LEADERSHIP IN FOCUS

BRINGING OUT YOUR BEST ON CAMERA

VERN OAKLEY
PART I

THE VIDEO MIND-SET
Never a Better Time
to Be on Camera

“No art passes our conscience in the way film
does, and goes directly to our feelings . . .”

—INGMAR BERGMAN

It’s hard to imagine that film has only been around for a little over a century. When compared to artistic media like music, painting, and sculpture, film is practically in its infancy. And that’s true of film in general. This book zeroes in on something much newer than that—the idea of leaders appearing on-screen to connect with their audience. Scientists are just starting to measure the effects of how individuals express themselves on camera. It’s an exciting time. The brave people who already embrace video have been doing so without much knowledge as to how their appearances influence viewers. They know they can leverage their in-person communication skills in front of the lens, but a lot more goes into great video performances than most people realize.
The first leader to truly leverage film’s benefits was John F. Kennedy when he went up against Richard Nixon in the 1960 presidential debates. As he prepared for the debates, Kennedy had to have sensed the potential of television when he asked American film director Arthur Penn (Bonnie and Clyde, The Miracle Worker, etc.) to coach him on how to behave on camera. Penn helped him learn to relax and urged Kennedy to be himself—down to that “Hahvud Yahd” Boston accent.

The debates were broadcast on television and radio. Radio listeners thought Nixon outperformed Kennedy, yet TV watchers came to the opposite conclusion. Nixon was nervous and sweaty; Kennedy was personable and confident. The election was close, but JFK won and, as TIME magazine noted, many attributed his edge to his brilliant on-camera performance.¹

The Kennedy–Nixon debates proved that a powerful on-camera appearance could eclipse the impact of the spoken word. Since then, politicians have turned television appearances into something akin to an art form. From Ronald Reagan to Al Franken to Donald Trump, politicians’ on-camera skills have greatly enhanced their political impact. Business leaders followed politicians’ lead as some of industry’s biggest icons began to appear on camera. In the 1980s, Chrysler hired famed documentary filmmakers Albert and David Maysles to direct a series of videos that were shown to Chrysler dealers.² They were among the first videos in which CEO Lee Iacocca appeared, and they marked the beginning of a video journey that eventually led to Iacocca starring in several television commercials that resurrected the company’s image.

The Maysles brought their famed direct cinema style to Chrysler’s in-house videos. True to their method, the brothers didn’t set up false scenarios or glorify reality. They strictly adhered to capturing Iacocca’s
true personality, which was refreshing given the artificiality of films and documentaries at the time. A 1982 *New York Times* article about the Maysles’ corporate work noted that “the number of four-letter words enunciated by the Chrysler chairman [in those videos] seems to exceed the number of Chryslers sold last year.”

In that same article, the brothers were quick to tell the *Times* that they did not have an affinity toward most corporate videos. David was quoted saying, “Most of these sales films [are] not very good. They’re dull, they’re done by committee, they’re stiff.” Albert shared his brother’s disdain, “Most corporate films start as a puff piece, continue as a puff piece, and end as a puff piece. So no one’s interested.”

Unfortunately, not much has changed in three decades. Now more than ever, viewers crave the raw honesty that the Maysles brought to life in their films. Even though we may never meet our political leaders, we expect to get to know them through their on-camera appearances. Millennials, in particular, see straight through the veneer when a leader tries to be someone they’re not, whether on camera or off. But many organizations still opt for puff pieces over truth-telling, and viewers are forced to fill in the blanks about whatever they think their leaders might not be telling them.

Working with the Maysles on Chrysler’s in-house videos helped Iacocca show his true self to viewers. By the time he was ready for national TV commercials, his booming personality nearly jumped through the screen and into viewers’ living rooms.

Ad executive Leo-Arthur Kelmenson got the idea to have Iacocca star in a series of Chrysler commercials to help pull the company out of its slump. Iacocca’s mission was to assure America that “The pride is back” (the name of their ad campaign) and that the government’s
1979 bailout was taxpayer money well spent. Few leaders had appeared on camera like this before. At stake were the CEO’s reputation and the jobs of thousands of employees.

The commercials featured Iacocca strutting across the factory floor spouting straight talk about Chrysler’s quality and innovation. It was Iacocca essentially being himself. He looked straight into the camera and challenged Americans with from-the-heart lines like “If you can find a better car, buy it.” The ads made Iacocca an icon for the American comeback and helped pull Chrysler out of its financial death spiral.

Now, we’re not Lee Iacocca or JFK. But the good news is, these days we don’t have to be. You don’t need to buy an expensive TV commercial spot (although you can) or wait for your chance to be in a nationally televised debate to engage with a wide audience through film. All you need is a well-made video, an Internet connection, and great on-camera communication. These last details can’t be underestimated.

WE LIVE IN A DIGITAL VIDEO WORLD

According to Cisco, 82 percent of all Internet traffic will be video by 2020. Learning to communicate effectively on camera is not a choice for leaders anymore; it’s a necessity because we live in a digital video world. Gone are the days when authentic video appearances like Iacocca’s were a novelty. Video is now ubiquitous, and it’s changed the way we’re expected to do business. Today’s audiences want to see leaders talking to them through computers, phones, and tablets at the drop of a hat. According to a study coauthored by Forbes and Google, three quarters of executives surveyed said they watch work-related
videos on business websites at least weekly, and half surveyed were apt to share videos with colleagues.6

Technology moves so quickly that modern video platforms are in their infancy. Social media, YouTube, and business-focused video outlets like Kickstarter evolve every day, and there’s no telling how new apps are going to affect the way video is distributed and consumed in the future. Tech is also constantly changing the recording mechanisms, the playback mechanisms, and how we work with the material. In 2015, the first feature film shot entirely on an iPhone was released at the Sundance Film Festival. At the time of this writing, iPhones already shoot at a higher resolution than HD. Technology informs how we view and create films, but it doesn’t change the vital need to understand communication, body language, storytelling, and honesty. Those elements are timeless.

Whether you lead a Fortune 500 company, a university, a start-up, or a nonprofit—your on-camera appearances will affect your organization’s future. Global culture has embraced video as the ultimate communications currency, but so far, many leaders are failing their audiences. According to a survey, 74 percent of consumers feel that open, transparent communication is critical to effective leadership, but only 29 percent feel their leaders communicate effectively.7 People naturally see their leader as an icon of the organization they run. If you want to connect with the people, you have to go where they are. You have to reach them through their screen.

Shrinking attention spans also mean your video has to be short and captivating. In no more than a few minutes, you need to hook readers with a story, communicate your message, and incite action. Once it’s posted online, your video is likely to live on the Internet, or on your
company’s intranet, twenty-four hours a day, indefinitely. Every time viewers watch it, they will experience your message exactly the way you intended it to reach them.

It doesn’t matter where we are these days. The Internet and smartphones let us connect with our audience anywhere, at any time. This makes video the next best thing to delivering important news to employees, customers, or other stakeholders around the world in person—especially in cases when an email or memo absolutely will not do. It lets us control our message and show people who we really are during times when they need to know we’re there for them.

We have the power to connect with audiences that are infinitely larger than those that Iacocca and JFK spent their lifetimes (and major corporate dollars) trying to reach. But our viewers can easily dismiss us if we seem untrustworthy. If you turn into a sweaty Nixon when the tape begins to roll, viewers won’t hang on long enough to even hear your story. Or worse, they’ll watch, but they won’t believe a word you’re saying.

Forget the slick performances that showcase the leader you think you should be. Those charades fool no one, and they push you further away from the people you want to connect with the most. The best leaders know how to let down their guard and communicate their vision, human-to-human, with every person they hope to reach.

**VIDEO’S SECRET SAUCE**

Video is wildly different from a recorded speech, where the camera never cuts away from the subject, or a live performance, where
the audience and speaker can share an energy or rhythm by being in the same room. Video is distinct in that its creators leverage the practices of film in order to craft a brief, powerful final piece. A professional video team can edit hours of interview footage into a few short minutes containing only your essential ideas. Other tools like B-roll—alternate footage interwoven with your speaking parts—can help viewers see a human side of your message that goes beyond the words or even your non-verbals. B-roll can be anything from shots of you playing with your dog to an exciting interaction with colleagues. I’ll talk about these topics in more detail throughout the book.

It will only get easier to create effective videos as technology and film methods advance. On the extreme end, Japan is already using robot newscasters that appear strikingly real. Now, we’re probably a long way from being able to replace you with your robotic twin, but the advice in this book should help you relax enough so you won’t feel you need one.

TIMELESS WISDOM FOR A MODERN AGE
As innovations soar, our longtime mentors often still possess the timeliest wisdom. I studied with JFK’s TV coach Arthur Penn for years and I deeply admire his work. I hadn’t realized Penn had possibly changed the course of US history until I read his New York Times obituary. The article notes, “Mr. Penn’s instructions to Kennedy—to look directly into the camera and keep his responses brief and pithy—helped give Kennedy an aura of confidence and calm that created a vivid contrast to Nixon, his more experienced but less telegenic Republican rival.”
This point helped me see that I’d been applying the concepts I’d learned from Penn and other teachers about acting, performance, and authenticity in theater and film to every person I’ve directed on camera. Penn inadvertently taught me that in a world laden with wooden video appearances, the best way to stand out is to show that you’re a real, accessible human. His wisdom is still relevant decades later, and even more today, as we’re glued to our devices and constantly craving human connection. The need for human connection is primal. It’s a big reason I decided to write this book.

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**Never a Better Time to Be on Camera—Key Ideas**

- Film is a fairly young art form. Not much study has gone into how individuals express themselves on camera.

- The first leaders to leverage film were politicians, but business leaders soon followed suit. Video is experiencing a renaissance as more and more leaders turn to video to connect with their tribe.

- Honest video communication is no longer a novelty. Audiences expect their leaders to communicate with them on-screen, and shrinking attention spans mean we have to make an emotional connection almost instantly.
Producers can leverage film practices to craft a brief but powerful final piece.

I hope the chapters ahead will move you to make the most of your video appearances, because there’s never been a better time to be on camera. Every appearance is a chance to build your culture, communicate your vision, and engage and inspire others. Your tribe is waiting for you to get real on their screen. Are you ready to show them who their leader truly is?
About the Author

Veteran filmmaker, teacher, speaker, and industry thought leader Vern Oakley is CEO and creative director of Tribe Pictures, which he founded in 1986.

Vern has created films for Fortune 500 companies, nonprofit organizations, universities, and their leaders. His mission is to help humanize the world’s most successful leaders and institutions, helping them to craft their stories and connect to the people who matter most. Personally, Vern has been on a lifelong journey to explore and express his own authenticity and to create meaningful human connections. To this end, he has studied with a variety of experts and institutions from Arthur Penn and the Actor’s Studio to Harvard Business School.

A client of Vern’s once bestowed on him the unofficial title “Business Artist.” He believes this captures his comfort with both left- and right-brain endeavors and his passion for sharing these lessons with others.
And . . . Action! If a message feels important enough for video, it’s likely because you want to move the audience to action—potential investors to take a stake in your company, current employees to embrace a new initiative, prospective employees to bring their talents to your organization.

Your video can help you inspire your tribe—the people you want to influence—to take action. But if you want them to do more than listen, your audience needs to feel an authentic connection with you.

Veteran filmmaker Vern Oakley offers strategies that can help the reader relax and be their best, authentic self in front of the camera. The return on investment will be a stronger connection to those they want to reach; heightened respect, prestige, and interest in their organization; a stronger brand; and a longer-lasting legacy.

*Leadership in Focus* is a comprehensive, entertaining guide for leaders who realize that it’s not just what you say on camera that’s important—it’s how you say it. Whether a CEO, middle manager, or budding entrepreneur making YouTube videos to influence their tribe, this book will help them rally others around a message.

Marketing Campaign

- National trade marketing and sales campaign
- Online marketing campaign including trade advertising and advance giveaways on Goodreads and 800-CEO-READ

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