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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 143: KIM FOLEY – COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY IN VIRTUAL MEETINGS

Ken White

From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, this is Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that help make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. Well, since the start of the pandemic, our workdays have changed. We're working longer and attending more meetings. Look at your calendar. You're likely to see a never-ending list of meetings. And most of those meetings are taking place virtually on Zoom, Teams, WebEx, Skype, and other vehicles. Well, that virtual world requires a particular set of skills. Communicating on camera is different than doing so in a face to face environment. If you communicate poorly on video, your brand, credibility, and reputation can be adversely affected. If you embrace video communication, your leadership, presence, and influence can improve. Kim Foley is a communication consultant. She works with Fortune 500 companies and professionals from a variety of sectors, helping them communicate more effectively on video. She's the author of *Virtual Meetings with Power and Presence: The Ultimate Guide to Online Meetings*. She joins us today to discuss how you can communicate effectively in your virtual meetings. Here's our conversation with Kim Foley.

Ken White

Kim, thanks so much for sharing your time and your expertise with us. I'm so excited to talk with you. Thanks for being here.

Kim Foley

Oh, I'm so happy to be here.

Ken White

Tell us what you do. You have an interesting job, interesting background. What what are your days like, and what do you do?

Kim Foley

Well, since April, my life has really changed because I pivoted from video production to and media training to teaching people how to do better Zoom meetings. And no matter what platform you're using, we all struggle with the same issues. And believe me, I had never done a Zoom meeting before April. And so, of course, I'd done plenty of face-time meetings, which is really the same thing. But I had to learn the platforms. And so it became very clear to me very quickly that I could no longer train people in my studio, and I had to start doing everything virtually. And the very first time I opened my computer to do this, I realized that the angles too low because my computer's down here and, you know, the shadows were terrible. And I immediately went into video production mode and started fixing things. And in ten minutes, I had something great going on on the screen. But I realized at that moment that other people are probably having a lot of the same issues, except they didn't know the solutions, right.

Ken White

You got it. You got it. People like you and I who've lived in the video world; we get it, but most people have not lived there. So, yeah, it's a whole new thing. So what are some of the common mistakes you're seeing where people are literally sabotaging their credibility because of things they're doing on Zoom?

Kim Foley

It's just unbelievable. You know, the whole point of this is to make sure that you simulate sitting across the table, having a conversation at a conference, at a meeting, whether it's in person, you want to simulate that. And the only way you can do that is by getting about five or six things right. And so the main things that I see people doing incorrectly are, first of all, they'll open up their computer while it's sitting down low around their waist, and all we see is their chin. We see the ceiling, we'll see the ceiling fan, we'll see recessed lights, whatever. But we're not seeing them eye to eye where it looks like we're really sitting across the table from someone. And so one of the first things I always say to people is figure out a way, whether it's a bunch of Amazon boxes you taped together, it doesn't matter. Get that computer or that tablet or that phone up to eye level. And I don't mean kind of eye level; I mean really eye level. And when you do that, it makes such a difference. And so that's the very first thing I would get people to do. But in my book, what I talk about, the first chapter is getting that Internet connection right. Because let's face it, if you get your framing in your audio and your lighting and everything just right, but you have really poor Internet connection, what's going to happen is you're going to have odd audio. It's going to sound very electronic. It may even cut off altogether. You're going to have freezing, and it ruins the meeting. So any time you have a lot of stalling, sometimes people are kicked completely off the platform because of Internet. So I go into how to maximize your Internet connection, how to reboot your router, and how to close out all your apps and make sure that your bandwidth is really supporting what you're

doing, especially if you have an important presentation or meeting. You know, if you're a leader in your organization, you definitely don't want to be the one that's cutting out. You want to be the one setting the example right.

Ken White

Yeah.

Kim Foley

So we got to get that right. So then get that framing perfect so that you're really, truly eye level and then step back a foot, because if you're right up close next to your computer and a lot of people do that because they're having trouble seeing the screen, don't worry about seeing the screen. Where you should be looking is in the eye of the camera, not at the other people on the screen or at yourself. And we're hardwired to do that, as you know, to look at faces. So it's very hard for people to keep that eye contact with that camera because it's a tiny little thing. So there's tricks for that. There's tricks to helping you remember that put a little Post-it behind there and make it very obvious so that your eye is drawn to that space and keep your eyes there if you're doing the talking. So there's a lot of body language that's involved in this. But if you step back, like I see that you are in my meeting here and I'm stepped back, we can actually use our full body language to support our message. We can move our head or shoulders. We can move or shift our weight. We can; it's really fantastic to get more of a chest-up shot going than a shoulder-up shot. And so you've got to back up to do that. And that's when it really looks good. Now, if you are doing that, the other problem is you need to make sure you're using a microphone because the mic in the computer is it's going to be too far away from you to really pick up beautiful sound. So I want you to think about what type of microphone. I use a lavalier microphone that's USB connected into the computer. It's very inexpensive; got it on Amazon. It works great. And it's a very simple thing to do so that you get rich, beautiful sound. So these are, you know, some of the tips that I work on with people. And then, of course, lighting, if you're if you've got overhead lighting, which most people have, you have deep, dark shadows. You may have darkness in the background, and it looks foreboding, sort of like a creepy horror movie. You can't quite see what's back there. We don't want that. We want to make sure that you're lit properly and that your background is lit properly as well. Shouldn't be brighter than you. For instance, I know you've seen people set themselves up or the windows behind them right.

Ken White

Yeah, backlighting.

Kim Foley

Backlighting it's the worst. So they're in darkness, but the background is very bright, and that does not work for people. So, you know, it's important for people to understand the

elements. It's not hard to do. And once you get that set up properly one time, you just repeat it so that it's not difficult to take in all the stress out of it by understanding exactly what you need to be doing. And then there's no more anxiety.

Ken White

What I often tell our students is watch the news, watch how anchors communicate right. They're in the box that they got it. They're eye level, and so forth. And I love you said the Post-it note. I have so many colleagues who have those little arrow Post-it notes that they put on each side of the camera

Kim Foley

Yeah.

Ken White

and their computer so that they do, in fact, look at the camera.

Kim Foley

Yeah, and remind you.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Kim Foley in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary's School of Business. There is no better time than right now to pursue your MBA. With businesses and organizations experiencing so much change, they're seeking professionals who can communicate, think strategically, and deal with ambiguity. Skills taught in the William & Mary MBA program. We offer four different formats, including the full time, the evening, also known as the Flex Program, the online, and the executive. The William & Mary MBA will prepare you to succeed in our post covid world. Check out the MBA programs at William & Mary today. Now back to our conversation on communicating effectively in virtual meetings with Kim Foley.

Ken White

We're on Zoom or whatever, whatever vehicle all day long, and questions I get are from people saying I'm busy at home, I have kids at home, there's so much going on. What do I do in that meeting? Do I need to appear on camera? Is it appropriate for me to put my photo up there? I know what I say to folks, but what's your advice? If somebody's got an environment where they're a little nervous that something could go wrong in the middle of a meeting?

Kim Foley

Well, I think this is the time to start thinking about where in your house can you have some privacy? I have a client in a very, very large organization who's very high up, and she had to address forty thousand people in a video. And she was calling me in a panic because she has four children. And I said, okay, what we're going to do is we're going to get if you don't have a lock on the door, and she did not. I said, you're going to put a chair at the door and a sign on the door that you will be make sure that there's someone tending to them, and then you're going to make sure that they know you will be out in an hour so that they know you're coming and so they won't keep banging on the door and get that person to wrangle them for that hour because she had to do this out of her bedroom because there literally was no other place for her to do it. So it's a very tricky thing having a lot of people in the background. I don't generally recommend virtual backgrounds because people usually key out unless they're using a green screen and they have adequate processor in their computer. And if you do, like I can do beautiful virtual backgrounds because I have the processor that will support it, and I use a green screen. But generally speaking, I prefer not to do that. I like the realism of the real backgrounds. And so I try to encourage people to do that, and then I help them get that right. So did I answer your question?

Ken White

You did, you did. And actually, you brought up another point a background. So many people seem to be worried about backgrounds, not necessarily the lighting, but what is it behind me? Should I go virtual? Your idea of if you've got the technology, go ahead with virtual because it does. It bleeds out, and it doesn't look good. But what if somebody has a room in their house? What should they put in the background? What's the background that's not distracting, for example.

Kim Foley

Well, I'll tell you what is distracting. A window is distracting because it's too bright. Another thing that's distracting is lot of people have a piece of art behind with glass in it. If you've got enough light shining on your face toward you, then it's going to be reflecting off of that painting behind you on the glass. And I've seen it a million times, very distracting. So what you want to do is you want to set this up, look at it and say, well, what things on the screen? People won't know what they are. They'll be trying really hard to figure it out. So if there's little things that sort of capture people's attention with reflection, get them out of the shot, just move them down underneath the table or in a box someplace else. I've had more people move things in their backgrounds and bring in things you might need. You might need some prettier books, or you might need a plant, or you might need to get rid of the like this morning with a lawyer I was consulting with, I said, you've got all those glasses in the background. Let's just get those out of the shot. We don't need twenty-five glasses in the background.

Ken White

Yeah.

Kim Foley

And he just never noticed it because they've always been there. And so it's again, a credibility issue. What are people seeing in your background? It's part of the story about who you are. So you want to make sure it looks thought out, and it looks simple and neutral and nothing that's going to really detract from you. That's the important. You're not trying to show something off here. You're trying to keep the attention on you, and anything else that distracts should be moved.

Ken White

It's interesting that you're standing. Of course, I could see on video our audience can't. I am a stander. I do ninety percent of my meetings standing. That's tough to stand eight hours a day. But do you have a preference in terms of virtual meeting standards?

Kim Foley

I stand eight hours a day. I do.

Ken White

Yeah.

Kim Foley

And I'll tell you why. Two reasons. One, my back's much happier at the end of the day. I truly feel better, more energized at the end of the day if I stand than if I sit. I get much more tired, I don't understand it, but it's true. The other thing is I find that and the research does support this, but when you stand and use your body language, your voice inflection changes. You are actually speaking in different tones than if you're locked down, sitting. And so I find that by being able to use my body language, shift my weight and use my hands, that I'm a better teacher. I really am a better consultant because of it. And so I encourage people to stand when they do this. Again you got to get that computer at eye level, not kind of eye level.

Ken White

Which is actually not very hard to do when you stand, actually. I mean, you get a desk or a filing cabinet. It's actually not very difficult. You mentioned the nonverbal aspects. You're using your hands, you're able to move around, and you briefly mentioned some of the verbal side of things like inflection. How we speak on Zoom is a little different, right? How do you what do you tell clients in terms of their inflection and so forth?

Kim Foley

When you are on a two-dimensional environment, and you're not in person? People don't have an opportunity to see your whole body in action. They're just looking into this little box, and they're trying to focus on your face. And so those micro-expressions are very important. So what people tend to do when they get on video, first of all, number one, people tend to not like the way they look on camera. That's one thing. And when you don't like the way you look on camera, people get kind of closed down. So what they'll do is they'll just sort of stare at the screen, and they won't have any expression at all. And it's different. And so if you're trying to inspire, you're trying to inform, you're trying to sell whatever you're trying to do with someone on that through that screen there, what you want to do is almost over animate because if you do that, it doesn't really translate because it's a two-dimensional vehicle.

Ken White

Yeah.

Kim Foley

So, yeah. So what and I teach is in my media training, when people are doing a lot of video, they need this training to get comfortable with the idea that they can loosen up, use more voice inflection and use their body more because it's actually much more engaging if you're giving a presentation and you're standing up, and you're using your arms. What you don't want to do is use your hands if you are framing yourself shoulder up and the hands come popping in. It's distracting.

Ken White

Mmm-mmm.

Kim Foley

Back up. Make sure your head's to the top of the frame, get a chest-up shot, and then when you use your hands, they're at chest level, and it makes sense. It doesn't distract from what people are seeing. And that's a great way to do a presentation.

Ken White

It is interesting. You said the two dimensional. It does. You have to be a little animated. It does steal a little bit away from your voice and your nonverbal the medium. It's kind of interesting how that happens.

Kim Foley

Yeah, it really is. And that's why when people watch people on the news or actors, they think, oh, I could do that. But then if they're ever put in front of a camera, they freeze up

and realize, oh, no, I can't do that. It's really not easy to be all either dramatic or charming or enthused and use body language when you're sitting behind a desk. It's really, really hard, and it takes the skill level and self-awareness. And so if I could just bring some of that to people when they're doing their meetings to inspire their teams or to talk to potential clients and close deals, it's going to make such a difference, in the end, result in terms of building trust. That's what we're trying to do here, is build trust. And so you have to look like the expert that you are. And so many people have ruined that on this medium. They don't mean to. They don't want to, but they don't know the solutions. And that's why I ended up writing the book.

Ken White

Leaders and even managers have got to embrace video today. Forget Zoom, just video in general. That's how we're communicate. This has become an essential skill for leaders.

Kim Foley

It has, as a matter of fact. I even use an app called BombBomb, where I can send video emails to people, and it's not like constant contact app that takes people off the page. It actually, they can just open their email, see my little video, click on it, and hear me have a conversation. And people are blown away that I email them with a video instead of a text. And it's far more powerful. And people say, oh my gosh, and I teach people how to do this because I want them to be able to harness this very, very valuable, very, very powerful platform video. It's just not hard to do. You just need to learn a few skills.

Ken White

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