

# FIVE TIPS TO MAKE A REAL CONNECTION IN CYBERSPACE

By Nico Human, Ph. D.

We don't hear properly in cyberspace. We only hear the speaker. Ambient noises—those clues to us as to what is going on in the room, that connection to others in the room—are lost. When you are the speaker in a physical space, you are supported by the audience. You feel and hear their participation. Small sounds (like a groan, a soft “Yes” or a ripple of gentle laughter) give you instant feedback.

In cyberspace, all you have is the faces on the screen and the deadly silence.

To overcome this, we all need to be the best we can be on screen. We need to show what we experience. Here are some tips to help you connect:

1. **Use all your screen real estate.** Others need to be able to see you from the top of your head to half way down your torso, filling your screen. Further away, your expressions cannot be seen. If you sit closer, your hand gestures are lost. You need light on your face. No backlight. No distracting virtual backgrounds, just a neat, quiet scene behind you. Fill your screen with your smiling face. Learn to use your hands more.
2. **Face the camera straight on with the lens at the height of your eyes.** Make sure you don't look down or up to it. To accomplish this, you can lift your computer (a standing desk works well; my first workstation was simply my laptop on top of some boxes), or you can buy a simple USB webcam for about \$30 which you can place higher, perhaps on top of a secondary screen.
3. **Master virtual eye contact.** It is quite different from regular eye contact. It is not about how you are feeling, it is what the others on the call will experience. When you want to make eye contact with a specific person, our natural tendency is to look at that person where we see them on the Brady bunch screen. To us it then feels like we are making eye contact with that person. For the person it feels like the opposite. To make them feel like you are making eye contact, look straight into the camera when you address them. A handy technique to make this look more natural is to follow the same approach we use when addressing a physical audience where we scan the room to the left and then to the right, constantly making eye contact with individuals to connect with them and to see how our message is received. In the virtual room I scan through the faces on the screen but include the lens of the camera as one of the “persons” in the room. So I'll scan through the faces to the left, look at the camera for a second, scan to the right, look to the camera for a second, etc. This way you can get visual clues as to how the message is landing, whilst still giving audience members the same sense that you “see” them.

When you make a point, you can drive it home by leaning forward and looking straight into the camera lens for a second to allow it to sink in.

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4. **Convey what you feel and experience.** In physical space the speaker can “read” our emotions and feelings. In cyberspace the onus is on us to support whoever is speaking by showing what we feel, by actively giving feedback. It feels a bit like a performance at first, but we need to be about 25% more expressive than what we normally are so that others on screen can read us better. Use your hands more. Be a bit more expressive showing your emotions. An opportunity is to learn from the deaf and use sign language. [Silent applause](#) is much more effective than mimicking regular applause (which is totally ineffective in cyberspace). You can [encourage](#) others silently while they speak. A thumbs up on screen works well, or you can use one of the emoticons that your platform supplies. The point is that the onus is on you to convey these feelings in support of the speaker whenever you feel them. You cannot, like in physical space, expect that they can “read” you and what you experience. You have to show it.
5. **Bring energy.** Sitting quietly in your little box on the screen with an expressionless face feels like a total disconnect to others. Instead, participate with facial expressions, hand gestures and moving around a bit when you speak. Show support of the others. Use eye contact. Lean in to the camera for a second when you are making a point. It has also really helped me to up my energy to use a standing desk when I present.

Hopefully these tips will be helpful.

See you in cyberspace! Let’s all connect better there.