



Designing people strategies based on human instincts

Let's Face It

There's a key reason why Zoom is useful during lockdown – humans read faces. But the significance of 'face' also explains the struggles we experience with video conferencing.

'Face' plays a key role in our social interactions for two reasons: our face identifies us as an individual, and we read other people's emotions by reading their face. But when we work from home and interact mainly by video conferencing, human nature means that we tend to have to work harder to pick up the social information we usually have when we meet and work with people in-person. It means that people find a long Zoom meeting more tiring than live meetings.

Individual Identity

Because humans identify each other from the face, there is incredible variation in human faces. Not many animals use the face as their way of identifying each other. My wife, Jude and I have visited penguin colonies with up to 600,000 adult penguins raising their chicks in the short Antarctic summer. All adult penguins of a species look alike, probably even to other penguins. And all chicks of a species look the same. That's not a problem, because penguins use vocalisations to identify each other. An adult penguin coming back from the sea with a belly full of fish needs to identify its chick. They won't hand over the food – regurgitate – to another adult's chick. The chirp of the chick and the squawk of the parents are imprinted on each other the moment the chick emerges from its shell. An adult and its chick trying to find each other amongst thousands of fast-growing, mobile chicks is a time-consuming and noisy business.

Our face-identity system is the reason why when we meet people in-person after we have been communicating at a distance, we'll say in greeting, "It's great to finally put a face to a name!"

Reading Other People

As well as using face to identify individuals, we use face to try to read what other people are thinking and feeling. To help us with reading others, our faces are particularly expressive. As against the sharp beak of a penguin or the snout of dog, our faces are flat which makes them very expressive. We have 43 muscles in our face, so we're capable of both large and micro expressions that convey information – our muscle movements can make 3,000 meaningful expressions (from the work of Ekman and Friesen). And of the approximately 250 primates, we're the only one with white eyes (sclera). That also makes our faces very expressive.

While we aren't perfect readers of faces, we tend to be quite accomplished. It's an important way for us to determine how someone else is thinking and feeling and what their motivations might be. This is important social information. More often than not, how the other person feels is written on their face.

Masking Emotions

Of course, we sometimes try to mask our feelings – to keep a poker-face. Masking our emotions can be for sensible social reasons, such as being careful not to signal negative information that might harm a relationship. Leaders walk a delicate line on expressing versus masking feelings. It's hard for people to work for an emotional iceberg. One leader I worked for was particularly hard to read – at times I thought he would be happy with something I'd contributed, but he didn't give any signal. And there were times I intuited he wasn't happy, but he wasn't showing his feelings. By masking his emotions, I had to work hard to try to read him.

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Making the Most of Zoom

Operating in lockdown would be much harder if we didn't have the visual tools – and of course the visual tools have a commercial market because we are face-readers. But there are unnatural elements that create challenges with video conferencing. In making the best use of Zoom, Skype and Teams while working remotely, there are a few things to bear in mind:

First, because of the significance of face, many people are uncomfortable about seeing themselves on screen – generally we only look at ourselves in a mirror to groom. And we never look at ourselves when sitting around a table for an hour or more in a meeting!

Second, many laptops and tablets make it even harder to see ourselves because of the position of the camera – a position that gives a weird angle to the picture and hence to our face! Don't be surprised that many people prefer an audio-only call. Some organisations only expect video to be activated if there is a client on the call.

Third, on a team video call, leaders should show a reasonable amount of emotion so people can read you (of course we need to contain any frustration with individuals until we are talking privately with them).

Fourth, give enough social cues, such as signalling approval by smiling and nodding, to build team members' confidence and help facilitate easy interactions between people.

Fifth, don't be concerned if you have to work harder on Zoom than in a live meeting as you try to intuit the social information you normally have available to you. You'll probably find Zoom meetings more tiring than live meetings because you *are* working harder. You might want to run Zoom meetings for shorter periods than your in-person meetings.

Sixth, another reason Zoom meetings are harder than live meetings is that the technology is a 2-dimensional flat screen giving mostly thumbnail-sized images, so many micro-expressions that we would pick up in real-life, 3-D interactions are lost.

The technology helps, but only up to a point.

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