

Body Language 84

Zoom Boom 1- Eye Contact

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



This is the first of four short articles highlighting the differences from in-person body language and body language when using a virtual platform.

Clearly, having the ability to see the faces of individuals, particularly in a group setting is far superior to having a conference call where people cannot see each other.

However, it is wrong to suggest that the virtual experience is just as good as actually being in the same room as the other people. It is not.

This series of short articles will highlight areas where we need to recognize the limitations, even while we enjoy the benefits of the various platforms for virtual meetings.

The first area is eye contact. The most critical connection between people when interfacing in person is eye contact. When you look at another person's eyes, you can detect how sincere and authentic the person is.

We read the eyes of other people all the time without even being conscious of the depth of information contained in them. We may have a first meeting with an individual and come away with a cautionary feeling about him by the way he made eye contact.

In "The Gambler," Kenny Rogers sings, "He said, Son, I've made a life out of readin' people's faces, knowin' what the cards were by the way they held their eyes."

Most people in organizations do not take it to that extreme, but we do take away a huge amount of data by watching other people's eyes.

In a virtual setting, it is often difficult to even see the other person's eyes. First of all, if the person is wearing glasses, the glare from the reflection of the screen or ambient light at least partially blocks a clear view of the eyes.

Second, people rarely look directly into the camera when working in a virtual meeting. They are focusing their attention on the pictures of the other people or data displayed on screen. Depending on where the camera is placed, that may cause the person to

rarely show his eyes. Direct eye contact between any two people in a virtual meeting is extremely rare.

Third, when there are many people in the meeting, each image is so small that it is hard to see the expression in the eyes. You can gather some information, but it is not nearly what would be seen if you were meeting in person.

What to do

If the information in the eyes is less than ideal, you need to substitute other factors to understand what is going on with the other person. Tone of voice will let you know if the person is feeling happy, angry, sarcastic, confused, or several other emotions.

In addition, pay attention to what the other person is saying. Is she being negative, grumpy, and hostile, or is she buoyant, happy, and flexible?

Body position can give you a clue to the attitude. Is the person sitting up straight or slouched over holding her head up with the palm of her hand?

Facial expression is another tip off to what is going on with the person. Even though the eye contact may not be ideal, you still have the ability to read what is going on. Look for clues in the configuration of the mouth and the eyebrows.

You can ask open-ended questions that call for the person to reveal how she is feeling at the moment.

I will explore other differences or compromises in future articles.

This is a part in a series of articles on "Body Language" by Bob Whipple "The Trust Ambassador."