



Making Consistently Great People Photographs

Presentation Handout · KelbyOne Photographing People Virtual Photography Conference

This handout follows the structure of the talk. Each section includes the core insight, key takeaways, and one practical action you can apply on your very next shoot.

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01 The Uncomfortable Truth

Most photographers are terrible with people. And that has almost nothing to do with technical ability. The photographers I'm describing usually understand light, nail exposure, and have composition down cold. What they're missing is something much harder to teach: they've never stopped to ask what it feels like to be on the other side of the camera.

"Consistent results don't come from talent. They come from a system."

- The gap between what you can visualize and what you can actually coax out of a person standing in front of your camera is the gap worth closing.
- Even the most talented photographers can be wildly inconsistent when operating on instinct alone without a repeatable process behind them.
- If you're further along in your career, use this as a diagnostic rather than a refresher. The title is "Consistently Great," and that one word changes everything.

02 What Actually Matters, and in What Order

There's a hierarchy to what matters in people photography, and most photographers have it inverted.

01 CONNECTION

Before light. Before composition. Before any technical decision. If there's no genuine connection between you and your subject, the image is a technical exercise. It might be a very impressive one. But it won't make someone feel something, and making people feel something is the whole point.

02 LIGHT & COMPOSITION

Both matter enormously, but the order depends on your working environment. In a studio, lean on light to carry the image. On location, lean on compositional instinct and vision. Neither approach is wrong. The skill is knowing which lever to pull.

03 TECHNICAL EXECUTION

The goal of technical skill is to make the technical disappear. The moment you're thinking about your settings is the moment you're not thinking about your subject. The best technical photographers operate on autopilot technically.

"Your camera is the least important thing you own." — Joe Edelman

03 Posing Is a Lie, and Your Subjects Know It

Posing was not invented by photographers. It was invented by painters. When a portrait sitting took weeks or months, the subject had no choice but to hold still. Early photography borrowed the convention because the technology demanded it. A modern camera can freeze motion at 1/8000th of a second. There is no longer any technical reason for a subject to hold a pose. But posing stayed. It got institutionalized. And then it got industrialized.

"When you take another person and try to put them into somebody else's body, it doesn't work."

When someone is posed, their body doesn't feel right. That physical discomfort shows up in the photograph as tension. In the eyes. In the shoulders. In the jaw. Their friends and family who see the image know something is off, even if they couldn't say why.

The alternative is prompts.

A prompt is an instruction that elicits a genuine physical response rather than a manufactured one. Instead of manufacturing a pose, you manufacture a moment.

INSTEAD OF DIRECTING A POSITION...	USE A PROMPT:
<i>"Put your hand on your hip."</i>	"Walk toward me like you just heard your name called across the room."
<i>"Tilt your head to the left."</i>	"Tell me about the last time you laughed so hard you couldn't breathe."
<i>"Look directly at the camera."</i>	"What were you doing this time last year?"

The study of body language is one of the most underrated skills in portrait photography. When you understand how people actually hold their bodies, what tension looks like versus ease, what genuine confidence looks like versus performed confidence, you stop trying to construct shapes and start reading the person in front of you.

TRY THIS

On your next portrait session, replace three directing instructions with prompts. Instead of telling someone where to put their body, describe a moment or an emotion and photograph what happens.

04 Building Real Connection

The single habit that will do more for your people photography than any piece of gear you'll ever buy: have a real conversation with your subject before you ever pick up the camera. Not small talk. A real conversation where you're genuinely curious about the person in front of you and listening more than you're talking.

"Authenticity cannot be manufactured. It can only be cultivated."

When someone is uncomfortable, their body shows it. Shoulders come up. Jaw tightens. Eyes get slightly flat. They start performing, and when they're performing, you're photographing a performance, not a person. A genuine pre-shoot conversation gives the subject a chance to relax before the camera adds pressure, gives you information you can use during the shoot to prompt genuine reactions, and signals that you're actually interested in them as a person.

Practical habits:

- Ask what they're nervous about. Almost everyone being photographed is nervous about something. When you name it, you defuse it.
- Mirror your own energy. Mirroring is a real neurological phenomenon. If you want a relaxed subject, be a relaxed photographer.
- The first 20 frames of almost any portrait session are not real frames. They're the warm-up. Stop evaluating them as failures. Tell the subject: "These first ones are just for both of us to get comfortable."
- Keep talking as the shoot continues. If you want genuine warmth, ask about someone they love. If you want a real smile, ask about something funny. If you want confidence, ask about something they're proud of.
- Watch the hands. Hands are one of the first places people hold tension. Give them something to do with a prompt, not a placement.

When a subject feels genuinely seen, their nervous system actually relaxes. You can photograph that. When a subject feels like a prop, their nervous system does the opposite. You can photograph that too, and it's not pretty.

TRY THIS

Before your next session, spend five real minutes in conversation before picking up the camera. Ask: "What are you hoping to feel in these images?" and "Is there anything you're nervous about?" Then listen without rushing to reassure.

05 The Universal Language of Light

Studio and natural light photography are taught as two separate disciplines. The execution differs. The underlying principles are identical. Whether in a studio or with natural light, the language is the same.

Every great people photograph has one dominant light source.

Whether it's the sun, a window, or a studio strobe, one key light is responsible for the shape of the face, the direction of the shadows, and the quality of the image. Once you understand this, the division between studio and natural light starts to feel much less significant.

Three variables describe everything that matters:

Quality

Hard or soft. The size of the light source relative to your subject determines this. The sun at midday is small and hard. An overcast sky is enormous and soft. A studio strobe through a large umbrella is soft. The same strobe fired directly is hard. The physics are identical whether you're in a studio or outdoors.

Direction

The angle of the light relative to the face determines where shadows fall and what they reveal. Light from directly in front flattens. Light from the side sculpts. Light from above creates drama. Learning to read how light falls on a face transfers completely from the studio to any natural light environment.

Color

The most underrated of the three, and the one that most strongly affects the emotional tone of an image. Warm light feels intimate and inviting. Cool light feels clean and contemporary. Mixed color sources can be beautiful or a mess, depending on whether you understand what's happening.

Bridging studio and natural light:

- Natural light photographers: when you analyze light in terms of quality, direction, and color before you shoot, you stop reacting to available light and start using it. That window in the coffee shop is a giant softbox. Position your subject accordingly.
- Studio photographers: thinking about natural light as a key light makes you more versatile everywhere you go. You stop thinking about the gear and start thinking about the principles the gear is helping you apply.
- One round catchlight in the eye, from a key light positioned slightly above eye level. The brain is hardwired to expect light from above. Keep the catchlight clean.

TRY THIS	On your next shoot, describe your light out loud before you take the first frame: "My key light is [hard or soft]. It's coming from [direction]. The color is [warm, cool, or neutral]." Do this until the analysis is automatic.
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06 Structured Spontaneity

The structure is your plan. The spontaneity is your permission to abandon it when something better is happening. A great photograph often occurs not when you're executing the plan, but when the plan creates conditions that produce something unexpected. The skill is holding both simultaneously.

- Before any session, know your three to five essential results. These are the shots without which the session is incomplete. Everything else is gravy. That clarity frees you up to play above the floor without anxiety.
- Think of a great shoot the way you'd think of a good conversation. It builds. It has peaks and quieter moments. Don't burn hot early and coast.
- When things aren't working, step back and change something. The answer is almost never to push harder. Change location, put the camera down for two minutes, show the subject a great frame from earlier.
- Review images with subjects selectively. A great frame at the right moment can unlock the rest of the session. Showing a bad frame, or showing frames too often, kills the energy faster than almost anything else.

07 The Consistency Framework

Connection, light, prompts, structured spontaneity: these are skills, not concepts. Skills require a system. The Consistency Framework has three parts. Build habits in all three, and your results will be consistently excellent.

Before the shoot

- Know your subject. Use the consultation not just for logistics but to understand who they are, what they're hoping to feel, and what they're anxious about.
- Scout the location at the time of day you'll be shooting. Know the light before the session starts.
- Have a plan, not a script. Know your essential shots. Give yourself enough structure to stay confident and enough flexibility to follow what happens.

During the shoot

- Stay present. Keep talking. Read the face, the body, the energy in the room.
- Ask yourself every few minutes: do the images I'm getting match what I envisioned? If not, make a change. Don't wait until the session is over.
- Protect your technical baseline. Settings should be dialed in before the subject arrives. Adjustments happen in the background of your awareness, not the foreground.

After the shoot

- Three questions after every significant session: What worked? What didn't? What would I do differently next time?
- This is not a quick mental note. Sit with those questions. Write the answers down. This is how you systematically get better over time.

The Consistency Framework is not complicated. It is disciplined. The difference between a photographer who consistently produces excellent work and one who occasionally does is almost always the presence or absence of this kind of deliberate, systematic approach on both sides of the shutter click.



**Now go pick up that camera and shoot something.
"Your BEST shot is your NEXT shot."**

— Joe Edelman

www.JoeEdelman.com

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