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18 Ways to Increase Executive Presence in Zoom Meetings
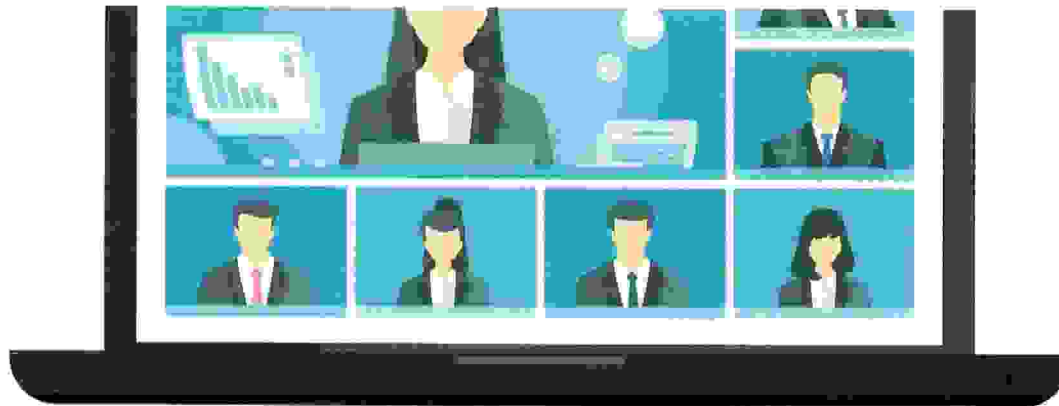
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After you gain your proverbial seat at the table, don't fall out of the chair. You can't afford to fall on your face when it comes to presenting ideas and information to your boss, clients, or coworkers. The challenge to hold the room is more complicated than ever with meetings happening virtually via video conferencing software.

Executive presence may be difficult to define, but we all know it when we see it—or don't. People walk into a room, and heads turn. They speak and people listen. They lead and people follow. When they leave, the party winds down.

The mysterious "it" of executive presence includes how you look, how you talk, how you think, and how you act. Working remotely and appearing online to deliver your ideas shouldn't diminish your personal presence.

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present a "larger than life" image. But when technology reduces you to a thumbnail (okay, maybe slightly larger if the Zoom gallery shows only two or three people), you simply have to compensate in other ways to connect and build credibility.

If you can't explain and gain support for your work—the reasons behind it, the results achieved, the impact it has on profitability, and the opportunity it holds for the future--you have figuratively fallen out of the chair. You've failed.

So let's talk about succeeding—how best to convey expertise and a powerful executive presence when working remotely and meeting with others via Zoom or other online platforms.

How You Look

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1. Light Up Your Life

A big part of trust and rapport-building involves reading body language—facial expressions, eye contact, smiles, posture, shifting of positions as you listen or speak.

Yet reading your body language depends on proper lighting. Linda Swindling, a speaker colleague of mine, uses humor to coach her virtual attendees out of the darkness. One of her favorite quips as attendees come online without having lighted their room and themselves properly: "Hey, Jerry, are you in the witness protection program? Come out of the shadows so we can see you!"

Her good-natured teasing makes the point: Unless you're trying to hide, pay attention to proper lighting. The light should be streaming *toward* your face—not from above your head, not from behind you, and not from the side.

Celebrity photographers make the big bucks because they understand that improper lighting creates unflattering shadows in the wrong places. They'll

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Your colleagues and customers should see you in the best light—figuratively and literally.

2. Beware of Background Breakthroughs and Settings

Artificial (virtual) backgrounds don't always work well. The green-screen technology has not been perfected, so often weird things happen to your face, head, hair, and hands when you move around in front of a virtual background.

So prefer a stable, simple background that doesn't distract. Never load your background with so many objects that viewers become obsessed with your setting rather than impressed with your comments.

3. Keep Your Posture Positive

Slouched posture communicates disinterest. Not the impression you want to give colleagues, customers, or your boss. Leaning backward, away from the camera may convey arrogance and a judgmental mindset. To show interest, sit up straight, with shoulders relaxed but slightly forward at about a 15-30 degrees angle.

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4. Gesture Inside the Frame

Polished presenters use gestures to add emphasis to their message. But those natural gestures should be appropriate to the virtual setting. Keep hands inside the frame—within camera range. Also, take care not to wave your hands *toward* the camera, which can make you look frantic and aggressive.

5. Dress for the Impression You Want to Create

Granted, today's audiences may accept and expect a more casual dress for online versus in-person appearances —but not disheveled or sloppy. One of my weekly coaching clients living in another country and time zone looks as if he's just crawled out of bed without a mirror check.

After a tech check as a video podcast guest on a show streaming from a major university, I watched the host stand up from behind his interview desk and walk toward a closet door in the back of his bedroom. He dropped his pants down around his hips, changed shirts, and then tucked in his shirttail. While I appreciated his inclination to dress for success, watching the process did not instill confidence in his interviewing style!

are not watching you at any given moment. Twirling a thread or hair,

scratching a splotch off your tie, or adjusting your jewelry or bra strap does

not instill confidence.

How You Talk

The "talking" component of executive presence involves word choice,

grammar, clichés or their absence, speaking rate, volume, pitch, pausing,

inflection, and so forth.

6. Be Brief

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7. Pause to Add Emphasis

Talking too quickly conveys nervousness. If you naturally talk quickly, all the more reason to add pauses before or after key points. Pausing builds suspense for what you're about to say or adds emphasis to what you've just said.

8. Avoid Patronizing Phrases

When someone asks a question, never start your answer by uttering clichés like this: "That's a good question," "Thanks for that question," or "I'm so glad you asked that."

Comments like these sound as if you're assuming a one-up position—that you alone know what is or isn't a good question. A prospective employer will quickly tire of that refrain during a job interview.

9. Hold the Floor Until You Finish

You can avoid having others interrupt (whether intentionally or not) by setting yourself up to hold the floor until you complete your point. An example: "I

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At this point, if someone interrupts you, add, "I'd like to finish with my three reasons, please." Then resume at the point you were interrupted. To continually permit yourself to be interrupted communicates timidity.

10. Look at The Camera

Shakespeare was right when he said, "The eyes are windows to your soul." That willingness to make eye contact conveys openness and honesty and, as a result, builds trust and rapport.

Looking at a person's image in the gallery rather than at the camera is THE most common mistake in online conversations. Avoid letting your eyes wander up or down as if reading answers from the ceiling or the floor.

With inexperienced TV guests and multiple cameras on a studio set, producers typically tell their guests where to direct their comments. "When the green light flashes on this camera, you're on.

Imagine other people in your meeting standing behind the camera. Dragging an individual's image up on your screen (directly under the camera) may help you remember where to look.

How You Think

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Your thinking process enables you to communicate clearly and persuasively—even under pressure.

11. Make Your Bottom-line Your Opening Line

When giving a presentation or simply responding to a peer's comment, overview and then elaborate. Summarize your point before you launch into the details.

The classic "Once upon a time" opens many bedtime stories, but marks a meeting amateur. If you're writing a movie script or telling a joke, your audience will give you a few minutes to interest them before they flip the channel, check text messages, or nod off.

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you don't first have the big-picture framework. Second, listeners expect immediate relevancy.

Many people insist that they always start their conversations, emails, presentations, and proposals with an executive overview. But having heard thousands of such briefings in client coaching sessions, I disagree. They don't.

Instead, most start with a purpose statement—a warm-up drill, stating what they *intend* to say—later. In a virtual meeting, the comment sounds something like this: "Let me share my experience with what we've been talking about. I know our situations may be entirely different. But when I think of the real cost of a survey like this, I'm inclined to . . . ."

All lead-in details. Not a real summary. Instead, start strong. Summarize your key point or conclusion. Then circle back and elaborate with details.

12. Sort the Significant from the Trivial

Squelch the urge to "speak your truth" in every meeting on every topic.

To gain buy-in from colleagues, know how to sift the significant from the myriad information you may have at hand. Your reputation rests on what you

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13. Ask Thought-Provoking Questions

Executive management teams insist that a key value advisory boards offer is asking the right questions. Questions guide discussions and prevent missteps. Consultants provide their clients the same service. Going into a new organization, they listen to stakeholders, learn the situation, analyze data, and ask questions. Their value most often lies *not* in the answers they provide but in the questions they ask.

The more provocative your questions, generally the stronger others consider your contribution to the outcome. Your questions showcase your distinct way of thinking about an issue.

14. Make Your Points Memorable

How do you know if you've been successfully persuasive? Are your colleagues using your illustration or phrasing at the next meeting? Have you heard your slogan bandied about in a hallway chat? Did others quote you in a later presentation? If so, your slogan or illustration "stuck."

Analogies and metaphors can turn ordinary explanations into eloquent ones.

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true ownership. Owners are different from tenants. I know of a couple who rented out their house and the family who moved in nailed their Christmas tree to the hardwood floors instead of using a tree stand. Expedient, I suppose, and admittedly these were particularly bad tenants, but no owner would be so short-sighted. Similarly, many investors are effectively short-term tenants, turning their portfolios over so quickly they are really just renting the stocks that they temporarily 'own.'"

Such comparisons don't exactly solicit an emotional response; they simply clarify a complex concept. Metaphors, on the other hand, imply a comparison and typically evoke an emotion. Both types of comparisons can be succinct, yet powerful ways to manage how well your listeners remember what you say.

How You Act

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"How you act" refers to personality traits, values, character, and competence. Do you have a sense of humor? Are you courteous? Empathetic? Approachable? Do you exude confidence—but not arrogance? What's your reputation and track record for competence in your job?

How do these characteristics come across online? Much the same way as they do when you're together in the same room.

15. Forget Multitasking

Multitasking (reading text messages, responding to email, working on a document) while others are interacting says to the group, "You're boring me." And that's not a good way to build rapport or credibility.

draws attention to your inattention. When you show up to a meeting, show up with the intent to participate fully.

16. Master the Technology

Be mindful of when to mute and unmute yourself. Others in the meeting grow impatient when they see someone's lips moving and arms gesturing, but are unable to hear them.

Another thing: Practice until you can smoothly and quickly share your screen to show a slide or a document. Having the group wait on you while you figure things out in real-time leaves an impression—a negative one.

17. Avoid Interrupting

A friend mentioned this behavior to me just yesterday after a Zoom meeting with seven of his colleagues to improve a new process for hiring and performance reviews. "Man, Chris is really becoming annoying in these meetings. It seems like every time a thought flashes in his mind, he just blurts out. No matter who's talking and what they're talking about. Bam— Chris throws the discussion in a totally different direction. Did you know he was like that?"

clear "tell" about personality and values.

18. Exit with Manners

As a party-goer, you've learned to politely excuse yourself from a conversation rather than just slip away unnoticed. The same is true online. If you need to leave the meeting early, you don't want to create an interruption but neither should you simply disappear from the screen without notice.

An appropriate exit technique is either to tell your colleagues up front that you'll be leaving early or add an exit line in the chat: "I apologize for having to leave early for another meeting. I'll catch up with Deepak later to see what I've missed."

To repeat: Executive presence flows from how you look, how to talk, how you think, and how you act. Adapting to today's technology, you can convey your credibility online as powerfully as when you're physically present. Small changes can make a big impact.

Dianna Booher

Dianna Booher is the bestselling author of 49 books, published in 62 foreign-language editions. She helps organizations to communicate clearly and leaders to expand their influence by a strong executive presence—and often by their own published book. Her latest books include Faster, Fewer, Better Emails; Communicate Like a Leader; What MORE Can I Say?; Creating Personal Presence; and Communicate With Confidence. National Media such as Good Morning America, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, Bloomberg, Forbes, FOX,