

Converting to Online Teaching¹
A series of short guidance articles for educators and institutions

**Non-verbal Communications in Video Conferencing:
What it Says About You! ²**

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Since spring of 2020, I have written several articles providing guidance to our faculty that had never taught an online course. I discussed different topics all related to teaching in a virtual environment; Blended Learning Classroom Guidance, Video Production Guidance, and Facilitating Virtual Classes to name a few. In a recent video class that I observed, it stuck me that everyone needs to understand that “You Can Not; Not Communicate.” In the article on Facilitating Virtual Classes, we briefly discussed having a good webcam, lighting, and microphones. But we really focused the article on conducting the virtual class. This article provides tips and techniques for putting your best image forward in any virtual setting.

A key point to remember is that when you are on a video conference, the visual image you present says a lot. Not only are the webcam, lighting, and audio important but how you dress, your posture, your facial expressions, and your background contribute to creating an overall impression of you. The environment you work in says a lot about you. Make it say what you want it to say!

THE BASICS: CAMERA, LIGHTING, & AUDIO

The basics that must be right for an effective video conference include having a good webcam, the right lighting, and good sound quality. The cameras that come in laptops do not always have the quality you want. And desktop PC monitors don’t normally come with cameras! You may

¹This series of articles by the Director of the University of Maryland’s Project Management Center for Excellence provides information and advice for converting from traditional in-person classes to online teaching, based on their experience before and during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020. See Professor Cable’s background at the end of this article.

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need to purchase a good webcam. They do not have to be expensive to be good. We use the Logitech C920x which sells for about \$75.00. There are many in the series to choose from.

Once you have a good camera, it is very important to get it located so that you are looking directly into the camera when on a video conference. I can't tell you how many times we see a camera that is not adjusted properly, and the view is looking up or down but not at the face of the other party! Do you really want others looking up your nose or at the top of your head? Proper camera positioning is practically a must!

The next basic to attend to is lighting. It is important to have good lighting in front of your face so that the viewers clearly see your face and expressions. Backlighting puts you in a silhouette and none of your facial features are distinguishable. There are several different lights available to mount on the monitor or small stands to put the light source so that you are not in shadow. The key issue is to be sure it is a full spectrum LED light that you can adjust the brightness. Having warm "natural" light is crucial to not looking like you are ill.

Finally, the last of the three basics is audio quality. The simple fact is that the mics that are built into laptops and PC monitors pick up a lot of background noise and generally do not produce good quality sound, particularly for recording. There are many good mics available. We like the Purple Panda Lavalier microphone but Jabra, Computer Blue Yetti, and many others will meet your audio requirements and make you sound like a pro!

THE IMAGE YOU PRESENT

Working from home makes it very tempting to wear relaxed clothing that is different from what you would wear to the office (think pj's, t-shirts, tank tops, sweats, etc.). Now think about the appearance you want to present. Even though you are at home, do you want to present a professional image? If so, dress like you are going to the office – at least from the waist up! Open collar dress shirts/blouses or golf shirts are fine unless you want to project the image as though you are in your office and then jacket/sport coat work.

So, dressing to fit the image you want to present is part one of the image. Grooming is also a big factor in the image you want people to see but for this article we are not going to touch that.

The other consideration you might want to pay attention to is posture. Be sure that you have a comfortable chair and that you can sit up straight without difficulty. If you slouch or lay back in your chair you may look like you are not really interested or are bored with the content/topic of the video conference or the person that is speaking. Slumping over or slouching also suggests disrespect for the speaker and conveys an attitude that you may not mean?

FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

What if you learned that your best friend was saying things about you that caused others to view you in a negative light? Chances are you would feel betrayed and want to confront the slanderer.

What if the slanderer was your facial expressions? The fact of the matter is you are always communicating even when your lips are not moving, and your facial expressions could be sending the wrong message.

According to Dr. Albert Mehrabian's 7-38-55 Communication Model, only 7% of what we communicate consists of literal content of message (verbal); 38% is attributed to our tone, intonation, and volume (vocal); and 55% of communication consists of non-verbal communication, namely body language (visual). Facial expressions are an important component of nonverbal communication and are often more important than the actual words you say.

If others routinely ask "Were you up all night?," "Are you angry?," "Did I say something that offended you?," "Are you mad with me?," "Did I sound stupid?," or "Why don't you smile more?," a facial expression that unintentionally makes you appear as if you are sleep-deprived, angry, annoyed, irritated, confused or stoned may be the culprit. This condition is often referred to as resting face phenomenon and it affects both males and females.

The first step to taming your resting face is gaining an awareness of what it is saying about you by assessing what your face looks like in its natural or resting position. This can be accomplished in several ways. Consider positioning a desk mirror on either side of your monitor and when you are deep in thought, typing, or talking on your cellphone, occasionally glance at the mirror and take note of your facial expression. Ask yourself if you were seated next to someone who had your facial expression on their face, would you want to be in that person's company. Another option is to video record yourself sitting through a meeting or giving a presentation and review the video paying attention to your predominant facial expressions. A third option is to gather information by asking others what reason they have for asking whether you are angry, offended, confused, or tired.

Once you have established that your resting face has gone rouge, the next step is to pinpoint which facial feature is the biggest offender. Knowing which facial feature is sending that look of disapproval, contempt, or confusion helps determine where to focus your attention. Perhaps it is the raised and arched eyebrows; staring eyes; pursed lips; or horizontal wrinkles across your forehead.

Lastly, it is time for an intervention to synchronize your facial expression with your emotions and intentions. Practice relaxing your facial muscles in front of a mirror. Aim for a neutral look at first. Then relax your jaw and your tongue inside your mouth. Try smiling with your tongue touching the top of your mouth. Lift your eyebrows a little. Continue to practice your facial expressions until you achieve a look that is pleasant and inviting. Practice your facial expressions around your friends and ask for feedback.

Next time you join a meeting, consider whether you are entering with a smile that says, "I am happy to be here" or with a frown that screams "I would much rather be elsewhere."

YOUR VIRTUAL BACKGROUND

The background in your camera's field of vision also tells a story. Do you really want people to see your bed? Do you want to project an image of being professional and well organized or messy? All of us are not fortunate enough to have a home office so we need to be sensitive to the background we select to have a video conference from. Those with messy home offices may also want to pay attention. One of your goals when you participate in a video conference should be to have the focus on you and not your background. Using a virtual background is a good choice to hide the real one. You also want to be selective about the background you choose – it again portrays an image. Do you really want to be sitting on the Golden Gate Bridge? There are default virtual backgrounds that come with Zoom or other platforms and there are numerous available online. Pick one that suits you. My favorite that one of my colleagues uses is the bookstack in an English Tudor library. A good option to minimize the ghosting that may occur with virtual backgrounds is to get a green screen to set up behind you because this minimizes the ghosting.

Here are two YouTube videos that address presenting in a virtual environment that you might enjoy:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YO6utfQm7Bg>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=bFIFFIN-4I&feature=emb_logo

SUMMARY

When using Zoom or other video conferencing platforms You Can Not; Not Communicate! Be aware of all the issues: camera, lighting, audio, dress, grooming, posture, facial expressions, and the setting of your virtual background. Make conscious decisions about these and you will send the message you want to send. Zoom like a pro!

Previous Articles in this Series

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About the Author



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John Cable is Director of the Project Management Center for Excellence in the A.James Clark School of Engineering at the University of Maryland, where he is also a professor and teacher of several graduate courses in project management. His program at the University of Maryland offers masters and PhD level programs focused on project management. With more than 1,300 seats filled annually with students from many countries, including more than 40 PhD students, the program is the largest graduate program in project management at a major university in the United States.

John Cable served in the newly formed U.S. Department of Energy in 1980, where he was involved with developing energy standards for buildings, methods for measuring energy consumption, and managing primary research in energy conservation. As an architect and builder, Mr. Cable founded and led John Cable Associates in 1984, a design build firm. In 1999 he was recruited by the University of Maryland's Department of Civil & Environmental Engineering to create and manage a graduate program in project management. In his role as founder and director of the Project Management Center for Excellence at Maryland, the program has grown to offer an undergraduate minor, master's degrees, and a doctoral program. Information about the Project Management Center for Project Management at the University of Maryland can be found at www.pm.umd.edu.

In 2002, PMI formed the Global Accreditation Center for Project Management Educational Programs (GAC). Mr. Cable was appointed to that inaugural board where he served as vice chair. In 2006, he was elected as chairman, a role he held through 2012. As Chair of the PMI GAC, John led the accreditation of 86 project management educational programs at 40 institutions in 15 countries in North America, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and the Asia Pacific Region. John was awarded PMI's 2012 Distinguished Contribution Award for his leadership at the GAC. He can be contacted at jcable@umd.edu.



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In a fulltime capacity with the U. S. Department of Commerce, Shana serves as a management analyst and project manager, where she conducts program evaluations and interdepartmental studies; formulates process improvement recommendations; and manages ad-hoc projects initiated to accomplish strategic goals and objectives. She served as project manager for the 2018 National Trademark Exposition held at the National Museum of American History reaching 43,000 visitors. She received the Department of Commerce Silver Medal Award for designing and implementing successful organizational-wide programs and in 2014, was awarded a Distinguished Career Award. Most recently, she was recognized with a Special Act Award for spearheading the planning of an organizational-wide training program impacting 850 employees.

Shana is a certified Gallup Strengths Coach, EQ-i^{2.0}/360 Coach, DISC Behavioral Analyst, and Myers-Briggs practitioner. She also holds certifications in Lean Six Sigma and Information Technology Infrastructure v3. She is a senior fellow of the Excellence in Government Fellows Program. With a diverse, multidisciplinary academic background, she holds a Ph.D. in Management with a specialization in leadership and organizational change; a master's degree in Financial Management; a master's degree in English with a specialization in teaching writing and literature; and a bachelor's degree in English with significant course work in Communication. She can be contacted at shanawt@umd.edu.