EMPOWERING WOMEN
FOR DIGITAL & REMOTE HR CAREERS

MODULE 2 · COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION · LESSON 2.5

Communicating with empathy at a distance

Everything that makes a conversation human survives badly on video. This lesson is about putting it back deliberately.



1.25 training hours · Building the basics · RemoteHeR

WHAT THIS LESSON COVERS

Five things, in order

- What is lost when the signal degrades — tone, pace, body language, and the pause
- Active listening techniques that actually work on video
- Questioning: open, probing and clarifying — and using silence deliberately
- Hearing what is not said, and checking understanding without interrogating
- Responding assertively and respectfully when a conversation becomes uncomfortable



On video you are working with much less information.

No peripheral vision. No posture. Micro-expressions lost to compression. Eye contact is impossible by design — you cannot look at the camera and the face at once.

20%

Of employees worldwide report feeling lonely for much of the previous day. It is reported more often by those working away from the employer's premises.

Gallup, State of the Global Workplace 2024, as cited in the RemoteHeR Skills Mapping Report (2026), section B4.3.

HR is often the only function whose job includes noticing.

A manager sees output. You are the one who sees the pattern across absence, engagement and the small things people mention in passing — and on video, none of that reaches you unless you go looking for it.

WHAT IS LOST

Four signals that do not survive

Tone at low volume

Compression flattens the quiet end of a voice — exactly where hesitation, doubt and upset live. Someone can sound fine and not be.

The pause

Latency means you cannot tell a thoughtful silence from a frozen connection, so people fill every gap. The thinking time disappears.

The body below the shoulders

Folded arms, a hand shaking, someone leaning away. You see a head in a box and nothing else.

The before and after

In an office you see someone arrive and leave. On video they appear composed and vanish composed, and you never see the ten minutes either side.

THE COMPENSATION

Say out loud what you would have shown

In a room you nod. On video you have to say it.

- "I'm following — go on."
- "That sounds difficult."
- "Take your time, I'm not going anywhere."



BEFORE THE CONVERSATION

Ten minutes that change the call

1. **Decide the purpose, and only one**

   A conversation about wellbeing and a conversation about performance are two conversations. Combining them tells the person their wellbeing is a performance issue.

2. **Write your opening sentence down**

   The first fifteen seconds set the whole call, and it is the part you are most likely to fumble when nervous.

3. **Book more time than you need**

   Forty-five minutes for a thirty-minute conversation. Running out of time in the middle of something difficult is the worst outcome available.

4. **Sort your own setup**

   Door closed, notifications off, headphones on. Being interrupted mid-disclosure is not recoverable.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Four things that actually work on video

1. **Reflect back in their words, not yours**

   "So the problem is the Friday handover, not the workload itself." Using their words shows you were listening; paraphrasing into your own can sound like correcting.

2. **Name the feeling as a question**

   "That sounds frustrating — is that fair?" A question lets them correct you, which a statement does not.

3. **Do not take notes on camera**

   Typing looks like distraction. Say you are taking notes, or take them afterwards.

4. **Leave your camera on when they are talking**

   Even if cameras are optional. Speaking to a black square is hard, and it is the person disclosing something who bears that cost.

QUESTIONS

Three kinds, and when each belongs

Open

"How has the new pattern been working?" Use it to start. It gives the person control of what matters, and what they choose to raise first is information.

Probing

"What happens on the days it does not work?" Use it second, to get from the general to the specific. Most useful HR detail lives in the specific.

Clarifying

"When you say unmanageable, do you mean the hours or the pace?" Use it to close a gap, not to challenge. Tone is everything here.

ACROSS FOUR COUNTRIES

The same words land differently

Directness varies

What reads as refreshingly clear in one country reads as blunt in another. Neither is right; be aware which one you default to.

So does the pause

Comfortable silence differs by culture as much as by person. Do not read a longer pause as reluctance.

And who speaks first

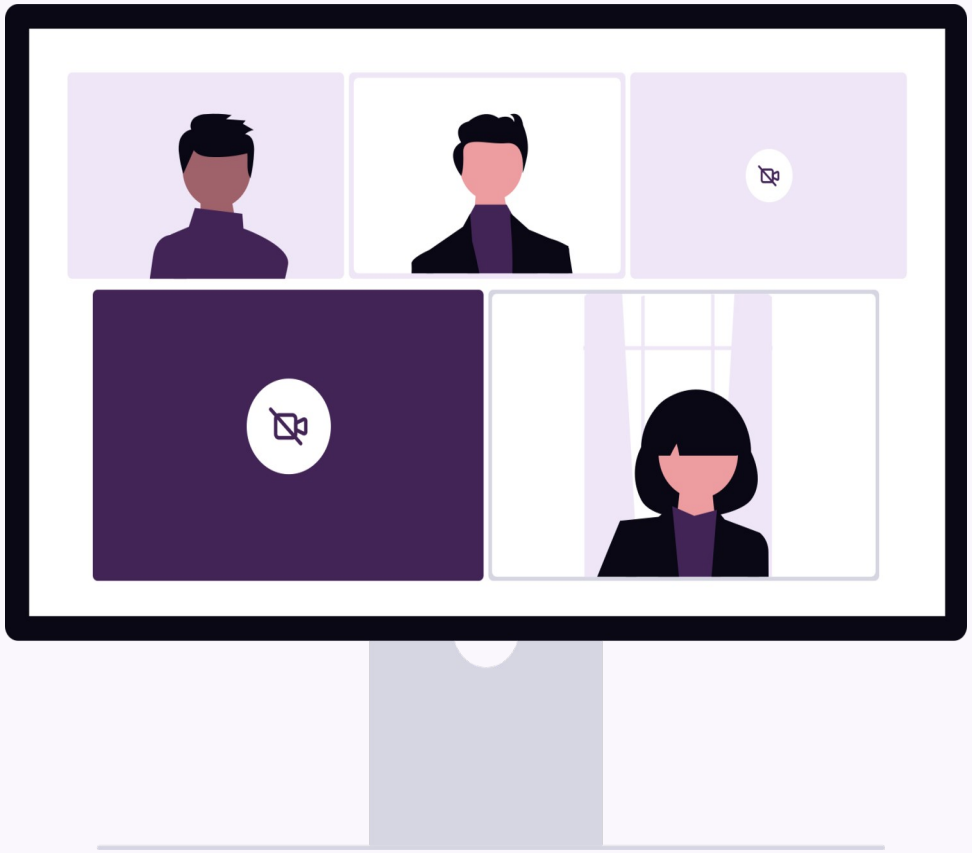
In some contexts the most senior person speaks first by convention. If you always let that happen, you will hear from managers and nobody else.

Ask rather than assume

"Is this a good way to have this conversation, or would you rather do it differently?" It costs one sentence.

Silence is a technique, not a failure.

After a difficult answer, wait. People almost always add the important part second — but only if you have not filled the gap.



CHECKING UNDERSTANDING

Checking, or interrogating

⚠ Interrogating

- A run of questions with no response in between
- "Why" repeated — it makes people defend rather than explain
- Questions that contain the answer you want
- Taking notes visibly while they describe something painful
- "Are you sure?"

Listening

- One question, then a genuine pause
- "What was that like?" rather than "Why did you?"
- Reflecting back before asking anything more
- Explaining that you are writing this down, and why
- "Have I understood that right?"

WHAT IS NOT SAID

Four things worth noticing

A topic deflected twice

Once may be nothing. Twice is a pattern, and it is usually the thing they most wanted to talk about and least know how to raise.

"It's fine" said quickly

Speed is the signal. A considered "it's fine" and an instant one are different answers.

A change in who they mention

Someone who always talked about their team and now says "I" has usually stopped feeling part of it.

The question at the end

"Just one more thing before you go" is where the real subject arrives, often. Never book back to back.

IN PRACTICE

"Everything's fine"

A one-to-one with someone whose absence has crept up. Asked how things are going, she says “fine, honestly, just tired” — quickly, and looks away from the camera. There are four minutes left.

What good looks like

- Do not accept it, and do not challenge it. Reflect and wait: "Tired. That sounds like it has been going on a while." Then stop talking.
- If nothing comes, do not push in the last four minutes — you cannot open something you have no time to hold.
- Say plainly that you have time later this week and name two slots. A specific offer is taken up; an open one is not.
- Write your own note afterwards about the pattern, not a diagnosis of the cause.



Empathy is not agreeing with everything.

You can understand exactly why someone is angry and still hold the answer. Confusing the two is how HR people end up promising things they cannot deliver.

WHEN IT GETS UNCOMFORTABLE

Assertive and respectful at once

1. **Acknowledge before you answer**

   "I can hear this has been frustrating." Not a concession — just evidence you were listening, and it lowers the temperature.

2. **Be specific about what you can and cannot do**

   "I cannot change the pattern this quarter. I can look at the Friday handover this week." Vagueness reads as evasion.

3. **Hold the boundary without raising your voice**

   If it becomes personal: "I want to keep talking about this, and I need us to keep it about the work." Say it once, calmly.

4. **End it if you need to, and say when you will return**

   "I am going to stop here and pick this up tomorrow at ten." Ending a conversation badly is worse than pausing it.

Some conversations are not yours to hold.



You are not a counsellor or a doctor. Listening well, then signposting to the right support, is the skilled response — not a failure to help.

AFTERWARDS

Three things people forget

Write it down the same day

What was said, what was agreed, and any referral you made. Not your interpretation of the person. Memory of a difficult conversation degrades fast and unevenly.

Do the thing you said you would

The single largest predictor of whether someone brings you the next problem. One unkept promise closes a door for a long time.

Look after yourself too

Absorbing difficult conversations is a real load. Have someone you can speak to, and do not schedule three of them in a row.

Tools you will see used

Zoom or Teams

No new software in this lesson. The techniques are the tools.

Your own notes

Before a difficult call, three lines: what you want to find out, your first question, and your next step.

Your own phone

Record the sentence, play it back once. That is the whole exercise.

Free tiers are enough for everything in this lesson.

NOW IT IS YOUR TURN

What was not said



Work through a transcript and find what was missed

You are given a real one-to-one transcript. Mark the three points where something was signalled and not picked up, and write what you would have said instead at each one.

It feeds into

Piece 3 of your written communication pack, the sensitive message, and the line on why it was sent the way it was.

No mark

Your tutor reads it and replies in writing. Activities carry no mark: only the module test and the artefact have a result.

RECAP

Before you move on

- On video you have much less information. Compensate deliberately rather than hoping.
- Say out loud what you would have shown with a nod. It feels artificial twice, then it is just how you talk.
- Reflect in their words, name feelings as questions, and do not type on camera.
- After a difficult answer, wait. The important part usually comes second.
- Empathy is not agreement. You can understand completely and still hold the answer.

Next: take the knowledge check. It is never graded, you have unlimited attempts, and every option comes with feedback.

EMPOWERING WOMEN
FOR DIGITAL & REMOTE HR CAREERS

Module 2 complete

Do the activity and the knowledge check, then the module test and your written communication pack.

mountains of research

egeria desarrollo social

ELN MTÜ European Learning Network

UNIVERSITÄT PADERBORN

Co-funded by the European Union

Erasmus+ 2025-1-PT01-KA220-VET-000365831

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

CC BY-SA 4.0