

Lights, Camera, Action!

By Susan Schilke; July 1, 2020

We are having a very strange year, and normal does not feel like it is getting any closer. It's never been so important to be connected to your team, and never more challenging. Let's focus on the now, and this means it is time to get good at using video technology to stay connected to your team and your customers. Apps like Zoom, Google Meet and Microsoft Teams are now a critical part of continuing our relationships and our companies. You need to use them as effectively as possible.

There is a tremendous benefit in video communication. The first is the obvious ability to do it from anywhere you have the technology available. Right now this is providing a much-needed work from home option for teams. Long-term, the ability to connect with clients, suppliers, and service providers more effectively without getting in a car or airplane will pay huge dividends, along with the continued ability to offer work from home options or even employ a distributed workforce.

And in some ways, video meetings can be better than in person. They tend to start on time more often and be shorter and more productive. Screen sharing lets you focus together on documents or spreadsheets. And on camera people may be less distracted.

At the same time, without being in the same room with others, there are challenges. It's harder to read facial expressions and body language. You don't get the energy from others the same way. And the give and take becomes more formal as it's challenging to interject or bounce back and forth.

Using this evolving method for critical functions like strategic planning, 1-1s, team building and sales is more than making sure you have a camera and the app loaded. Communication is crucial to effective leadership, and with limited in-person options, you need to overcome the limitations of video conferencing and really connect with others virtually. Here's how:

1. **Lights!** Arrange your seating so that your face is clear and well-lit – with lighting on your face, and limited light behind you. You may need to rearrange your office to make this work or add additional lighting. [Here's an option](#) (I have two of these to overcome the backlighting in my sunroom office).
2. **Camera!** If using a laptop, make sure it's on a firm surface and consider elevating it for better angle (aim for eye level or slightly higher). Limit the use of virtual backgrounds as they can be distracting and impersonal. And pay some attention to the real background to make sure it's free of clutter. Your face should take up about one-third of the screen – close but not too close. Consider an external camera as an option, and be sure to set it up close to the onscreen images so you appear to be looking right at others. [I use this one](#) (and set it right in the middle of my screen).
3. **Action!** For virtual meetings, silence and turn off devices, and keep your conference window as large as possible to see all attendees clearly. A headset makes a huge difference in both the quality of what you hear, and how you sound to others. Most also limit the amount of background noise transmitted. Here's one [high-quality, low-cost option](#).

Getting the tech and set-up right is a great start. Take it further and really connect and engage with others with these habits:

1. **Use your face, head and body language deliberately.** Just as you would in person, nod with approval or to demonstrate you are following, tilt your head to indicate interest, keep your posture straight and lean in when you hear something interesting, or want to make a

point. Use your hands as well. Reflect what you are feeling in your face – smile, raise your eyebrows, frown. Remember there are fewer tools and you have to work harder to use the force of your personality to connect, influence and collaborate.

2. **Keep distractions limited and use mute.** Minimize open tabs, shut off alerts, and silence your phone. Video meetings deserve your full attention, and when you get distracted in a video meeting, it's really obvious – kind of like those drivers who are on their phones. You see the drift and lack of attention. Use mute in meetings to limit background noise and give you the freedom to clear your throat without disturbing the group.
3. **Start and end with personal connection.** In 1-1s or meetings, craft time for relationship building. Video meetings eliminate that pre- and post-meeting social time, so put it in the process. Start with ice-breaker questions – in 1-1s it can be as simple as 'How are you doing?' In meetings, try to let every attendee be heard at the beginning and end of the meeting. A quick round of sharing a success story, something you're looking forward to, or a hobby you've been enjoying lately is a great start. Then close the meeting with each attendee sharing a top takeaway from the meeting, or first action item, or another shared observation.

Some final notes. Video is a necessary connection right now for those you can't see in person as often or at all. If at all possible, help your team gear up with the right equipment and require video attendance at meetings and events.

But first and foremost, as a leader, make sure every time you connect via video with your team members, customers or partners, you're doing everything you can to continue to build relationships and trust, collaborate and problem solve, and drive accountability.