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# Zoom Lives: How to Read the Room When You're Not in the Room

## INNOVATION & TECHNOLOGY

Human Behavior | Smart Society

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Managers have been thrust into the new world of online meetings by the COVID pandemic and many have struggled to grasp the intricacies of digital formats to make the most out of them. Professor Michael C. Wenderoth explores the techniques leaders can use to ensure their meetings are meaningful interactions between engaged colleagues rather than unwanted screentime for their teams.



In 1999, a clergyman opened a tiny restaurant in Zurich that challenged guests to eat blindfolded, in total darkness. In 2020, much like the guests at *blindeküh*, we find ourselves in a new, unsettling environment, and have had to conduct routine tasks in unfamiliar ways.

When I talk with executives about working remotely, they say they "feel blind." While they aren't blind like the patrons of Jurg Spellman's dark restaurant, they have realized that their biggest challenge is "reading the room," the skill of assessing the reactions of others so they can quickly adjust to the situation.

Video conferencing is certainly not a new phenomenon, but "zoom" is the verb of the year for a reason. Our lives are full of it, thanks to the upsurge in telework around the world. We *can* see, but zooming isn't *quite* the same as being in the same room with people. On Zoom, it can be more difficult to pick up subtle signs that are easily noticeable when we're physically together – cues that help us understand the thoughts, intentions and emotional state of others.

To make sense of situations, research shows that we pay disproportionate attention to nonverbal communication, especially when someone's body language and spoken words don't agree. For example, if someone says they are on board with an idea, but their arms are crossed and body tense, we know something is amiss. Astute leaders watch for these signs, but the problem is that these nonverbal signals are more difficult to pick up when communicating remotely, even with the visual aid of a video call.

Missing these signals has wider ramifications. Many managers, working apart from their teams, cannot observe interactions amongst team members which provide [insight into critical political dynamics](#). Furthermore, being away from the office means these same managers miss out on conversations across their organizations, conversations that provide enhanced visibility for them, their team, and projects as well as access to information that can lead to a [network advantage](#).

Making it even more complicated is the fact that executives might also be misinterpreting behavior on video calls. For example, managers might view home background noise, such as a dog barking or baby crying, to imply that others are not fully present. A misplaced webcam can result in a worker being interpreted as evasive or lacking confidence because they do not look their manager or team members in the eye. It's thus important for everyone to be aware of how they "show up" in new online environments, and the signals those may send.

The soft skill of "reading the room" helps us all – from team member to team leader – work together effectively, and it's a skill that will become increasingly important since many employees will work from home into 2021 and beyond. Zoom does not change everything, but to be effective in the new medium, we must remember the fundamentals of effective communication, adapt best practices to the online environment, and take advantage of technology.

Here are five recommendations to enhance your ability to read the virtual room, interact with your co-workers in a meaningful way, and ultimately create a more productive working environment:

### • Don't Zoom just for the sake of it

An increase in remote work has not cut back on the number of meetings that pop up on our calendars. In fact, with less chance for informal discussion, many employees find themselves with even more meetings than when they were working in the office. Zoom makes it easy. But while technology may change our conference rooms into virtual meeting spaces, the fundamental question remains: what is the objective of the meeting? Just as before, it is necessary to define the goal of the communication (is it to share information, collaborate, mobilize – or to simply bond?) and then decide on the format.

One senior director I work with would finish many of her video conferences feeling frustrated. She could see that her team members were not engaged, many had their video off and mic muted, and few had questions. She later learned that they were bored by her monologue and their attention was drained from being online throughout the day; they didn't have energy for meaningful discussion. Video calls can be cognitively exhausting and it's important to sometimes work off screen and let team members do the same.

Rather than taking the standard approach to a team meeting, the director could have recorded a short video for team members to review in advance. This strategy is effective when there is nothing sensitive to share, so the live interaction is saved for questions and meaningful discussion. In education, this is known as "flipping the classroom," a technique that effectively engages students by turning them into active participants of the learning process.

Lesson: Be clear about your purpose. Use video conferences strategically, for example when an issue or project is mission critical, involves nuance, or requires real-time interaction.

### • Don't speed through the learning curve

When lockdowns forced us online, we immediately obsessed about how to teach and lead online, and forgot that it is equally important to understand how to learn and interact online.

Seasoned bosses do not underestimate the intelligence, adaptability, and tech savviness of their employees, but some bosses wrongly assume that everyone adapts to technology and situations as fast as they do. Senior leaders generally adapt faster than their employees, as they often get more support at work, receive higher pay, and can take advantage of a lifestyle that includes more available time, childcare and home support, and even private working space within their residence.

So when it comes to productively working online as a team, organizations cannot afford to skip steps. Yes, employees value autonomy in how they deliver their work, but managers should be careful not to throw their teams, especially those that need to collaborate, into the deep end of the working online pool without support and guidance. This is the case under any circumstance, but particularly so as people struggle with the repercussions of a pandemic. Organizations must spend resources training teams on how to use remote communication tools and best practices. It is also advisable to periodically check in on employees after their trainings to see what is working well and what could be improved.

Lesson: To move fast you often need to move slow. Be thoughtful and deliberate and create the conditions necessary for strong collaboration and teamwork, particularly in getting everyone on an equal playing field.

### • Ask colleagues for help

When speaking to an audience, of any size, experienced presenters periodically pause, check in, and involve their audience, which provides a space for them to adjust to the feeling in the room. For the majority of us, this is hard work. It's difficult to read *any* room when we are focused on presenting to that room, and this effort is amplified online, with multiple screens in play and audio and video challenges.

To get beyond these personal limits, meeting leaders can enroll others to help them read the online room – for example, asking a coworker to monitor the chat board or watch for raised hands or even puzzled expressions. Another can manage online polls to surface opinions and spot-test, even gamify the discussion, to help the leader keep people engaged.

Keith Ferrazzi urges teams to have a "Yoda" – a group member who observes what is going on and what is *not* being said, someone who can interject when necessary to keep the meeting on track, send the speaker a private note, or simply provide feedback after the video call.

Lesson: Don't take everything on yourself. Enlist others to help you read the room and, when possible, rotate this important role to ensure diverse perspectives.

### • Create space for meaningful interaction

Research shows that teams that have psychological safety – an environment in which they are not afraid to voice unpopular opinions – perform better. Developing this space of acceptance and productivity takes time, and it is frankly impossible to create it instantly, for example, on a recorded video call with strangers.

But because in-person meetings have been reduced significantly these days, it is common to be in Zoom meetings with people who don't know each other well. To make the best of the situation, leaders can borrow best practices from traditional in-person meetings: establish ground rules and lead by example in what is shared or how comments are received. Just as when people are around the conference room table, it sometimes happens in a video conference that the same people are constantly speaking up or everyone simply remains silent. Either way, important information is getting buried.

The good news is that video conferences have the advantage here. Presenters can poll participants anonymously, to instantly surface what they think. Participants can also be asked to share their thoughts in breakout rooms or written format in a chat – either with the group at large or privately with the leader of the discussion, who can add the information anonymously. In this manner, well run online meetings can reduce the sequential sharing of information and groupthink. Taking advantage of technology helps to surface information, which makes many executives I coach question whether they ever really read the room that well before, when they were physically together.

Lesson: Get people actively engaged during your online conference calls. With more people feeling included and having a voice in the discussion, you won't have to work so hard to read the room, because the room will reveal itself.

### • Create space for informal interaction

Working from home, we miss out on watercooler moments, shared lunches, and coffee breaks. Not only are these beneficial for our mental health, but these informal interactions help coworkers bond and understand each other on a personal level, which then helps professional collaboration within departments and across the organization. Employees that have a feeling of belonging, one recent study showed, not only perform better, but get sick less, stay with their employers longer, and report higher Net Promoter Scores for their organizations.

Needless to say, creating a sense of belonging and comradery is difficult when most team interaction is online and remains within the structure of an organized meeting. To keep interaction fresh and personal, managers can schedule virtual sessions for the group outside of set meetings, such as formal "skip-level" and mentoring chats, and informal coffee and happy hours.

Lesson: Do not underestimate the importance of finding ways to sustain personal interaction between your coworkers and teams. Our well-being – which drives our productivity – is dependent on feeling connected.

### The room is yours to step into

Reading the room when you're not in the room, while difficult, is not impossible – it simply demands a willingness to adapt, learn, and put into practice the skills that are necessary for our new online environment. These range from the implementation of new technology to the recommitment of those tried-and-true soft skills, like attentiveness and listening.

The world of work will never go back to teams meeting regularly around a conference table or gathering in a lecture hall. It's clear we are headed towards a new, hybrid way of working and living that brings its own opportunities and potential. We only need to have patience with ourselves and each other so that we can grow into this new working environment. We must accept our new Zoom lives. Before we can read the room, we must enter it.

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