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CONNECTING OVER VIDEO

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This month's coaching conversation is with a leader who wants to keep strong connections despite the quarantine. She and Tom explore the barriers that make connecting over video so difficult.

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Video exposure

Greta was beaming. In the middle of our Zoom coaching conversation, her 10-year-old daughter had come in asking for something. They had spoken in German (Greta lived in Switzerland). I had no idea what they had said, but the exchange had been sweet to watch. Greta had rubbed the girl's cheek affectionately as they spoke. There was an ease and comfort between them.

Before the daughter turned to go, I called hello and waved. She smiled and waved back. Then she went. And Greta beamed.

Then her smile changed. She said, "I was on the phone with a colleague in Germany the other day. Just the phone. No video. She's got two small kids at home and one of them burst into the room during the call. She lashed out at that kid. 'I'm on the phone! You can't come in here!' I got really embarrassed for her." Greta held up



Video exposes all of us, myself included.

her hands in surrender. "But I understand. Everybody's crazy. Who can be sane in the midst of all this?"

I nodded sadly.

"Video exposes all of us, myself included." She laughed and waved at the room



behind her, saying, “I’m doing business from my bedroom. My whole team has seen my bedroom. Not that I don’t like my bedroom. I do! But I don’t usually invite my team here for meetings!”

I laughed. “I bet it keeps the laundry off the floor!”

“Thank god we have big closets!” she laughed back. “But all of us are seeing each other in new ways, aren’t we? Seeing each other’s homes. Seeing each other’s families.”

“How is that for you?” I asked.

“I like it. I’ve always appreciated differences. Do you know the StrengthsFinder assessment?”

“Sure,” I said.

“One reason I think it was so popular was that it promoted this idea that everyone has strengths. And theirs are different from yours. To me, that was a big ‘duh!’ I’ve *always* looked at people that way, seeing their differences. Well, this is that in spades, isn’t it? We are all seeing each other at our most individual. For better and for worse.”

“Like me seeing you with your daughter. It was sweet. And something I would never have seen otherwise.”

She nodded and gave a big sigh. “It was hard for us to work out the rules about how we were all going to live together 24 hours a day. We had three big sit-down conversations about it before everyone was happy. I’m just glad my girls are old enough so we can hash it out with them. But my co-worker with the two little kids? She can’t negotiate with them. They’re too little. And there’s no babysitter to hand them to. She’s really stuck. I feel badly for people like her.”

I waited, interested to see where she’d go next.

Vicious little camera

She pointed at her camera, saying, “This little thing is vicious, you know. I used to think I was pretty good with video. You know how global we are, Tom. I did video meetings from our conference rooms all the time. But this is nothing like that!”



“How not?” I asked.

“Distance, to start with,” she said. She gestured towards my image on her screen. “I’m seeing your face so close up. Do you know how close we’d have to sit for me to see you in this kind of detail? Too close!”

I laughed. “It does put us close together.”

“And it’s intense,” she said. “As big an extrovert as I am, feeling so close to people all day long is exhausting.”

I rolled my chair back just a few inches. “Would this be more comfortable for you?”

She took her time, really looking. Then she nodded, “I think it would.” She scooted her own chair back. “Is this better for *you*?”

“Actually, no, I prefer you close up.”

“It doesn’t get too intense for you?” she asked, scooting back in.

“Sometimes. When it does, I ask the other person to move away a little.”

“You do?”

“Sure,” I said. “Why not? We’re all figuring out this whole video thing together.”

“Ain’t that the case? You know what I’ve been noticing? How do I want to look when we’re all reduced to those little Brady Bunch windows.”

“What have you decided?”

“In a thumbnail, it’s better to sit closer to the lens. I just never know how people set up their screens. I don’t know if I’m a thumbnail or not!”

“In general, thumbnail or not, how are your people looking on camera?”



She shrugged. “They look okay, I suppose. Well, no, some don’t. That’s what’s so different from those video conferences. The ‘video’ part wasn’t that important. It was usually a big wide shot of the whole conference room and the people looked like bugs. Who cared how people looked? Not anymore! We’re stars on our own screens.”

I draped my hand under my chin, tilted my head and said huskily, “I’m ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille.”

She laughed. “What were you thinking when you asked about how people looked on camera?”

The Four “Musts”

“I was thinking cinematically. Angle. Lighting. Background. Those are the three big things that can help you connect on video. Oh, and sound. Four things.”

She asked, “Oh! Angle! Have you seen people who use their phone and put it down on a table? You end up looking up their nose. Or they’re nothing but chin and neck.”

I smiled. “A lot of ceiling, too!”

She laughed, then reached towards her own camera. “I’ve been wondering, is my camera up too high? Sometimes I feel like I might get a crick.”

“You’re fairly close to level, Greta. That’s the ideal. Eyes level to the lens. Yours isn’t bad.”

She said. “You have a high-def camera, don’t you?”

“I do. I think it makes a big difference. The image is always sharp and the ratio is more realistic.”

“Ratio?” she asked.

“How the camera sees. Some cameras have a fish-eye feel to them. That won’t happen in high-def. And they’re



Who cared how people looked? Not anymore! We’re stars on our own screens.



so cheap now. But!” I held up a finger. “You gotta, just gotta, have lighting. If you don’t have lighting, it doesn’t matter what angle your camera is at!”

Front light

Her eyes flitted above her computer and she smiled at what she saw. “I love the light in this room. Does it look okay?”

“Yes. Where you’re sitting, with that window in front of you, there’s a lot of front light. That’s what we need to see each other. Front light. Every now and then, the reflection in your glasses blocks me from seeing your eyes. But, yes, I love how well you’re lit.”



That’s what we
need to see
each other.
Front light.

“Should I take them off?” she asked.

“If it was constant, I’d say yes. But yours only flash now and then. I’d say leave them on.”

She pursed her lips. “One woman on my team is always in shadow. She may not know it, but it’s literally as if she is making herself disappear. It’s hard to connect with her if I can’t see her face.”

I nodded, and smiled. “Young actors in the theatre are always being told, ‘Find your light.’ And when they ask why, the answer is, ‘You have to get light on your face if you want the audience to hear you.’”

“To see you, you mean,” she corrected.

“No, to hear you! That’s what actors learn. It is amazing, Greta, I have seen it over and over and over. If people can’t see you well, they won’t hear you well. It was always true in theatre. And I think it’s true on video, too. Your experience with that woman in shadow is the perfect example. Get light on your face from the front or people won’t hear you.”

“You know another place I like seeing light?” she said. “The background. When there’s a dark hallway or something behind the person, it has a little horror in it.”

“Background,” I said. “That’s one of my four, right?”



The back of your head

“Backgrounds can be so distracting! I ought to know. When this shelter-at-home first started, and I began using this room as my office, I had a big potted plant coming out of the back of my head. I looked ridiculous. I had to move the plant to the other corner. I think it’s going to die over there, but it couldn’t stay where it was.”

“I’m glad you noticed,” I said. “Do you see backgrounds that are brightly lit windows?”

“Not on my team, but someone I talk with in Chicago sits in front of a big window. I can’t ever see his face because the lens shuts down. He’s always in silhouette. It makes it hard to connect to him.”

“Another version of disappearing,” I said.

In a different tone, she said. “The last item on your list was sound. I don’t know what *you* meant by sound, but can I tell you one thing? Some people have terrible microphones. Every word they say is just a little distorted. Or they’re hard to hear, like they’re in another room but they’re sitting right there.”

“All of which gets solved with a headset,” I said with a shrug. I wore one. She did not.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m shouting,” she said. “A headset would take care of that, right?”

“Absolutely,” I agreed, pointing to my lips. “Having a microphone right here is like having your ear right here. I can talk much more naturally when I don’t have to shout.”

“Easier to connect!” Then, tousling her head, she said, “I’ll have to wrestle with my hair, or find better ear buds, but you’ve convinced me on this one.” Then, with new energy, she asked, “You know a big barrier I’m finding these days?”

“What?” I answered.

Content in pieces

“Attention span. In our old video meetings – and we used to have a ton of them – you learned to listen for long periods, you’d follow along and save your questions. But listening is a lot harder on these video calls. I’m not sure why.”



“How do you handle that?” I asked.

“I change things up every five minutes or so. It’s a pain in the ass to do it, but I do. Otherwise people drift off. Especially if they’re staring at a gallery of tiny faces. It’s so easy to stop listening. You’ve got to break content into little pieces.”

“Little pieces? What does that look like?” I asked.

“If someone is presenting – explaining a slide, let’s say – stop and ask for questions at least every five minutes. Don’t let anyone lecture. Break it up. Do a poll. Ask people to answer a question in the chat. Something.”

“Chat questions. Polls. I love all those tools.”

She said, “Staying connected is the whole point here, right? Because connecting on video is hard. If things like lighting and background make connection easier, you bet. Sign me up!”

The next time I saw Greta, she had a high-definition camera and earbuds. And she’d talked with her team about angles, lighting, background and sound. She knew her team’s ability to create connections over video was crucial to their display of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.

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Core Concepts:

- Video exposes us all. Be aware: you're on camera
- Connecting over video has inherent barriers
- Use every tool available to connect more easily
- Pay particular attention to lighting and background
- If you lead video meetings, break up the delivery frequently

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