Tech Manager Primer: Room Etiquette

Bad habits can spoil your videoconference; here are nine ways to overcome them.

////// by John Laughlin

These practices are annoying enough during a face to face meeting, but during a videoconference they can be downright detrimental. Not only do they irritate co-workers and distract from the meeting, but they degrade the quality of the audio and video systems that you have spent time (and money) so much to provide.

Videoconferences are different from regular meetings in at least two important ways. First, the technology tends to focus peoples' attention on a speaker more than it would be in a face to face meeting. Prepare well and you can use that attention to your advantage. Come in unprepared and it can be especially obvious to everyone.

Second, a video call requires a little more discipline than you may be used to. The switching of cameras and microphones forces people to speak in turn. There can be a very short delay before sound and video reach the far-end site. That can also require people to slow down a bit and wait their turns before making comments.

A little training can be a great investment, but in the meantime, we have found there are nine key areas where some extra effort can help your conferences run a lot better, and your system perform at its peak.

Get more organized. Because a videoconference looks like television, peo-ple have a higher expectation for the pace of the meeting. If you are in charge, consider using a written agenda, creating visuals, and appointing someone to make sure you stick with your timeframe.

If this is an important meeting, it can be helpful to assign some participants certain tasks, such as making presentations, being ready to comment on specific topics, or preparing questions to 'prime the pump' for discussion. You may find it helpful to ask questions via email in advance of the meeting, to start people thinking about what you need to discuss.

Be sure everyone knows how/when they will be recognized to speak. Try to keep presentations a little shorter than you might otherwise. If a video-based meeting drags, participants will lose interest faster; they will have more trouble paying attention.

If you are a participant, write down what you want to accomplish by attending this meeting. Is there information you need to communicate? Are there specific questions you need answered? Are there questions you are likely to be asked?

Let participants know who exactly is connected. Because the camera's point of view is limited, it can be hard to tell who is present in a meeting. If you are in charge of a smaller meeting, introduce everyone. For larger sessions, introduce the main participants and let people know if anyone is sitting in off-screen.

Speak clearly and naturally. It's true that the quality of the calls are better

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than ever, but it's still a little harder to understand someone than in a face to face meeting.

Sit up to make sure you're in range of the camera and microphone. Speak just a tad more slowly and clearly than you would normally. You don't have to raise your voice, but avoid speaking softly or mumbling.

Hold relatively still. Your system must compress and decompress the video images, so a lot of movement or excessive gesturing puts more demands on the codec and will result in a somewhat degraded image. It can also be distracting for viewers on the far end.

Dress conservatively. Loud colors, shiny jewelry, and busy patterns do not look good on video. Dressing all in white or black can throw off the camera's iris and make your face too dark or too light.

Be aware of the technology. Notice where the camera is and look at it when you speak. This will make a better impression on those at the far end, because you will seem to establish eye contact. If you have a near-end monitor, avoid watching it while on camera.

Be aware of the microphone, as well. You don't need to lean into it or speak especially loud, but you do want to avoid tapping a pencil or rustling papers near the mic.

Be extra considerate. The obvious bad things seem especially distracting on video. Set your phone on vibrate. Leave the room if you have to take a call. Mute your microphone before you sneeze. Be aware that eating or drinking looks more distracting on camera than in person.

Act with the assumption that the worst will happen. That is to say, if you start to nod off assume you are on camera. If you make a joke to your neighbor, assume that everyone in the conference will hear you.

Close the meeting on a strong note. If you are in charge of the meeting, summarize what has been discussed and decided. Make sure people understand the next steps and who will be responsible for each. A thank you is always an upbeat way to end the session.

Follow up by email. Repeat your summary statement in an email, including any decisions that have been made and any action items. If particular people have assignments coming out of the meeting, make sure you list them in the email.

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