How to Inspire Trust in Your Next Video Meeting

"How can we remain authentic and connected when a screen divides us?" That's the question Erica Dhawan asks at the beginning of her book Digital Body Language and it's a question many of us are asking ourselves today.

After more than a year of living under the looming threat of COVID-19, it makes sense that some people would identify some issues with connecting with colleagues and partners when meeting physically was no longer a simple matter.

Zoom and Microsoft Teams calls infiltrated our calendars and we found ourselves wondering about our business relationships in new ways.

"Was Tim really listening to me when I was talking? I saw him looking to the side of the screen like he was reading his email."

As society insisted, "We're all in this together!" it was easy to see that sometimes, at least during some Zoom meetings, we might not be.

While Dhawan's book focuses on our text and email communications, her four laws of digital body language are useful for explaining how we can think about the ways we encourage greater team and relationship building on camera, as well.

The Four Laws of Digital Body Language are Value Visibly, Communicate Carefully, Collaborate Confidently, and Trust Totally.

Value Visibly
How do you communicate "I understand you" and "I appreciate you" and treat people with care digitally?

On camera, we communicate that we value someone else by showing up a little early for the meeting and being prepared with a smile.

We also show our respect by paying attention to the screen in front of us rather than looking at other screens nearby. This can be harder than it sounds and many people tend to push back on this exclaiming, "everyone does it and knows it doesn't mean you aren't paying attention!"

But that's not true. If you have ever been the one totally present and paying attention in an online meeting, it is a very clear and distinct difference when someone else is not.

Communicate Carefully
How do you work to eliminate confusion? How do you get teams to work together so they are on the same page?

This need to communicate clearly means being aware of everything in your setting to make sure you are easy to understand starting with the technical aspects of your online meetings.

Is your lighting bright and balanced so people can clearly read your expressions and even read your lips if necessary?

Is your camera angled directly at your face or only slightly higher than your eyes so that your face is in the upper thirds of the video frame and the angle is not unintentionally making you larger or more diminutive than normal?

Filmmakers use camera angles to communicate nuanced messages about the characters on the screen. For example, an actor looking down at the camera could communicate their higher role or need to condescend to others.

If your camera angle makes it look like you are looking down at people, you could unintentionally say that you don't think they are worthy of you. You could also be giving them a good look inside your nose. Either way, it's not a good look.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, angling your camera so that it is looking down at you (you are looking up at it) could communicate that you are childlike, naive, or unimportant. It could make you look weaker than you are or unintentionally communicate inferiority.

Along with the visual side of things, people need to be able to hear your words clearly. Improving your sound by using a better microphone and ensuring that your words come through clearly will help to make your speech easier-to-understand.

And finally, attending an online meeting so that you are prepared with an outline of important matters to discuss or specific points you'd like to make will help make sure your goals for the meeting and your communications come through with clarity.

Collaborate Confidently
How do you show others that you are a good collaborator and encourage others to believe in your partnerships.

If you are trying to help align yourself with others on your webcam meetings, try to mirror their head room in the video frame. Visually this will make them feel like you are in sync.

While dealing with how you look into the camera (and whether you should or shouldn't) is a much discussed and often misunderstood element of working with a camera, it is important to touch on it here.

You can think of the webcam as another person in the room and even though you are looking at the screen to read their expressions while talking, when it comes to you trying to connect with them, remember that when you look into the camera lens, it is like looking into their eyes.

So, much like if you were making an important point in person, look into the camera when you have a particularly important point you want to get across. But don't stare into the camera's lens. (Think of how you would feel if someone just stared directly into your eyes non-stop, with no rest. It would feel strange and unpleasant, right?)

You need to be sure to catch the non-verbal cues people make in meetings, so watch the others on the screen, but when making a particularly important point when you are talking, be sure to connect with the camera as if you are looking into the face of a baseball referee during a hotly contested play at the base.

One more thing about collaborating confidently on camera…

When you are appearing as part of a panel or team in front of a larger audience, be sure to match each other in the top third of the video frame. You don't want people to infer some sort of disorganization or misalignment just because they get a gut feeling based on the visual cues of your heads being in different spots of the frames.

Align your physical selves to match an alignment of message and present a more united appearance.

Trust Totally
How do you demonstrate trustworthy behavior and inspire trustworthy behavior in others? How do you inspire psychological safety in your teams?

Show others that we are proactively working to do right by them. How do you do that? By explaining what you are doing when you have to handle things that they can't see.

For example, all kinds of things can happen while in a Zoom meeting – like an important alert that comes up from your aging mother waiting on critical medical results.

Similar to how radio show hosts handle what the audience can't see, provide a vocal explanation of what is happening (even if you don't go into detail) so that your audience understands why you seem distracted. This is just one example of how you can provide a sense of respect for meeting participants while inspiring trustworthiness.

Assume good intent in others and show why they should do the same for you.

*Part strategist, part story-collector, part dot-connector, **KiKi L'Italien** helps experts develop stronger connections with the people they want on their team. KiKi honed her approach in and for organizations like the National Press Club, American Red Cross National Headquarters, and QVC, as well as with hundreds of individual founders, academics, and thought leaders. She's a former professional makeup artist and current Community Strategist. She's also creator and host of Association Chat, an online community and podcast reaching 72k individuals every month.*