



# TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR VIRTUAL BODY LANGUAGE

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## How do you consciously use your body language to master interaction in virtual workshops and hybrid meetings?

Imagine sitting in a cockpit on your way to taking 50 excited holidaymakers on the adventure of a lifetime. You are sitting with your back to the holidaymakers in the soundproof cockpit, and you cannot see or hear their reactions to what you're doing. When facilitating a virtual meeting, it can often feel exactly the same way.

Are you one of those people who have put loads of time and energy into mastering the facilitation of virtual meetings? Perhaps you can recognise yourself in actually being comfortable facilitating virtual meetings with everything that it entails, from planning and design to technical setup and facilitation of the

meeting. However, you may still often feel that you are not really successful in your communication. Perhaps it is hard for you to sense if your participants are engaged and actively involved on the other side of the screen, or maybe you don't get the reactions you expected despite the fact that the content of your exercises or what you present is good.

**When facilitating a virtual or hybrid meeting, the physical distance between you and your participants makes it more important than ever to understand how to make your body language a co-player to ensure that you shine as a facilitator or trainer<sup>1</sup>.**

<sup>1</sup> In the remaining part of the article, the term "facilitator" is used as an overall term for facilitator, trainer and leader.

## Be aware of yourself and your energy when communicating virtually

The American psychologist and communication theorist Paul Watzlawick once said: “You cannot not communicate”, and this also applies in the virtual space. As a facilitator on the virtual stage, it is not enough to have control of your agenda, presentation and technical setup. If you are not aware of how your body language and on-screen appearance affect the energy you bring into the virtual space, you risk having non-engaged participants and compromising the quality of your meetings. Try spending two minutes thinking about some of the best dinner parties or festive events you have attended. What made them special? What made them memorable? When I do the same, I think about the host. A smiling host greeting you with open arms is what our participants should experience when they arrive or check into meetings facilitated by you.

In this article, we will take a closer look at how you as a facilitator can train your interaction skills by consciously using yourself and your energy when communicating.

The article builds on our experience with body language training in physical meetings as well as theoretical perspectives on a conscious use of body language. In addition, the article builds on the book Virtual Facilitation<sup>2</sup>, describing six principles for creating engaging virtual meetings. We will take as a point of departure the book’s third principle: “manage the energy”.

### Forget about eye contact – it builds confidence in you as a facilitator

What?! As if it wasn’t enough that you cannot hear, smell or touch the people you meet virtually, you must now also shut down your visual sense by avoiding looking at each other.

It may sound a little controversial to forget about eye contact in virtual or hybrid

meetings, and this is of course also only a half-truth. **It is not that you should avoid looking each other in the eye altogether, but you need to be aware of when you are doing it.**

In physical reality, you seek eye contact with people you communicate with, because you are naturally looking for a reaction in them, and because it is a habit for us to look at the one we are talking with. However, in a virtual setup, there’s a shift between what you’re doing and what’s being broadcast to the participants on the other side of the screen. If you start your meeting by saying “I would really like to hear your thoughts on how we can organise a more flexible workplace in the future” and at the same time try to create a feeling of presence by resting your eyes on the small images of the participants on your screen, you risk ending up with the completely opposite effect. This happens because in a virtual context you look down at the images of your participants on the screen, and therefore the participants will experience a facilitator that looks down at them and does not look them in the eye.

**In situations where you want to build trust and credibility, you should deliberately direct your gaze directly at the webcam.**

In that way, the participants will feel that you look them in the eye, and this strengthens their trust in you as a facilitator and in what you say. You can also consider whether it is necessary to share your slides while talking, or if you can stop screen sharing to create a feeling of a stronger presence in the virtual space.

The virtual meeting is by nature purely visual and/or auditory, which means that the participants can easily lose their concentration or misunderstand your messages. This happens because the virtual space shuts down the senses we normally use when facing each other or otherwise physically sensing each other and the context in which we need to understand the message.

<sup>2</sup> Andersen, H. H. et al (2020). Virtual Facilitation: Create More Engagement and Impact, Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley.

We know from studies of personal communication that if we have doubts about a message, we attribute body language and tone of voice 93% of the overall meaning of the message. The actual words spoken only make up 7%. That is why it is important to focus on eye contact – or at least how the participants experience it – which helps to build credibility and seriousness about you as a facilitator. At the same time, it can also appear rigid and unnatural if you do not vary your body language.

In any situation where two people communicate with each other, there is a natural interaction between looking each other in the eye and looking away. For example, if you think about the times where you've experienced skilled facilitators who shined on stage, you will often find that they have varied between taking the stage and standing firmly on the floor and walking slowly around the room with a more wandering and reflective gaze. **Your ability to vary your body language and use it intelligently will therefore only strengthen your authenticity as a facilitator.**

### **Believe in your virtual meeting and save your PJ's for later**

Imagine facilitating an important virtual workshop, but before the meeting starts, you feel unsure of your format, process or role as a facilitator. This will inevitably have an impact on the energy that you as a facilitator bring into the meeting and will thus dominate the room. Getting ready for a meeting is very much about your preparation time. This involves being prepared in terms of techniques, content and process, and that you have made sure that the participants feel well prepared and ready for what is about to happen. Despite hours of thoughtful preparation, it may still feel as if you are not quite ready. This is where body language comes in. Only when we have mastered process, techniques and content do we have that extra energy to also use our body language deliberately.

In order to get your messages across and demonstrate strong facilitation leadership, you must first and foremost believe

in what you are doing. In other words, you need to be aware that the energy you bring into the virtual space will affect the participants in your meeting. **Only when you can control the energy signals you send out yourself can you start taking responsibility for the energy that is created in the group.** You should, however, avoid trying to read the participants' body language, as we are typically less aware of our body language when listening than when talking. Also, we see only small images of the participants in the virtual space, which makes that attempt even harder to succeed with. However, what you can do is to frequently check in with your participants and ask them directly if the energy is high or low.

In the book *Virtual Facilitation*, you will find several concrete tips and tricks on how you as a facilitator can take responsibility for your participants having the right energy level. In this section, we will focus on how you as a facilitator can turn energy into a bodily co-player as you get ready for your meeting.

Very few people have a professional studio setup when facilitating virtual meetings and workshops. The vast majority of us facilitate the meetings from home. The home environment probably makes it a little more natural for us to put on a warm sweater and worn-out Birkenstocks that have gradually become part of our home **office environment. However, just like getting ready for work in the morning, it is our experience that our clothing, and not least our footwear, can also help make a difference in terms of our appearance on screen.**

The final sprint of your mental preparation for your workshop starts as early as in the morning when you get up, shower and get ready for the meeting. In order for you to feel ready as a facilitator, it is important that you dress so that your appearance does not interfere with the process you have planned.

You should therefore think about whether there is a specific dress code for the group of participants you have invited to your

meeting and also whether your clothing can help to stage a certain atmosphere. Your clothing, body language and appearance are crucial elements for how to make you shine, as they activate the associations, moods and emotions of your participants, which can be both positive and negative. For example, if you are the leader of a group of employees whom you have called in for a meeting to discuss a case where you would like to show that you are at eye level with them, it may be that a shirt and suit do not help you to create that atmosphere, unless of course that is the type of clothing you typically wear at your place of work. It may also be that you as a project manager is about to facilitate an important steering committee meeting where you would like to appear serious and professional, and it is therefore appropriate that you dress more formally for the occasion. If you are a younger facilitator who sometimes encounters resistance due to your young appearance, you can consider replacing the high ponytail with a hair bun, as a high ponytail is often associated with a young girl.

Although the participants will typically only be able to see your upper body in a virtual meeting, it is not unimportant if you're wearing pyjama pants and slippers. The reason for this is that your body language is to a large extent driven by sensual impulses. When you put on your professional working shoes rather than a pair of slippers, your body will subconsciously help you stay focused on being at work and doing something important. Wearing the right outfit from head to toe also gives you more flexibility and freedom to move around in front of the screen without having to worry about whether the participants find out that you're still wearing pyjama pants.

The use of means can also have a powerful effect on the energy of your meeting. For example, having a flip chart next to you that you can write on, or a poster you can point to, gives you a more dynamic and strong body language rather than just using slides and standing directly in front of the screen. You will discover that it also gives you energy, and it rubs off on your participants.

## In good or bad graces? In 90 seconds, you've been judged!

It's the small details that make the big difference. Mark Bowden, an expert in body language and a keynote speaker, claims that your participants decide whether they like you or not within the first 90 seconds of your presentation or meeting. And they make their assessment solely on the signals you send out with your body language.

In the physical meeting, we therefore always urge you to be ready as soon as the first participants step through the door 30 minutes before your meeting starts. That way you're ready to give them a warm welcome. It doesn't give a very good first impression of you as a facilitator if you're standing with your back to everyone and are setting up tables when your participants arrive. We therefore recommend that you apply the same ground rules to your virtual meetings.

In our experience, it has a positive effect to welcome virtual participants informally as they log into the meeting while having some music running in the background, for example. This makes the participants feel welcome, it can help motivate them to engage themselves more in the meeting, and you get the chance to warm up before the meeting starts.

## Increase the use of your arms and hands in virtual meetings

In the virtual meeting, your participants will typically only be able to see your upper body. This means that your bodily expressions are halved compared to when you facilitate a physical workshop. Therefore, your hands are an invaluable tool. Make sure that your hands are visible to the participants when you speak. This also applies when you welcome them. It might feel a bit awkward to physically spread out your arms to welcome them, but you should actually increase the use of your hands and arms in the virtual space.

Your hands can demonstrate both open and closed body language. You can demonstrate a clear and open body

language if you spread out your arms and leave your palms open and pointing outwards. Keeping your hands closed or hidden below screen height will have the opposite effect.

According to Mark Bowden, opening up your body language signals to your participants that you're in control. **When you open up your body language, you expose vulnerable areas of your body, and when you dare to do so, you can more easily convince your participants to lean confidently into what you have planned,** because everything is under control.

Now imagine the opposite scenario: a meeting facilitator who has his arms crossed or close to his body will appear insecure and nervous, and this rubs off on us as participants. If the facilitator himself does not believe in what he or she has planned, why should we? The same is true if, for example, you have turned off your camera to take care of the final preparations when the participants check into your meeting. It signals a closedness that can lead to your participants concluding that they don't like you rather than judging you positively within the first 90 seconds of the meeting.

### **Turn your voice up and down when you're working with energy in your meetings**

Lene Kobbarnagel, an expert in body language and author of several books on the subject, explains in her book "Op på ølkassen" (Influential Power) what she calls the "dwell-drive" technique. This technique focuses on how you can use your body language to turn the pace and energy level up or down in your meetings. In this section, we will focus on voice and tone as one of the tools you as a facilitator can use when you want to steer the process in a certain direction. Your tone of voice can be high or low, and it can be slow or fast. If you facilitate a debriefing with the participants, and you would like them to elaborate further, then you can slow down your voice and perhaps even speak a bit more quietly. Conversely,

if you feel that it is time to move forward in the process, or if you are about to explain to the participants about a group task that you would like them to engage in, it is an advantage if you turn up the pace and volume of your voice. In this case, you want to drive the participants forward in a process and provide them with good energy along the way.

### **Organise your surroundings and get more power behind your messages**

Your virtual space is more than just a screen image of you as a facilitator and the presentation on your shared screen. **Using the space strategically can help you shine even more.**

There are many companies that have developed virtual backgrounds with for example company logo. These backgrounds can be quite excellent to use if you're participating in a regular meeting where you want to camouflage the background of your home office. However, as a facilitator, we recommend that you do not use the virtual background but instead organise your surroundings, allowing you to invite working relations into your living room for a workshop.

The virtual background limits your mobility and flexibility in front of the screen, as it is best to stand in the same spot the whole time so that parts of your face or body don't become blurry. As a facilitator, you need to be able to move away from the centre of the screen where you're presenting and go to solve technical issues on your computer or write on a flip chart peripherally from the centre of the screen.

**Therefore, think about how you organise your surroundings and what visual aids you can use.** If you are used to facilitating physical workshops, you may prefer actively using flip charts in your workshops, e.g. having a nice welcome flipover on the door or writing the participants' input on a flip chart during the workshop. These are means that you can easily use in virtual meetings – albeit to a lesser extent than in physical meetings. Using flip charts to

stage the virtual space will give the participants a feeling of being welcome and that you're well prepared. Another good reason for using physical artefacts is that it can help create a better dynamic and energy in your meeting rather than in meetings where you just see a facilitator changing slides. You can have a flipover or poster with key messages hanging behind you, and you can naturally get more energy in your body language by using this mean to point to while presenting. Of course you need to be aware that what you point to is readable for your participants. If you use flips, it is therefore a good idea to write with dark colours.

The last thing that you should remember when organising your home office is to **have good lighting and raise your screen so you can facilitate your workshop standing up.** You will find that it has a huge impact on your own energy level to stand up when you facilitate your meeting, and that energy will rub off positively on your participants. When sitting down, you tend to slump, making your body language less energetic and more closed. You don't need to have your own adjustable office desk at home. You can easily make your own setup by placing your screen on a box on top of your desk.

### **Conclusion: practise, get feedback and do it again**

No one becomes a good communicator overnight. It requires many hours of training and testing in practice. In this article, we have given you five specific focus areas that you can train when you want to become an even stronger virtual communicator. If you want to work with your credibility, you should start practising by deliberately looking into the camera when you want to give the participants a feeling of making eye contact with you. When working with the energy in the meeting, you can either focus on the use of physical means that can make your body language more dynamic, or you can focus on more active use of your hands. And finally, you can work with the dwell-drive technique in your voice. Last but not least, don't forget to smile, even if you're

trying to concentrate and find it difficult. A smile goes a long way when it comes to winning the attention of your participants. We recommend that you choose one thing to practise, which you can then further develop with new techniques.

It is a good idea to utilise the virtual platform's opportunities by recording your meeting and watching it yourself afterwards – but remember to ask your participants for permission first. Most people, however, usually don't mind that a meeting is recorded if they know that it will be used for further development. A video recording is a powerful tool for identifying how you can adjust your body language to achieve the results you want. You can also invite a colleague, who is already participating in your workshop, to give you feedback afterwards. If you do, consider in advance what you'd like feedback on and ask your colleague to specifically look for these things. For example, you may want to focus on practising looking directly into the camera to build trusting relationships, or you may want to train the use of your hands. When giving concrete instructions on what you want feedback on, it is easier for you to get the feedback you need on the areas you want to develop.

As you begin to test some of the techniques you've been presented with in this article, we recommend that you **start small and expand** as you improve. Start by practising one area for the next three meetings, and when you think that you have improved in that area, you can bring a new technique into play. **When changing habits, which happens quite frequently when working with body language, you need to make the goal easy and manageable to achieve,** and you must try to remove any potential barriers standing in the way of your success.

If, in your next meeting, you have ambitions to test everything you have learnt in this article, it would be both an unmanageable and non-specific plan. Therefore, pick out one thing, practise it, get feedback and try again. When learning new things, it's like being on shaky ground, and that's perfectly okay. It should feel a bit

**”THEREFORE, PICK OUT ONE THING, PRACTISE IT, GET FEEDBACK AND TRY AGAIN.**

barrier-breaking to train new skills, and to help you on your way to making this a successful and barrier-breaking process, you need to put an end to the idea that your meeting will only be successful if it is completely flawless.

There is no such thing as the perfect virtual meeting. Neither is there a perfect physical meeting. In physical meetings, a flip chart stand may be standing in your way, and in virtual meetings, you may have technical issues. Unpredictable things happen to all of us. **Believe in yourself, be transparent when things happen and make sure to have a strategy for how to handle different scenarios.** In our experience, the small bumps on the road have minimal impact on the effect of your meeting compared to leaving your body language at home the day you went to work.

When you take control of your virtual body language, you will discover that it is a shortcut to better and more effective interaction with your participants.

**FIVE THINGS YOU CAN PRACTISE:**

1. Look into the camera when you speak. It increases your credibility.
2. Use physical means, such as a flipover or a poster when facilitating. It creates more energy in your body language.
3. Smile – you’re on camera!
4. Use your hands actively to demonstrate your points.
5. Practise the different nuances and energy levels in your tone of voice.

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