

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Phone

Elements of face-to-face work:

- Rapid feedback -- ability to notice and correct misunderstandings.
- Information flows through many channels.
- Shared local context.
- Informal social contact before & after the session.
- Spatiality of reference -- ability to point at things.
- It's easy to redirect each other's attention.



What can help?

Shared common ground

"...we construct common ground from whatever cues we have at the moment. The fewer cues we have, the harder the work in constructing it, and the more likely misinterpretations will occur."

"This joint construction of common ground can be an especially taxing form of interaction, especially when people appear to be similar but have important, hidden dissimilarities."

What might help:

- Meet in person once in a while.
- High-bandwidth Internet connection, good phone, strong phone signal, etc.
- (Maybe) use video to add more ways for the information to travel.
- Be extra mindful of cultural differences.
- Describe your physical setting, especially if there's a time difference. Maybe send a photo of your supervision space, if this is an ongoing relationship.

Structure

Collaborating from a distance is easier and more successful when people are trying to complete *unambiguous* tasks. The more routine, structured, and formal the task is, the more likely you are to succeed -- so consider removing ambiguity wherever possible.

What might help:

- Ask them if they can send you something in writing about the issue they would like to discuss.
- Plan your agenda in advance, summarize it verbally at the beginning of the call, and guide the call clearly through that agenda.
- Send the person a backup plan for what you will each do if the phone doesn't ring when it should or if the video call drops out.

Attentiveness

Research: Deception goes up when people perceive you to be distant. Just interesting.

What might help:

- Pay extra attention to data from the subtle senses -- psychometry.
- Check out those "uh oh" feelings.

What about video?

Why use video? More information channels can mean better communication.

Why not use video?

- Technical glitches are more likely; they distract and take time.
- The person on the other end seems unreal; lag time, pixelation, no eye contact.
- Sitting at a computer while talking about spiritual things is not so contemplative. Things flash and ding; our gaze is focused on a box made of metal and plastic.

Sources

- "Distance Matters." Gary M. Olson & Judith S. Olson, School of Information, University of Michigan, 2000 (www.crew.umich.edu/publications/00-04.pdf)
- "Why Distance Matters: Effects on Cooperation, Persuasion and Deception." Erin Bradner and Gloria Mark, Dept. of Information and Computer Science, University of California, Irvine (available for purchase at <http://portal.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=587110>)