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LIFE & STYLE

Do You Have E-Charisma on Zoom? Here's How to Get It

The flair and charm that works for in-person meetings doesn't come across the same way on a video chat; 'E-charisma involves a completely different set of skills'



ILLUSTRATION: ALEX NABAUM

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With the rise of working from home, some people accustomed to using their charisma in person have learned a tough lesson: Commanding a room isn't the same thing as commanding a Zoom.

It comes down to "E-charisma."

In face-to-face meetings, physical charisma often goes a long way in helping someone get noticed and advance in their career. More reserved or shy types are often at a disadvantage. But physical charisma can be more challenging to replicate online—creating a potentially different pecking order.

“E-charisma involves a completely different set of skills and attributes than does P-charisma,” says Leigh Thompson, a professor of management & organizations at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, who addresses the issue in her latest book, “Negotiating the Sweet Spot: The Art of Leaving Nothing on the Table.”

In person, charismatic people could get away without saying much of substance because of all the other visual stimuli those around them were taking in, such as the way they stood (confidently) or moved (gracefully) or dressed (with flair). Online, with fewer physical cues, what people are saying or writing takes on more weight, academics and career advisers say.

After months of working from home, many people may not realize they’ve been getting E-charisma wrong. Fortunately, it can be learned. Here are some tips from experts.

Zoom In to Stand Out

Stage presence is part of what it takes to be charismatic in person. To achieve that on video meetings, you should make sure your face takes up at least a third of the screen.

“Ideally you’re in the middle of that screen, so you want to be close enough where there’s just a little space between the top of your head and the top of that frame,” says Robert Chen, a partner at business communication skills consulting firm Exec-Comm and a managerial communication lecturer at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. “It’s taking up your space in the frame just like you would take up space at the table if you were live.”

Also make sure you are well-lit, with a desk lamp or ring light, so your image looks brighter.

Nod More—Smile More

In video meetings, whether you’re the host or a participant, use nonverbal energy like nodding to show that you’re engaged, says New York-based executive coach Ora Shtull. “When we are in person, we use a lot of vocal cues like ‘uh-huh.’ It’s difficult to do that on video,” she says, noting it can cause annoying effects in a large meeting.

Those who tend to be more expressive with their hands should move the laptop back enough to demonstrate engagement in the conversation when listening, or to “make your

words come alive” when speaking, Ms. Shtull says.

A smile does wonders in communicating charisma, she says. A simple, warm smile (without teeth showing) should do the trick most of the time when others are speaking, and a broader smile when someone on the call makes a joke. Otherwise try to look thoughtful in the most natural way you can, without looking stuffy.

Avoid a negative “resting face” and don’t slouch as you listen—telltale signs of weak charisma.

Use Your Voice

The guy whose voice booms in person might sound less commanding on video or mobile phone calls because of poor Wi-Fi connections and other electronic distortion. Consider investing in high-quality microphones and headphones so that nuances and rhythms in your voice aren’t lost.

Slowing down speech and articulating can also help ensure you come across as confident, clear and charismatic, says Rosario Signorello, phonetician and voice scientist at Laboratoire de Phonétique et Phonologie at Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle and CNRS in Paris.

Vary your pitch and speech patterns to emphasize points and make the conversation more engaging, says Dr. Signorello, who has led studies that examine the voice’s role in the charisma of public figures giving speeches. If you’re reading from notes, try to vary your voice so it doesn’t come off as robotic.

Remember to come to full stops when making points so that it doesn’t sound like an oblivious stream of consciousness.

And take a longer pause than usual to signal that it’s another person’s turn to talk, Dr. Signorello advises.

Make Eye Contact

It can be challenging to master eye contact on video calls, with so many places on the screen for the eyes to go. “In order to connect and engage in this virtual world, you have to look at the camera, as opposed to people on the screen,” says Mr. Chen of Exec-Comm. Ideally, position the camera at eye level. That may mean you need to elevate your computer so you are looking at the camera lens or the top third of the screen.

When delivering prepared remarks, have quick notes or outlines with key words you can glance at rather than reading the full speech.

If it's a smaller meeting where you need to interact more, it's OK to look at the people on the screen. “Just look at one person or one pair of eyes,” Mr. Chen says. This gives the illusion of intimacy and helps you appear to be a good listener—a mark of charisma.

Create Space for Others

In person you can use gestures and posture to cue another participant to speak, but those signals are often hard to discern online. When it is your turn to talk in a video meeting, one way to display that charisma is opening with an acknowledgment of what the previous speaker said, Ms. Shtull says.

Paraphrase or say something like, “Cheryl, I hear what you're saying,” before diving into your own remarks. Or ask questions to show that you care how others feel about what's being discussed.

Other tricks to invite others to engage include using metaphors, asking rhetorical questions and listing points in threes, says John Antonakis, professor of organizational behavior at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland and a leading researcher on charisma and leadership.

“Three is like a magic number because three is easy to remember, three gives an impression of completeness and three sounds nice,” he says. Recently published research he co-authored examines how the personal charisma of informal leaders can have an impact via media, in TED Talk videos and Twitter posts.

Speaking for short bursts of time, then pausing, helps signal that there is give and take during the conversation. Direct a question to a specific person when you finish your

thought—“What do you think, George?”—to make it personal. It’s a mark of the spotlight-sharing that charismatic people do so well.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What is your experience with video meetings vs. in-person meetings? Join the conversation below.

Watch Your Words (and Tone)

The decline of in-person meetings has also increased the importance of email, texts and social media. “The people who got along with physical charisma and style in the pre-Covid era really need to work on their substance game because we’re being more sized up for substance in the virtual era whether we realize it or not,” says Dr. Thompson of the Kellogg School of Management.

In email, it’s important to make the tone conversational. Personalize as much as possible. “People tend to perk up when you talk about them,” and charismatic people tend to boost other people, says Vanessa Bohns, associate professor of organizational behavior at Cornell University’s ILR School, [who has studied charisma in emails vs. face-to face interactions](#).

On social media, keep the tone upbeat, says Aliza Licht, founder and president of Leave Your Mark LLC, a brand marketing and digital strategy consulting firm. Show glimpses of your personal life but “read the room,” says Ms. Licht, who has more than 20,000 followers on Twitter. Now is not the time to show off anything ridiculously expensive or indulgent on social media.

Commenting on others’ posts is a way to show charisma, Ms. Licht says. “It’s also a way that I recommend networking right now,” she says. “You can email someone and say ‘Hi, how are you?’ but it’s much easier to just pop up in someone’s comments and say something positive or amplify their content or their post. That is a great way to keep your name top of mind.”

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