

The Etiquette of Video Conferencing and Telepresence

Optimizing the Total Experience



Compared to ubiquitous social technologies like cell phones, e-mail, and text messaging, video conferences today lack universally-accepted rules of engagement. There are no cross-cultural standards such as saying “Hello?” when you pick up the phone or replying “LOL” when you find something humorous. Most standards have been inherited from the audio conferencing world, where muting, not interrupting, and paying attention to the speaker are accepted courtesies.

But as real-time and on-demand visual communication increases, standards for video etiquette are developing. Here are a few key fundamentals to follow today that will make video conferences positive experiences for you and those with whom you interact.

Polish Your Image

Prior to the call, use the picture-in-picture “near side” view function to see how you will appear to those on the far end. Make sure you’re visible in the frame, that your environment is adequately lit, and that there are no distractions in the background. Also, make your line of sight relatively level so that you’re not looking at your far-side participants from an angle tilted too severely high or low.

Note: When seated in Immersive Telepresence environments, these variables are nearly all accounted for, so simply try not to slouch! If you’re in a near-side room with multiple participants, make sure everyone is visible in the frame while avoiding the distant “fish eye” effect by zooming the camera to an acceptable angle. This may mean that people all need to sit on one side or near one end of the table.

Yes, I Can Hear You Now

Next, you’ll want to make sure the volume is set to the right level, so that when you connect to the far end or conference bridge, your voice(s) are clearly audible and you can hear the far end. Those who were in the conference room before you may have lowered or raised the volume for their far end participants, or may even set the near side to “Mute.” As a rule of thumb, a volume set at its mid-level or slightly higher than mid-level should enable you to clearly hear and be heard.

Vying for Attention

After your camera angle and incoming view window have been correctly established, try to remain focused on the conference. Constantly looking at your computer display, talking on your cell phone or to someone off frame, typing on your keyboard, carrying on IM conversations, and similar multitasks are the video conference equivalent of speaking too loudly on your cell phone in a public space. Once it was common but today it’s a sign of inconsiderate boorishness. Video conferences are much more interpersonal and interactive than telephone calls or e-mails and attentiveness, non-verbal cues, and facial expressions matter. If you wouldn’t behave this way in a live meeting, don’t behave this way in a video conference.

Avoid Adjustments

Once the video conference begins, make as few alterations to your camera angle as possible. Certain modifications might be necessary in response to environmental changes (for example, room lights may automatically turn on or off, background or ambient noise may suddenly increase, a presenter in your room may need to be brought in for a close-up) but on the whole, correcting and fine-tuning video settings repeatedly during the conference can be quite distracting to far-end participants, and it's disruptive to whoever is speaking.

In a Multipoint Conference? Mute!

The technologies inside the microphone(s) on your near-end video conference system won't distinguish between relevant and irrelevant sounds. It will hone in on side-bar gossip just as readily as the core meeting points, so if you're in a multipoint conference with three or more parties, it's generally productivity-enhancing for everyone if you mute your near-end audio. When you or someone on the near-end wants to speak, simply press or click on the "Unmute" button and make your point, then, when you've had your say, return to Mute mode. Note: Muting is particularly critical if you've called into a conference over audio from your cell phone, where the signal is prone to static and background noise. Everyone will appreciate your consideration.

It Really Is "Just Like Being There"

As with any face-to-face meeting, stray noises and side conversations can sidetrack a video conference from its primary purpose. The result can be a virtual assembly that veers off course and into the weeds of anarchy. With the pre-existing near-side/far-side divide of a video conference, the danger of side topics dominating is particularly acute, so if you're the host of a video conference, just as with an in-face interaction, provide a meeting objective, agenda, and content to all participants beforehand to keep people focused. If you're a meeting participant and an agenda hasn't been provided, request one from the host at the outset of the call, and then extend to them the courtesy of your attention.

Other variables such as showing up promptly (which in the video conferencing world means a few minutes early, to check your image, volume, lighting, etc.), not interrupting or speaking out of turn, acknowledging or greeting other participants, and requesting a "next steps" summary (if one isn't forthcoming) at meeting's conclusion are all actions that you want to carry over from the real to video worlds.

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