

## **Cameras On: Why You Should Reconsider Your Company's Video Call Policy**

### **By: Stephanie Lang**

Since the pandemic, some companies have replaced phone calls with video calls, requiring their employees to have their video cameras on for every call. Video calls are great for an introductory meeting when working with someone for the first time. But video calls for every meeting seems overkill. These companies have assumed video calls are superior to phone calls and act as an equivalent replacement to in-person meetings. I think these companies have made, consciously or subconsciously, a poor decision about the role and importance of video calls in our work environment because they didn't ask the right questions and/or challenge their assumptions.

In the book, *Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work*, authors Chip and Dan Heath talk about how our brains naturally get disrupted by an array of biases and irrationalities when making decisions, and how we can use techniques to make better quality decisions. If these companies had used two of the Heath brothers' principles when considering the use of audio vs. video calls, I believe they would often have arrived at a different conclusion. The two principles are "Find someone who's solved your problem" and "Reality test your assumptions."

### **Find Someone Who's Solved Your Problem**

When companies transitioned to a remote workforce, it seemed like they approached it from a narrow frame of view: this transition is brand new for our company and we need to make our remote workforce policies on our own. My question to these companies is: Did you find other companies that have been remote prior to the pandemic and did you talk to them? Have you considered the following questions:

- How did pre-pandemic remote teams hold their meetings?
- How did they facilitate connection?
- How did they encourage trust?

I will answer the above questions from my personal experience. I worked for two remote companies and two geographically dispersed companies prior to the pandemic. Although Zoom and Skype video call technology existed, we never used video calls because the benefits did not outweigh the costs.

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*What companies were remote prior to the pandemic? How did they have their meetings? How did they facilitate connection? How did they encourage trust?*

## On the Topic of Virtual Meetings

I worked for the software start-up, Vocado, between 2013 and 2015. I was on the Product Management team. We were a fully remote company and we conducted our calls via Skype. We never had our video on.

The people on this team lived technology. The majority of this team had worked together at Deloitte in the Business Technology Consulting sector. They were artificial intelligence, computer science, and information systems graduates from Stanford and UC Berkeley. They were the first adopters of new technology, the first to read Steve Jobs biography, the first to try a new app and share their thoughts. The one technology they did not adopt was video calls.

In August 2014, we had one team meeting where, for fun, one person tried to encourage others to turn on their video. The rest of the team, myself included, refused and did not feel comfortable doing so. We joined the technology start-up culture so we could be comfortable when we worked (wear sweats, no make-up, from the privacy of our own home.) For our team, it felt like an invasion of privacy having others looking into our home environment. Also, many of my teammates had roommates and having cameras on would have negatively impacted their roommate relationships. The team never talked about turning on cameras again.

This is a significant case for a several reasons:

- The team consisted of technologists. If video call technology would have helped the team's productivity, the team would have used it.
- Vocado was successful: it was acquired by Oracle in 2018. For companies that think there is a relationship between video calls and success, this experience proves the contrary. (Being acquired by Oracle was a big accomplishment.)
- The team chose to use audio over video communication in a state of peace. In the context of no pandemic, the decision was centered around individual team member's comfort and privacy.

Yet decisions during the pandemic were made quickly and seemed driven by panic:

- Some companies were fearful of losing control. They were nervous because they could no longer see their employees. They required their employees to turn on their video as a way to keep tabs.
- Some employees were fearful about losing their jobs. They felt they had to show others that they were working.

- Some team members were lonely and fearful of the new work environment. They turned to video calls as a way of feeling connected.

Making decisions from a place of fear is not a best practice. Without the pandemic, would people have made a different choice if confronted with an audio versus visual decision?

### On the Topic of Human Connection

I worked for a consulting firm between 2015 and 2016, creating sales and customer service workshops for Nissan North America dealerships. I was the junior instructional designer, working with the senior instructional designer Roberta. Since Roberta lived in Northern California and I lived in Southern California, we conducted our work through phone calls and emails.

Roberta was a great storyteller. I felt connected to her through her stories. We would hop on the call, collaborate on the project for one to two hours, and then talk. Our conversations flowed organically. Roberta was semi-retired and had a successful career, whereas I was new to the Learning and Development field. It was special to hear Roberta's wisdom about life and work. She shared what's happening at her winery, her daughter's new cocktail bar in San Francisco, how she met her husband (*inspirational because I was dating at the time, which was tough*), and more. She also shared how she entered the training field, the importance of putting a change order clause in an instructional design contract, and choosing what kind of work-life you want. (A number of her friends from business school worked for global consulting firms and lived a very different lifestyle.)

If Roberta and I conducted our work on video calls, I don't think we would have openly shared stories. After looking at a computer for two hours, we'd probably want to step away from our screens and end the call. I also don't think I'd remember all the stories she shared many years later. Because I wasn't in front of a screen, I could actively listen, internalize, and visualize her stories. (She once shared a story about her friend going to Stanford for medical treatment and walking around Palo Alto. I remember visualizing downtown Palo Alto in my head.)

Providing an opportunity for people to let their guard down and openly share their stories creates an opportunity for connection. I don't think seeing people on video automatically creates connection and I don't think companies prescribing how their employees meet creates connection.

## On the Topic of Trust

I worked for Toco Warranty on the Talent Development team between 2016 and 2018. The company was headquartered in Los Angeles and opened an office in Denver. I was responsible for hiring and developing the new employees and creating the talent management infrastructure to support the growing company. I was in Denver. My boss, Brandon, was in LA. We met in person once a month and conducted our communication via phone. We had a lot of trust in our work relationship, which can be attributed to a variety of factors, one of which was using the phone to communicate.

### *Good Quality Audio and Fluency Creates Trust*

The Mind and Society Center at USC Dornsife College conducted a study that produced two significant findings. First, the better the audio quality, the more likely the person will trust the source and the information. Second, fluency, the ease with which something is processed, influences trust: when something is easy to process, it creates trust (Gersema, 2018).

Since Brandon and I used phone calls to communicate, we had great audio quality and clear audio connection, which contributed to the trust I felt towards him. There was no: “are you there? ... your mouth is moving, but I can’t hear you... you cut out for the past 20 seconds, please say that again” that we have all experienced on video calls over the past couple of years.

Second, my ability to easily process our phone conversations contributed to the trust I felt towards Brandon. I process information on audio calls incredibly well. My brain is hard wired to process audio input given my background in dance, moving with music. There’s four pieces to listen for on a phone call: words, absence of words (pauses), tone, and rhythm. Through this combination of elements, I hear everything: emotion, hesitation, when someone’s thinking, the breath someone takes before they’re about to speak, when someone’s speaking authentically or when they’re faking it (just like how we can tell a fake smile.) Because I could easily process the information, I trusted Brandon and the information he shared with me.

### **Reality Test Your Assumptions**

When companies transitioned to a remote workforce, they did not *reality test their assumptions*. They assumed that video calls were more intimate and would create more connection than phone calls. However, many errors in decision making come from over relying on one’s perceptions and assumptions about audio and video calls. These companies should have gone to people who produced podcasts (audio medium) or videos (video medium) to test their assumptions.

I have produced podcasts and videos and will share my thoughts based on my experience.

## Podcasting is Considered to Be the Ultimate Intimate Medium

At another company, I produced a leadership development podcast for a leadership program. My first episode was cringy – scripted and uncomfortable to listen to. As a result, I was inspired to learn about podcasting and read Eric Nuzum’s book *Make Noise: A Creator’s Guide to Podcasting and Great Audio Storytelling*. Nuzum has developed some of NPR’s most successful podcasts including *TED Radio Hour* and *Invisibilia*.

In his book, he shares that “radio was always thought to be the ultimate intimate medium” and now, podcasting takes that title (Nuzum, 2020). With radio, the best broadcasters made it sound like they are talking directly to you. It’s a one-to-many medium that sounds like a one-to-one. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s (FDR) Fireside Chats are an example of this: families tuned into FDR’s address in their living rooms and it felt like he was personally giving them an update about the war effort in Europe. That’s intimate and Nuzum says that podcasting fosters an even more intimate connection because of the relationship between podcasting and actively listening.

When you tune into a podcast, you are prepared to actively listen. You selected the specific podcast and episode you want to listen to and so you are listening with intention and purpose. Also, because there is no visual component to the podcast, you visualize the story, creating your own production in your head, which further adds to the intimacy (Wen, 2015).

I therefore think phone calls are more intimate than video calls. I join a call with the intention to actively listen – information needs to be exchanged. Then, without the visual and auditory disruptions on video, I’m able to actively listen.

## Adding to Nuzum’s Ideas: Relaxation and Freedom

Nuzum shared why podcasting is the ultimate intimate medium. With my 20 years of dance education, I will add to the idea around the audio medium and intimacy. I have strong mind-body awareness, which comes from spending a significant part of my developmental years in the dance studio. I notice how my mind and body connect, and when my mind feels open or closed.

On a phone call, my eyes, neck, and spine are relaxed. I feel open with the person I’m talking with. I also have the freedom to move around, which contributes to the feeling of openness. This combination of relaxation and freedom makes me feel like I have an extra beat to listen and consider what the other person is saying and an extra beat to consider my response. This openness has been helpful in creating the foundation for intellectual intimacy, particularly when my colleagues and I have to navigate ideological conflict.

On a video meeting, I feel restricted. I feel the pressure to sit still and not move outside of the camera range. I was born with a fused vertebrae in my cervical spine. When I'm still for extended periods of time, my neck begins to hurt, which makes me feel agitated. (For those with chronic back pain, there is a connection between the spine and emotion.) If I'm on a video meeting and my neck pain flares up, I'm downloading what the other person's saying with the emotion of agitation. This results in me feeling less open to hearing the other person.

I have the most sincere and empathetic conversations with my coworkers when we're talking in person, on the phone, or on Zoom without the camera function. I recognize that technology is not universal and people may feel connected with others using technology in different ways. I encourage you to think about how you feel most connected to your colleagues and talk with others to see how they feel.

## **Conclusion**

In regard to companies that have implemented the policy that employees must have their video camera on for every call, I think these companies made a poor decision about the role and importance of video calls in our work environment. It seems that these companies did not consult with pre-pandemic remote companies about their communication technology best practices or test their assumption about the intimacy of video calls.

When a company establishes and enforces a policy like "cameras on" for all meetings, it narrows the spectrum of who can be successful at the company. Video calls work well for people who can cognitively process information well through this medium and who are fully able to work on a computer for eight or more hours a day. However, this policy may be harmful to:

- People who kinesthetically process information.
- People who are on the autistim spectrum. (Read [What Zoom Fatigue Feels Like When You're Autistic](#) by Jae L.)
- People who do not cognitively process information well on video calls. The number of distractions on video calls can impact people's ability to actively listen and remember the information (Lang, 2022).
- People who have computer work-related injuries. Health professionals have recommended taking fewer video calls as a way to preventing computer-related injuries from flaring up (Lang & Walley, 2020).

By not requiring employees to have their “cameras on” for every meeting, you are honoring the various cognitive processing styles and physical abilities of your workforce. This will allow all employees to show up and contribute fully in their roles.

### **Recommendations for Leadership**

- 1. Dialogue and listen to your team** – Your employees are the people that get the work done and they are each their own authority on how they do their best work. Encourage them to choose the technology and team meeting norms that serve them.
- 2. Invest in ergonomic workstations** – Provide the opportunity for team members to consult with an ergonomic specialist and ensure that employees have an ergonomic workstation.

In 2020 to 2021, there were record number of computer work-related injuries. With the increased workload that’s being done on the computer, plus Gen Z entering the workforce, I believe we’re going to see an increase in computer related injuries in the coming years.

- 3. Ask team members if they want to try a walking meeting** – Walking meetings may benefit the kinesthetic processor and those who experience computer work-related injuries.

In the Covid and post-Covid era, the kinesthetic processor was ignored and forgotten about. Help them feel the energy again by asking them if they want to take a walking meeting. They will appreciate you for it.

For those with computer work-related injuries, a key part of healing and prevention is getting out of the computer work position. By taking a walking meeting, one allows their body to rest and re-set (Lang & Walley, 2020).

- 4. Ensure equitable access to technology** – Team members live in different areas with different access to technology. Ensure that team members are able to access and use the various communication technologies so that they can communicate with the team.

## Resources

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