

8 new rules for Zoom after a year of nonstop virtual meetings

by **Veronica Combs** in **CXO** on March 8, 2021, 4:23 AM PST

Babies and dogs are now welcome visitors during video conference calls but the expectation about your camera is the same: Turn it on.



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In pre-pandemic times, it used to be embarrassing when a dog barked or a baby cried during a work call. Now, these unexpected visitors are welcome interruptions that break up the monotony of back-to-back Zoom calls.

That's not all that's changed when it comes to rules for video conferences. Communications experts and chief people officers say that having a window into everyone's personal spaces has changed relationships at work.

Karin Reed, an on-camera coach and CEO of Speaker Dynamics, said that a year of remote work has helped colleagues see each other as complete human beings instead of just coworkers.

"We now have an understanding of the challenges in each person's space and I've seen a tremendous amount of empathy for each other," she said.

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Reed and a meeting expert combined their expertise in a new book, "Suddenly Virtual: Making Remote Meetings Work" that comes out March 9. Her co-author is Joe Allen, a professor of industrial and organizational psychology at the University of Utah and director of the Center for Meeting Effectiveness.

Reed said the book combines the research about what makes a good meeting with advice for real-world application.

Here's a look at what the two authors as well as other business leaders have learned about the new rules for Zoom in 2021.

Interruptions are OK

Lisa Walker, vice brand of brand and corporate communications at Fuze, said that over the last year she has come to know her coworkers' spouses, roommates, pets and children. She said that her colleagues helped her celebrate a personal milestone recently.

"My husband ran into the middle of my video meeting a few weeks ago and gave me a kiss because our son has just been accepted into a new school here in Vermont where we have moved during the pandemic," she said. "The response from those on the video was not shock, but instead a collective 'Yes!' when I shared that reason for the kiss."

Vicki Marchington, vice president of people operations at Matillion, a cloud data warehouse company, said her company has embraced interruptions because this dynamic has created more human, personal and authentic relationships among coworkers.

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However, this acceptance of the whole person is still a work in progress, even at companies with a family-first approach, according to Jen Henderson, founder and CEO of TILT.

"While holding your baby on a call humanizes the conversation, and it will take many more reps to make it 'normal,'" Henderson said. "Employees can start by not apologizing for their guest stars and others need to not ignore it."

Instead of pretending that an interruption isn't happening, Reed said that workers should go into problem-solving mode right away.

"Mute your audio, turn off your video and solve the problem, then apologize and get back to business," she said.

Be clear about your camera choice

The No. 1 rule from "Suddenly Virtual" is to keep your camera on. Meetings where cameras are on are 25% more effective, according to the authors. Reed said that she always starts training sessions about video communications with the same question: How often do you turn on your camera for a video meeting: Always, never or only when everyone else does. Before the pandemic, the most common answer was "Never." Now, most people say, "Only when I see everyone else doing it."

"People are recognizing that there is value in video, but they are reluctant to embrace it in determining the effectiveness of a meeting," she said.

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At the same time, if you're not feeling up to being on camera, just say so. Walker of Fuze also said that she encourages teammates to be honest.

"Letting other meeting participants know you will be keeping your video off is completely acceptable if needed; it's just about transparency at the beginning of the meeting so everyone feels like they are on equal footing," she said.

Give feedback to presenters

One challenge with video meetings is the lack of feedback from an in-person audience. It's hard to read the room when you're looking into the glowing light of a webcam.

Kirsten Newbold-Knipp, the chief marketing officer at FullStory, said company engineers created a new solution for this problem: Bwamp. This separate feedback channel runs alongside video meetings and includes sounds such as applause, laughter, clinking glasses and emoji bubbles.

Scott Blum, a systems engineer at FullStory, wrote in a blog post that Bwamp creates the "camaraderie we all desperately need, ensuring we can do our best work and stay connected to each other no matter the screens and distance that separates us."

Level up your background game

Reed said that setting up a good backdrop means cleaning up the background, improving lighting, ensuring good audio, and considering how your image is framed in the video window.

"It's not a matter of vanity, it's a matter of making it as easy as possible for a partner to receive your message in full," she said.

Reed likes real backgrounds instead of fake ones, except in a shared space when people are walking behind the person on the video call.

Be thoughtful about timing

Allen recommends scheduling standard break times of 5 to 10 minutes between meetings instead of defaulting to the standard 30-minute and 60-minute time slots.

"Going from one meeting to the next without any break in between means there is no time for recovery or preparation for the next meeting," he said. "I tell people to put a little humanity into our meetings by allowing people time to find a drink or go to the bathroom."

Adapt your leadership style

Fidelda Butler, Zendes's vice president of talent and organization development, said that if any leader has gone through the past year without evolving their leadership style, they need to reconsider that. She sees leadership skills like agility, feedback and remote engagement as much more important in a remote setting.

"These are not 'soft' skills — they are the make or break skills that a leader needs as table stakes in our post-COVID-19 world," she said.

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She has started to take more care when writing feedback and asking team members for deliverables because tone matters.

Allen agreed that the skill set for being an effective virtual meeting leader is different from the skill sets for a face-to-face leader. He has changed how he facilitates online classes as a result.

"Previously I would allow students to participate at their own pace and volunteer information, but now I call on people by name," he said.

Some meeting rules still apply

Allen said that 80% of meeting best practices that apply to in-person conversations apply to virtual meetings as well. These include:

1. Have an agenda
2. Start and end on time
3. Use procedural communication
4. Deal with conflict in a constructive way
5. Manage monologues

Just as sidebar conversations can derail in-person meetings, online chat conversations can distract from a video conference.

"If you need everyone 100% present in the meeting, you may want to disable chat," he said.

Keep phone calls in the mix

To combat Zoom fatigue, Reed recommends thinking about what meetings really need a video component and which would work just as well over the phone.

"Video is a richer medium to collaborate or make decisions, but if it's just a matter of quickly relaying information, it could be an email, a text or a phone call," she said.

Reed also suggests making meetings shorter and more purpose-driven with two agenda items instead of one.

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