



On-Camera Leadership Options for *CEOs & Executives*

by Vern Oakley

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Find Your Groove in Front of the Lens

One of the biggest decisions you'll make when planning a video is choosing your communication style. You have three broad options: speaking directly to the camera, speaking directly to an interviewer, or speaking directly to an audience.

Each method has variations, which we'll explore. The style you choose will depend on what you're most comfortable with, the message you're sharing, and most importantly, the amount of time you're able to devote to your communication.

Whether you're filming in your company's in-house studio or firing up your laptop camera for a quick intimate message, the concepts here still apply. Large-scale or small, the principles are universal.

Time to prepare with your director and communication team is the game changer when it comes to picking your most effective communication style.

The more time you can put into preparing for film day, the more comfortable you'll feel in front of the camera, no matter what format you choose. Oftentimes, leaders don't make their own calendar, leaving assistants or others on their support team to schedule video time. This leaves little room for prep on your end.

Whatever your role in this scenario, your best first move is to push for more prep time if you can.

Also, remember that you're not alone in this. Your director will work with you and your trusted team to help strategize the best communication style for your scenario.

It's not just you and the blinking red camera light.

Let's take a closer look at your options.



Option #1: Direct-to-Camera

As the name suggests, with this style the subject speaks directly into the camera. This format works especially well when you want to connect with employees or a specific group of people. Speaking straight into the lens is very compelling because it gives the feeling that you're having a direct conversation with the viewers and looking straight into their eyes.

Often the most conversational approach is when the leader simply speaks without a teleprompter or interviewer to guide the conversation. The director can ask questions to prompt a topic or idea, but when the camera rolls the leader flies solo. If your film crew shoots B-roll they'll stitch it together with your best speaking takes to create a short video that tells a powerful story.

A great example of this approach is Michele Scannavini's video introducing himself as the new CEO of Coty. We spent one hour filming Michele speaking into the camera. He had the freedom to try several takes until he felt totally comfortable

with his message. We also spent a few more hours shooting B-roll of Michele driving his Vespa and interacting with colleagues around the office. These interactions showed Michele's warmth and creative energy—qualities that the Coty team was excited to see in their new leader. After filming, we condensed several hours' worth of footage into a seven-minute video that made a personal, intimate connection with viewers.

Speaking directly into the camera is not for everyone, but those who do feel comfortable with this approach tend to use it often. Scannavini says, "I found that looking directly at the camera was a better way for me to organize my thoughts and the message I wanted to deliver in the way that I wanted to deliver it."

Even without B-roll, the direct-to-camera approach offers lots of room to show your passion as a leader and connect with your audience.



Option #1: Direct-to-Camera



Michele Scannavini introducing himself as the new CEO of Coty. (Click the Play button to see the video.)

Option #1: Direct-to-Camera

Former Allergan CEO Paul Bisaro offers a great example in his brand refresh video. Although the entire video featured Paul speaking directly into the camera, it was still lively and impactful. This is because Paul, his team, and I worked through the material—in advance as well as on set—to make sure the message and delivery genuinely reflected Paul as a leader.

We shot nine takes, each time working with Paul to deliver his key messages, refining the next take to emphasize a new point, or working on ending with power and a warm smile. His message was not only about the words, but also about his passionate and heartfelt delivery.

You could literally feel his energy coming through the lens. Back in my studio, my crew and I turned forty-five minutes of footage into a three-minute video combining Paul's best takes.

Some busy leaders don't prep at all and simply read from a teleprompter on film day. It seems like an efficient choice since they can just show up, read the words, and carry on to

their next meeting. In theory this is true, but most people—leaders and viewers alike—aren't happy with the experience.

The truth is that a great teleprompter performance can take just as much time as some other communication formats.

Most communication professionals and leaders I've worked with dislike teleprompters because they limit any sense of spontaneity and tend to make leaders look stiff on camera. Nevertheless, in certain situations teleprompters may be required.



Option #2: Direct-to-Interviewer, On-Camera

In the direct-to-interviewer style, viewers are aware that you're having a conversation with someone else. That person can be on or off camera, but the bottom line is that viewers know you're not talking directly to them. While not as personal as direct-to-camera this approach can still spark a powerful connection with your audience as they hear your message and witness your passion as you speak to an interviewer.

The same elements of time and preparation discussed previously apply here. Your director or communication staff will help you refine your message and will shoot several takes until your delivery is clear and genuine. In post-production, your video team will edit a long interview down to a few powerful minutes and weave in B-roll, if applicable.

People are perhaps most familiar with the on-camera interview since it's used in shows like 60 Minutes. In this format,

the interviewer and interviewee both appear on camera and viewers observe their conversation. While you're used to seeing this style on TV, remember that your video will be shot under much different circumstances. Unlike many TV interviews, the conversation in your video is under your control.

Your interviewer won't try to get you to dish about topics you don't want to cover, or throw any surprise questions at you. You are in a safe space that you can trust. The goal is to help you communicate the message you want to share in what is an organic conversation.



Option #2: Direct-to-Interviewer, On-Camera



Trevor Noah interviewing Greta Thunberg on-camera. This is a very familiar style because it's seen on most talk shows.

Option #2: Direct-to-Interviewer, On-Camera



Here's a variation on the Direct-to-Interviewer style called "The Walk-and-Talk," seen here on 60 Minutes with Anderson Cooper interviewing Adele.



Option #3: Direct-to-Interviewer, Off-Camera

Another direct-to-interviewer style is the off-camera interview. This is a kind of one-way conversation between the director, acting as the interviewer, and the interviewee.

Viewers don't see the director because he or she is never filmed, and the questions are edited out of the final video.

When filming in this style, I try to create a relaxed, natural environment. If the person is seated, I sit across from them off-camera and close by the side of the camera lens. If they are standing, so am I, to keep the eye line natural. The person we're interviewing is not looking directly into the lens but rather at me. Because I'm so close to the camera, the eye line is such that the viewer feels he's in the room. Think of the camera in this case as the viewer's point of view.

This approach allows for a back and forth "conversation" and the kind of freedom I need to make a personal connection with the leader that helps them speak from the heart. This is

the sacred space. I don't have to worry about camera angles or sound while in the moment. The crew is handling that.

All I need to do is concentrate on helping the leader express his or her humanity and passion for the issue or topic at hand. It could be a merger announcement, a thank you to employees for a job well done, or a chance for a CEO to lay out his or her vision to employees.



Option #3: Direct-to-Interviewer, Off-Camera)



Interviewing CEO Brent Saunders Direct-to-Interviewer. I will not appear in the final video.



Option #4: Roundtable

The roundtable discussion is a variation on the direct-to-interviewer style, but in this case several people are discussing a topic, sharing insights, encouraging comments and we see all of them on camera.

Since more than one person is being filmed, roundtables require multiple cameras. Footage from all of the cameras is edited together into a short video that captures the discussion's key moments and ideas.

The roundtable is particularly effective for discussing complex issues when you want different points of view to come forward. You may not want one person to be the total focus because someone in the group may contribute interesting and less familiar points of view to the audience.

This was the case when leaders from pharmaceutical companies Allergan filmed a roundtable. The talk showed Paul Bisaro, CEO of Allergan, and Brent Saunders, CEO of Forest

Laboratories, alongside three other colleagues, discussing the companies' merger. At the time, Paul's role was shifting from CEO to Executive Chair while Brent would become CEO of the newly formed company. The roundtable was an excellent format for showing the camaraderie that existed between these leaders. Their non-verbals reflected their warmth toward one another, and emphasized that they were a strong, cohesive team with a shared purpose. Paul said, "The five of us free-flowed conversation . . . It was open, it was honest, it wasn't scripted. It was people talking genuinely from their heart and it resonated extremely well with the company."

The roundtable creates the feeling of a team working together and shows how the team responds, reacts, and interacts with one another. It lets viewers see the speakers' passion and insider perspectives as they follow up with one another and build on a point in the conversation. The organic conversation creates a rich dynamic where people's ideas are sparked by what the previous speaker has said.



Option #4: Roundtable

In most cases, someone guided by the off-camera director starts off the conversation. Everyone knows the subject of the conversation and the key points that need to be discussed, but it's important to keep it loose. You don't want to be so specific about the talking points that people start rehearsing what they'll say beforehand. That's a deathblow to the spontaneity and authenticity that makes this format so special.

My job as the director is to keep the group's energy up and move through the agreed-upon series of topics. Some people are good at succinct statements, others drift off into long stories that are interesting but probably won't make the cut for a short film. If the conversation loses its focus, the director may call "cut" to refocus the discussion. I always make it clear that no one should ever feel bad about this call or become self-conscious about the amount of time they take to contribute.

The director in this scenario has to have a light touch. Before filming, I work closely with the leaders and/or their trusted

team to create a list of topics that need to be covered. When the camera rolls, I need to make sure we've hit each point, and that the communication team feels the same.

I often consult with the leader's advisors as we're filming to ask if they think anything is missing. Sometimes, if something hasn't been brought up, I'll slip a question on paper to one of the panelists who are not being filmed at the moment. Once I'm out of the shot, I'll cue that participant with a hand signal to ask the question when the opportunity seems right. It's a continual team effort, especially when several people are on camera.

The only instance I'll ever have to stop a roundtable session is because we're changing camera cards, which in turn, allows for a thoughtful break every so often. People can stand up and stretch, go to the bathroom, and recharge before the next take.



Option #4: Roundtable



Roundtable discussion for KPMG. (Click the Play button to see the video.)

Option #5: Direct-to-Audience

I often turn to direct-to-audience video communications when the leaders I'm filming are camera shy, but great in front of a room. In this setup, viewers see the leader speaking to a live audience. The actual scenario can range from a large public event, such as a town hall meeting, to a closed studio session with a small audience that we've cast just for this video. Using a small audience can create an intimate setting that allows the speaker to interact with others on camera in a way that plays to their strengths.

The fluid format can also be beneficial to those who have little time to prep, since most leaders are already comfortable talking to a roomful of people. Now they just need to do it while a camera rolls.

I recently filmed three leaders at the consulting group KPMG. I joined the team just after they'd recorded a series of unsuccessful videos with another film crew. They felt they didn't come across authentically in those videos, and they wanted

my help being real on camera. I knew I had to bring a fresh approach, but the leaders' schedules were airtight. They just couldn't dedicate more than a couple of hours total to video prep, and their personalities were not coming through on a teleprompter. When I asked their advisors what these leaders were like, they told me they were fabulous in front of a room. Their hope was to capture the warmth, passion, and charisma that these guys radiated when talking face-to-face with their employees. But until that point, those qualities had been totally absent when the camera rolled.

I decided that if these leaders were great in front of a room, then that's where viewers should see them. We created an environment that looked like a TV show, with a studio audience, visible cameras on set, and a TV crew. My team and I carefully cast the "audience members," all of whom were KPMG employees. The people selected were passionate about the company and brought a great energy to the room, which made for excellent, organic interactions with the leaders.



Option #5: Direct-to-Audience

The final video captured the leaders in their element: talking about their work with colleagues, answering questions, and discussing topics that viewers were eager to hear about. A lot of prep time went into setting up the “show,” but all the leaders had to do was know the points they wanted to discuss, and show up ready for a great conversation.

Our concentrated efforts on this one shoot yielded six short videos on a variety of topics. The company was armed with a small library of content that showed their leaders being real with their tribe, and speaking passionately about their shared work.

Direct-to-audience is a great antidote for the leader who is reluctant to speak to the camera at all. Years ago, I worked with an energy company whose CEO refused to be filmed. He just felt he wouldn't be effective on camera. I always thought it would be important to get him on video, and I finally got my chance when he called a town hall meeting after a natural

disaster. Without hesitation, this guy got in front of hundreds of people who had lost their homes and talked passionately about how his company would help the community. He said he would make a donation and give employees time off to help with relief efforts.

Back in my studio, I edited segments of the CEO's talk into a larger video about the company. It helped give the company a face, and let the public know that the company's commitment to the community was coming from the very top. The CEO hadn't even realized the talk was being recorded, but when he saw the video, he conceded he wasn't so bad on camera after all.

In the same vein, this format is perfect for condensing a recorded speech into a short video. Editing lets us pull highlights from the talk and perhaps even pair that footage with B-roll for a short but powerful film.



Option #5: Direct-to-Audience



John Hess filmed Direct-to-Audience. He was very comfortable in front of a room but less so in front of a camera. (Click the Play button to see the video.)



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