

MODULE

04

Zoom and Skype Interviews

The new normal, and everything it quietly breaks

WHAT THIS MODULE COVERS

Video calls compress the communication paradigm into a small box and strip out most of what makes you convincing. This module is about getting it back.

Digital interviews are difficult by design. Even when you can see the other people, they are thumbnails, and you are really talking to a lens on a laptop. The single most common mistake — and Steve calls it the number one problem — is **sitting too close**.

People pull right up to the camera. The laptop is eighteen inches away, all the viewer sees is a head, and both the communication box and the gesture box are gone. Arms are usually resting on the table too, so gesturing is restricted before it starts. **Move your chair back about a foot and a half** so your body language can be seen.

Second: get the lens to eye level. Looking down at the camera reads to viewers as looking down at *them*. Looking up at it reads as diminished, as though you do not think you should be there. These sound like silly details, but they are exactly what people see and judge.

Third: your background matters, and so does what is in it. Steve coached a dean at a school of public policy who sat too close; when he finally moved back, his bookshelf came into frame. Twice, mid-interview, someone interrupted to ask about a book on the shelf — once Hillary Clinton's, once Condoleezza Rice's — derailing an interview about education policy. But a blank wall or plain curtain tests as too sterile. Aim for a real setting: a police station for policing, a school for education.

Finally, the camera is always on. People look away, shuffle papers, take a bite of food. Viewers read all of it as rude.

Because Zoom is so cumbersome, you need **more** emotion than in person, not less.

18 in

roughly how close most people sit

+1.5 ft

how far back you should move

2 sec

the nodding rule while listening

Always

the camera is on

KEY CONCEPTS

The two-second rule

While someone else is asking a question, you have three options and two of them are bad. The **statue** — perfectly still — is the worst; viewers are reading your body language and you are giving them nothing. The **bobblehead** — constant nodding — is too much. What tests best is a small movement every couple of seconds, with real emotion where the question allows it.

Lens at eye level

Raise the laptop on books or a stand until the camera sits level with your eyes. Looking down reads as superiority; looking up reads as a lack of confidence.

A real background, not a sterile one

Blank walls and plain curtains test badly. So do backgrounds with distracting objects. You want a natural setting that reinforces what you are there to talk about.

FROM THE VIDEO

The Harvard professor who became a statue

Steve ran student training in a TV studio at Harvard. If a professor needed the studio for a national interview, they took priority and the class watched through a two-way mirror.

One evening, having just covered the statue, the bobblehead and the two-second rule, the students watched a professor who does interviews constantly hold completely still for a full minute while a long question was asked. The students went crazy.

They found it oddly reassuring: even people who speak for a living often do not know these techniques. You now do.

REMEMBER

- Move back a foot and a half. Let them see your hands.
- Lens at eye level. Not above, not below.
- Something real behind you, but nothing readable.
- Small movement every two seconds while listening. Never the statue.

PRACTICE

Exercises

Type directly into the shaded boxes below and save the file. Come back to your answers after you have practised — this is your record of what changed.

EXERCISE 1

Rebuild your video setup

Do this once, properly, and it is fixed for every call you take from that desk.

Record a two-minute video call answer at your current setup. Then fix the distance, the lens height and the background, and record it again. What is different?

What is in your background right now that someone could ask you about?

Tick each one once you have done it:

- ☐ Chair moved back ~18 inches
- ☐ Lens raised to eye level
- ☐ Background is real but not distracting
- ☐ Hands visible in frame
- ☐ Re-recorded and compared

EXERCISE 2**Drill the two-second rule**

Have someone ask you a long, difficult question — a full minute if they can manage it — while you record only yourself listening.

Watch yourself listening with the sound off. Were you a statue, a bobblehead, or somewhere in between?

Do it again, aiming for small movement every two seconds. What felt excessive but looked fine on playback?

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

One thing from this module I will use the next time I speak:

When and where I will use it: