to understand the limitations they may be experiencing by being familiar with best practices for managing virtual teams and meetings and remote collaboration. And consider how various online learning development solutions could benefit your team's work.

"Today I would say it this way: Your virtual persona is the message," Abrams urges.

"The way your ideas land on others is shaped by the medium, and no one who strives to be a great virtual communicator can afford to ignore their virtual persona."

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