

# Reflections from the Zoom screen

DEEPTI GANAPATHY

Last year, when B-schools took their classes online after the pandemic, I thought deeply about how to make a course such as Business Communication relevant and relatable to my students.

Some of them came with a few years of work experience, while others were fresh graduates with no experience in the real business world. The rapid shift of businesses and educational institutes to online platforms such as MS Teams and Zoom was largely to ensure that business continuity plans were in place and learning was uninterrupted.

There are several lessons in communicating ably that both business heads and course instructors can reflect upon.

Here are three lessons I learnt from the process:

## I see myself as a co-facilitator

The ability to bring guests from across the world, from different time zones, from middle-level to senior management, is one of the splendid benefits of an online live classroom. I have been able to bring the world into my classroom.

The pandemic has created a need

for people to keep themselves gainfully occupied and work through different time zones to keep their mental and physical well-being. I had MDs and CEOs beam live into my classroom eager to share their experiences of communicating in a virtual setting.

I reached out to my old students, who were now vociferously using the learnings from my classroom in a “work-from-home” situation. They spoke to my class about the course being a key competency sought in the world outside and how critical it had become to communicate effectively while working remotely to get work done.

To get the class to interact meaningfully with these guests, I asked the practitioners from the industry to record a 2-3 minute video of what they intended to speak, which was based on my detailed inputs and had a bearing on what the class had learned the previous week.

This video was uploaded on the Learning Management System and a discussion forum was created for students to comment and post their questions. When the guest actually joined the class, the students were well prepared to interact and engage.



From my interactions with the industry, I see many leaders trying to co-create the content in their meetings instead of making the communication process a one-way dialogue.

They have realised that in a virtual setting, they need to keep the communication crisp and clear while encouraging conversations. This reduces screen time fatigue and ensures optimal use of meetings and time.

## Effective communication

Ironically, technology has not simplified communication. With so many channels opening up, communication has spiralled into meaningless sounds and distractions.

With the online mode, we put in more hours and effort to communicate.

Unfortunately, the pandemic has led to many families losing their loved ones. This, coupled with a state of uncertainty and gloom, has disrupted the mental and

emotional well-being of many.

This then puts the onus on the faculty member and the manager at work to become aware of the psychological barriers in the communication process.

When students and employees go through disruptions such as travel, following Covid protocols like home quarantine, it becomes imperative to reach out to them and make room for contingencies.

A senior executive at a large family-run manufacturing firm tells me how ‘Madam Chairman’ was also meeting employees and their families over virtual interactions along with the chairman, to constantly give moral support to employees and families scattered all over the globe.

“We are certainly over-communicating, a practice which our top management has never followed before,” he observes. New employees have been joining remotely and, in such situations, they can feel jittery if they don’t hear from their boss for even a couple of days and tend to communicate more fervently in order to prove themselves in the new set-up.

## I value my nonverbal cues

Heightened use of nonverbal cues is paramount to emphasise one’s expressions.

Cadence, quality of voice modulations, micro-expressions and eye movement are under immense scrutiny.

Subtle nonverbal cues such as showing annoyance, sarcasm, etc which would often go unnoticed in a face-to-face meeting, since they can occur in microseconds are now caught by the camera and therefore present for all to see.

People from countries and cultures where nonverbal communication is valued continue to exude confidence and show dominance when it comes to how they communicate in a virtual set-up. The attention given to backgrounds, choice of clothing, objects on the desk, painting/mural behind the speaker and finally the posture and body language are subtle, yet powerful elements that shape the outcome towards the speaker and what they intend to gain from the communication effort.

If students and employees take this opportunity to reflect, refine and reposition their communication efforts using the medium that has been afforded to them, they might end up benefiting in the long run and use these learnings to match the medium to the message.

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