Eight Problems with Video Conferencing and Four Simple Recommendations

Okay, so Zoom, and all the other types of video communication like it, are part of our culture in ways that we couldn't quite imagine four years ago. Do we really need to talk about that anymore?

The answer is 'probably.' That's because it often takes us a while to fully digest a phenomenon and step back far enough from it to understand the good, the bad, and the ugly of it all. And that is certainly true about Zoom.

If you have been living with Zoom, it may be time to discuss its impact on your team and your meetings.

Without further ado, here are eight big problems associated with using Zoom:

1. The Peripheral Vision Problem

For years, we went to in-person meetings and had to turn our heads to focus on someone who was talking, and if they weren't talking, we took in whatever they were doing with our peripheral vision. Someone's quirks and habits, often things that make people interesting and delightful, are rarely distracting in person. On Zoom, these idiosyncrasies can be distracting and annoying. Jackie checks her hair, Carrie's laugh is infectious, and Beau eats constantly. The things that are benign in person are distracting on video. With Zoom, we can see what our peers are doing with an imperceptible movement of our eyes. This is unprecedented in the development of human interaction. How often do we stare at someone, or worse yet, a collection of someones, and have to digest their every action and facial movement? Never. And yet, we do it on Zoom calls for an hour at a time, and wonder why we are distracted, or even annoyed.

2. The Mirror Problem

Imagine that as you arrived at an in-person meeting, someone handed you a mirror so that you could constantly see yourself during the meeting, at eye level, with how you were looking at everyone else. That would be crazy. Regardless of whether it provoked feelings of inadequacy or narcissism, or something in between, it would be wildly distracting and unproductive. And, yet, we do it on virtually every Zoom call we have.

3. Intolerance of Silence Problem

Virtual meetings often highlight a unique challenge—the discomfort with silence. In face-to-face interactions, moments of silence can be natural and allow participants to gather their thoughts, process information, or simply absorb the content of the discussion. However, in the virtual setting, awkward pauses tend to make people uneasy, prompting them to fill the void with unnecessary or meaningless chatter.

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4. **The Voice Problem**

I have a pretty good idea of what I sound like in a regular conversation, and it sounds nothing like I sound during Zoom calls. My voice tends to go a little higher, much louder, and carries a certain level of "formality" that I would never choose on my own. It's as though I believe everyone on the call with me is a little deaf and a little slow. I know they don't like it because I don't like it when they do the same to me. And I'm guessing it's no one's intention, and yet it is undeniable that it changes the nature of video conversations.

5. **The Politeness Problem**

Beyond the idea that our conversational voices change during Zoom calls, the timing and dynamics of our conversations may be a bigger problem, but in an ironic way. As rude as interrupting and speaking over one another may seem in theory, a natural and effective conversation involves both of those dynamics. It is the nature of good interpersonal discussions that we don't have to wait for someone to completely finish a sentence before we share our verbal agreement, disagreement, or even ideas. Watch for it during the next meeting you attend. Unless it's done in a blatantly disruptive way, it is quite comfortable. On Zoom, people can't really do any of that. When people talk over one another, it's hard to hear both people, leading to the "no, you go first" "no, you go first" dance. It's just awkward, and it crushes much of the benefits of quick, informal dialogue.

6. **The Application Distraction Problem**

I don't call this "computer distraction" because it's not so much that we're using our computers to do Zoom calls as it is that we receive unprompted and curiosity-inducing messages from a variety of apps that interrupt our focus and concentration during meetings. And like the peripheral problem, those distractions can be viewed with an imperceptible movement of our eyes. And even a fairly imperceptible movement of our fingers on a keyboard.

7. **The Giants Versus Ants Problem**

In some Zoom calls, a few team members are in an office while a handful of others are individually on screen. This would seem to be a negligible problem, except that it actually reduces the visibility of the people sitting in a conference room. The people who are in person look tiny compared to the big faces projected virtually, and those big faces who are eating, drinking, or looking off-screen, for example, are magnified and can be distracting.

8. **The Abrupt Ending Problem**

Meetings in person have the benefit of immediate connection and debrief after. We may linger for a minute or walk to the break room together for another cup of coffee. These little moments help us feel connected, especially if we had any conflict in the meeting. On Zoom, we hit "leave meeting" and lose the valuable transition time between meetings, providing little room for the organic and essential follow-up conversations crucial for team cohesion.

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The Ramifications

Okay, so what's the big deal here? Does all of this really cause any issues, or is it merely a minor inconvenience? Based on my own experience and the comments of others who have over-indulged in Zoom during these past four years, I'm convinced that the ramifications are quite real when compared to in-person meetings. They include:

- Increased exhaustion
- Avoidance of conflict
- Exaggerated annoyance
- Lack of vulnerability
- Interpersonal misunderstanding
- Diminished participation among some participants

Even one of those would be enough to provoke action, but the entirety presents a significant social, cultural, and productivity challenge.

And while it would be unrealistic and unwise to try to eliminate all of those issues—after all, video conferencing has many benefits—below are four suggestions that could mitigate some of them.

Tips

First, whenever collaboration and innovation are necessary, try to get into the same room and work together. A little inconvenience is worth the lasting impact of in-person interaction. I think we've become complacent about the serious benefits of natural, face-to-face communication.

Second, and this one is ironic, choose to have more phone conferences instead of Zoom calls, when there is no real benefit to being able to see one another. Just as radio is sometimes a preferable medium to television for certain types of programming, good old-fashioned conference calls can be more effective, less intrusive, and less exhausting than video.

Third, when some people are in the same room and a handful are remote, get everyone to do the meeting from their own computer. Make it an even playing field, and avoid the awkwardness of trying to integrate two completely different types of interaction.

Fourth, have a good conversation, maybe two, about the limitations of Zoom calls. Discuss the real and often humorous annoyances of the problems described above. It will allow participants to take extra steps to ensure that there is more focus and fewer distractions.