‘The gaze’ and eye contact

Much has been written in the allied trade of psychotherapy about the importance of the gaze in establishing a containing relationship, recognised as the best predictor of a good outcome.[184] However, in virtual work there is no direct eye contact – only the ‘as-if’ illusion of eye contact when we look at each other’s eyes. We cannot see where people’s eyes go, at whom they look or how their eyes turn towards or away from the speaker; it is harder to detect subgroups. We can perhaps scan the ‘room’ more easily, but only in miniature so that important detail may not be visible. Meanings of the images we see are more ambiguous.

Copyright Material - Provided by Taylor & Francis
Review Copy - Not for Redistribution

Added to which is the possibility of simultaneously seeing yourself in the room. This is frankly fascinating to some of us and horrifying to others. However, to check your image in the box before starting, and occasionally during, is essential, even if you normally switch off the self-view. We can shape our image in the onscreen box we are given, and we should, to make our presence as useful as possible to our clients.

Using the box

- Consider an appropriate or neutral background and effective lighting, so that you can be seen clearly
- Arrange head and shoulders high in the box with face (and hands if you use them) fully visible
- Learn how to occupy this 'box' – attend to your own visibility, such as moving enough to make clear that you have not frozen
- How can you indicate attention during silences?
- Use movement, facial expression, non-verbal sounds and gesticulation to enhance communication
- The boxes, if all the same size, give equal importance to all members.

There is plenty more advice online about how to present yourself in an online 'box', so without elaborating too much further, I will merely add that if you work at the kitchen table, it's not good to have a pile of unwashed dishes in the background…

Of course, the gaze is not always welcome. A common coach frustration was with people who switched their cameras off. When contracting with the team, coaches had learned to emphasise the need to be able to see and hear group members. Set 'cameras on' as a ground rule and remind people of it if necessary. One coach points out that in person there wouldn't be an option to sit backwards facing the wall! If someone regularly cites technical reasons such as poor internet connection for having their camera off, gently take up the question of whether it would be possible for them to join from a better-connected location.

Copyright Material - Provided by Taylor & Francis
Review Copy - Not for Redistribution

Vignette: Cameras off?

Zola was coaching a team of psychologists who worked with survivors of abuse. She was frustrated that a high proportion of them routinely had their cameras off, despite her request that everyone keep their camera on. When she explored this with the group, they responded that some people felt vulnerable if they were visible, for example young women survivors of abuse. The team had taken on some of the norms of their client group. Zola reinforced the ground rule that cameras should be on, but added a caveat: if someone needed to take a break from being visible, then it was OK to switch the camera off for a while. After that, most people kept their cameras on and didn't take camera breaks. The caveat to the ground rule gave the team a sense of control which resolved the issue.