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Is Virtual the New Face-to-face?

A few thoughts on the role of body language in communication.

Let's face it, in the current crisis, we have all had to get used to communicating digitally and have witnessed an explosion in the use of meeting apps like Zoom, Webex, Teams and digital learning platforms. People who have steered clear of this technology before are realising that it is quite easy to use and, in many situations, more efficient than face-to-face meetings. There are suggestions that digital meetings will become the new normal, even when the crisis is over.

But can virtual interaction ever truly be a substitute for the real thing?

A colleague asked me whether I thought there were any benefits from being face-to-face with people that you can't get from a virtual meeting, or is this new reality the final nail in the coffin for live meetings, conferences and training?

We basically concluded that it is all down to the impact of body language and non-verbal communication, so, that is what I would like to explore.

Body language (Kinesics) is hard-wired into human interaction and communication. Potentially, over 70% of the true meaning of communication is picked up by non-verbal cues (Mehrabian/Fast). Most of this happens subconsciously, so we are not aware that we are decoding it, for example, when you take an instant like or dislike to somebody but have no idea why. However, it has a dramatic effect on our interpretation.

For clarity, I am classifying non-verbal communication into 5 categories:

- Kinesics - Body language
- Proxemics - Use of Space
- Paralanguage - Vocal qualities
- Object language - Clothing, cosmetics, status, etc.
- Other areas - Time, touch, smell, etc.

Kinesics

Kinesics includes things like facial expressions, eye movement, pupil dilation, head Inclination, posture, gestures and idiosyncrasies. Generally, people respond well to positive body language such as smiling, eye contact or looking interested and badly to negative body language such as frowning, no eye contact or a defensive posture.



You can observe some of these online but, typically, the resolution is not good enough to pick up on the finer points. For example, people react unconsciously to dilation or contraction of the pupils – it is part of a subconscious ‘friend or foe’ response. Face-to-face, this could determine whether you feel close to or distant from someone but, you probably won’t pick it up online.

Eye contact and eye movements are also difficult to read online; you can’t shake hands; and people also tend to use fewer gestures – yet all of these can completely change the meaning of what you are saying and how you are perceived by others.



Postural signals are also missed. For example, your subconscious can tell a lot by the way a person sits or crosses their legs – typically, you can’t see this online. The freedom of movement that allows these gestures and postures to flow naturally face-to-face, is seriously restricted when you are static in front of the camera.

Online, you are usually focused on the active speaker and some systems will only display four people on the screen at any one time, so you have no idea how the others are reacting.

Some online events do not even use video and rely on audio only. This completely removes the visual aspect of body language, arguably, the most important element.

Proxemics

This refers to how you use the space around you. At its most basic it means respecting other people’s personal space and not getting too close. This is not a problem if you are online but, it removes the natural sequence of events that dictates how close you can get to someone. This can only happen face-to-face.

Conventional wisdom also says you should avoid using physical barriers, like a desk. You could argue that this is not an issue in a ‘virtual’ space but, is the separation created by the camera any less imposing than a desk?

Online, the power of Proxemics basically disappears – the barrier is already there because you are remote from the other people and everyone is in their own ‘space’. This can be a good thing, although people may still play power games by choosing backgrounds or settings that make a statement about their status.

Paralanguage

This concerns the pitch and tone of someone’s voice, the emphasis they put on certain words, the pace of speech, accent, etc. For example, talking fast may convey nervousness; a strong accent may be difficult to understand.

You can also completely change the meaning of a sentence by placing the emphasis on a different word. For example, “You were there!” means something completely different to “You were there?”. Even the tone and pitch can change the meaning. Just saying someone’s name can convey that you are happy to see them or extremely angry, just by the tone of your voice.

Online events usually allow you to 'hear' the other person and to verbally respond but, research shows that we tend to tone down pitch and emphasis when communicating electronically.

People also tend to say less online – there are no visual cues to tell you to stop or carry on.

And not all online events allow you to talk. I recently attended a meeting with no visuals or audio. Apart from the presenters, all the communication was conducted using text chat. Fine, if you want to neutralise every aspect of the interaction.

Even here, there is the danger of misinterpretation, because people tend to put their own paralanguage into what they are reading (that's how we enjoy a good book!). If you have just shared a long report for us to read during the online event and I type "Thanks a lot" into chat, am I thanking you, or just being sarcastic?

Object Language

Whether we like it or not, we all form impressions of people based on how they look, what they wear and even how they smell. You may even be influenced by the fact that someone has a certain title, is attractive, wears an expensive watch, or smells of your favourite perfume/aftershave.

Many of these 'Object Language' factors are absent online.

Other Factors

Communication can even be influenced by factors such as the time of day, the physical environment and even the temperature.

Most of these factors are absent online. So, let's not forget the ambience of the environment itself, especially when that environment is 'shared'. Can you reproduce the beautiful grounds of a country setting online? Can you serve everyone a great meal? Can you recreate the laughter in the bar in the evening? Can you go for a walk as the sun sets or admire the view together from the patio? Can you provide an opportunity to meet new people and for relationships to develop naturally?



Conclusion

Human beings are hard-wired to interact on a face-to-face basis. We are social animals and everything we know about how to communicate is the product of hundreds of thousands of years of evolution and development – 99.9% of it based entirely on face-to-face interactions.

Look at the evidence we currently see. Even the generation that live on social media and mobile devices are frustrated by lockdown. Strangers speak to each other in the park. We are all desperate for some banter and a good laugh with our colleagues.

The non-verbal dynamic that drives every meeting and every interaction we have, that determines who's who in a social setting, that bonds people and helps us to make friends and allies – these are all missing in the virtual world.

For sure, we need to make use of the alternatives that modern technology can provide, especially in the current situation, and we quickly adapt to the change. I use the technology all the time and it works incredibly well, in the right context. But is it a long-term substitute for the impact of non-verbal communication that we get face-to-face? Can it reproduce the energy and dynamics of a group of people interacting in a real room? Personally, I don't think so.

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