Digital Body Language

What's in it for me? Become a great digital communicator.

Late email replies, ambiguous texts, awkward video calls . . . In today's world, where so many of our daily interactions happen from behind a screen, it sometimes seems like we've lost our ability to effectively communicate with each other. And it's true: without traditional body language to convey – or clue us in to – tone and meaning, what, when, and how to say things is often confusing. But, there are actually dozens of digital cues at our disposal. We just need to learn to tune in. These blinks highlight the specific dos and don'ts of virtual exchanges in order to sidestep misunderstandings and foster connection. By mastering your digital body language, you'll save time, worry less, and ensure your voice comes across loud and clear – no matter the physical distance.

If you want to communicate effectively in the virtual age, you need to tune into your digital body language.

Here's an all too common story. Laura and Dave were having a fight via text. Back and forth it went – for hours. Finally, Laura gave up and typed, So r we thru? Dave replied, I guess so. Devastated by the loss of her three-year relationship, Laura called in sick to work the next day. That night, Dave showed up at her door, wondering why she hadn't come to dinner as planned. You can probably tell where this is going. Laura thought they were through, while Dave meant they were through arguing. Oops. Laura and Dave aren't alone in their confusion. We send each other an unbelievable amount of messages every day. And a lot of these messages are taken the wrong way. Take email. 306 billion emails are exchanged each day; the average person sends 30 and receives 96. According to the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, the tone of our emails is misinterpreted 50 percent of the time! Our bewilderment boils down to the fact that we're cue-less – in the most literal sense. Anthropologist Edward T. Hall had a name for the nonverbal cues – things like eye contact, smiles, pauses, yawns, tone, volume, posture, and proximity – which make up nearly three-quarters of face-to-face communication. He called them "the silent language." Problem is, the silent language isn't exactly visible from behind a screen. And the gap between intention and interpretation in the digital world is only made bigger by the online disinhibition effect. This happens when we let loose and express ourselves with a level of informality we'd never entertain offline. What does this all say for the modern workplace, where roughly 70 percent of communication among teams is virtual? Or for our personal lives, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, where socialization online is more frequent than in-person meetups? In these blinks, I'm going to explore our understanding of body language and redefine it for the contemporary world. By focusing on how we say something, as well as on what we say – in other words, by becoming aware of our digital body language – I believe we can increase productivity, boost mental well-being, and ensure we're our best selves, even online.

Onscreen, your physical body language

translates into punctuation, timing, and medium.

Time for another story. One day, Jack, a mid-level manager, received an email from his boss. It ended with a simple sentence: That'll be fine. (period). But everything was not fine. That period haunted Jack. It was a microbomb: disapproving and deadly. Jack worried and worried. Why had his boss used a period? Why hadn't she used an exclamation point? The period was arguably once the world's most boring piece of punctuation, used to denote that a sentence had ended. But today, the little black dot has taken on an outsized and often-unintended meaning. When a friend, colleague, or, in this case, Jack's boss, ends a message with a period, it's usually seen as a sign of aggression. Direct eye contact. A cause for alarm. Meanwhile, exclamation points have gone from conveying emphasis, urgency, or excitement to also being used as a general indicator of friendliness; you risk being seen as cold if you don't use exclamation points. Because we can no longer rely on the sound and tone of our voices, every word, and every signal counts. The digital age is visual – the cues that were once implicit in body language now have to be made explicit online. If punctuation translates in-person emotion, the time it takes you to press Send signals respect. Digital conversations are often asynchronous, meaning they don't happen in "real time." This kind of communication can feel wildly convenient – or excruciatingly slow. Our brains have a way of creatively filling blank space with anxious thoughts, especially in situations where trust is low and power dynamics are out of whack. Finally, the medium you choose indicates how much you prioritize a conversation. Each channel – be it email, text, or phone – has its own underlying subtexts. Learning how to effectively wield this complex arsenal is a sign of professionalism. Now that you know the basics, it's time to walk the talk – or rather, write the talk. My four laws of digital body language lay out exactly how to implement this new ideal of communication in your daily life. My aim is that you spend less time obsessing over that period (or lack of exclamation marks) and more time feeling peaceful and productive.

Valuing Visibly means explicitly showing you're attentive, aware, and appreciative of others.

A lack of respect in a relationship spells D-O-O-M. In the workplace, it can kill motivation, collaborative efforts, and job satisfaction. And yet over 50 percent of employees report that they don't receive enough respect from their leaders. Are all bosses really inconsiderate jerks? Or are they just oblivious? But what if they're just not showing respect in ways that employees can recognize? The first law of digital body language acknowledges this disconnect. It focuses on the fact that unstated appreciation needs to become stated in today's world. Valuing Visibly means honing new skills to proactively show you value others' contributions and understand their needs. The first principle of valuing visibly is to show you're paying attention – "reading carefully is the new listening." To do this, always reference details in your communications. It shows you put in the time to consider the topics and care about the work the other person did. It goes without saying, but make sure you spell her name right! Second, demonstrate awareness by practicing radical recognition and honoring

others' time. What we mean here is not delaying your email responses, canceling meetings at short notice, or multitasking during conference calls – which, according to one study, a whopping 65 percent of people do. To address this, make a point to ban the mute button on team calls, and keep meetings engaging and concise. You can also practice awareness by acknowledging individual character differences. Balancing the voices of extroverts and introverts on calls or rapid email exchanges can be hard; even in the digital sphere, louder voices tend to monopolize conversations. Extroverts can benefit from access to additional social settings, like breakout rooms. To support introverts, send questions ahead of meetings so they have time to process and prepare, and schedule downtime between calls. Finally, valuing visibly means displaying appreciation – the equivalent of a smile or handwritten thank-you note in digital form. If you have any doubt that gratitude is important, consider this study, published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. Participants were asked for help writing a cover letter. Half received an email with a line including the words Thank you so much!, while the other half got the same email minus the thanks. Guess who was more than twice as likely to offer assistance? (Yes, that's a rhetorical question.)

Communicating Carefully involves choosing the right words, tone, and channel.

A recent survey revealed that up to 80 percent of all projects are hurt by lack of clarity and detail – and 56 percent of strategic projects crumble because of poor communication. The result? $75 million lost for every $1 billion spent – and this is just in the US. This is why my second law of digital body language is communicating carefully. As the name suggests, it involves making a concerted effort to curb misunderstandings by always being as clear as possible. To do this, you must become discerning with things like word choice, punctuation, nuance, and humor. But wait. Isn't that fodder for professional writers? Not quite. Just as reading carefully is the new listening, "writing clearly is the new empathy" – and it's considered by many top leaders to be a critical competitive advantage. In addition to being impeccable with your own words, it's essential to read the room – that is, tailor your tone to your audience. Think about how what you're saying may come across, especially based on your rank. And always remember, when communicating with your boss or colleagues, err on the side of neutrality. Greetings and signatures also indicate tone. If you want a swift, no-nonsense response, add a formal title in your email signature. Alternately, starting emails with Hey, or adding a smiley face to a one-liner, is a sign you're fairly informal. To stay in control of digital conversations, be conscious of the channel you're using. Length, complexity, and familiarity – with both the topic and recipient – should factor into your choice. For example, if you find that off-the-cuff texts aren't doing justice to a serious, complex issue, craft a more deliberate response via email. For longer emails, provide clarity with bold or underlined headings, and share context up front. Always be aware of your message's visual impact; the last thing you want to do is overwhelm your audience. Communicating carefully is about ensuring everyone's on the same page. When misinterpretations do happen, it's often because of a dropped word or out-of-place punctuation mark. So, I beg you, please make sure to proofread! If you're confused by a message, ask follow-up questions. If the medium's not working, switch it up; sometimes, a phone call is worth a thousand emails. If tone's the problem, assume the intentions were good, and respond with facts. When interpreting digital body language, giving

people the benefit of the doubt is key. Just like in real life, if we've offended someone, we're often the last to know.

To Collaborate Confidently, be consistent, stay informed, and exercise patient responses.

We may think of "deadlines" as the bane of our existence, but once upon a time, they truly were: during the American Civil War, prisoners who crossed these camp boundary lines would be shot. Today, luckily, the term holds a little less weight. But while overstepping deadlines in the modern workplace probably won't get you killed, meeting them still poses its own challenges. Take a Fortune study that recently reported that 60 percent of employees have to consult with at least ten colleagues per day just to get their jobs done. Traditionally, it was easy to pop by a colleague's desk for a quick request: Do you have a minute? Today, with numerous colleagues spread across different departments and time zones, it's a lot harder – and this makes the need for a consistent, realistic framework all the more necessary. Consistency is a hallmark of Collaborating Confidently – the third law of digital body language. Missed or muddled messages can cause confusion, leading to canceled meetings, inaction, or even chaos. To keep teams informed and up-to-date with what's happening, check-in with them regularly. To stay on track, it's important to set explicit goals from the get-go – ask yourself and each other What does success look like? – and remember to define thoughtful timeframes and expectations. You could, for example, end phone calls by asking, Who is doing what – and by when? I would also advise that you make yourself available for questions; after all, team members are more likely to stay motivated if they can reach you. That said, a crucial aspect of confident collaboration also means allowing yourself, and others, the time to craft careful, patient responses. We all know that answering messages when you're tired, frustrated, or angry will just lead to wasted time; so don't do it! While asynchronous communication comes with its drawbacks, it also provides us a chance to consider our words instead of blurting out things we immediately regret. So save your email as a draft, and wait up to 24 hours – a totally acceptable timeframe – to revise and send it. Hopefully, by then, you'll no longer be stewing under a gray cloud.

To foster an environment of Trusting Totally, be vulnerable and empower others to take ownership of their ideas.

In 2016, Microsoft released a chatterbot called Tay. It was poised to usher in new levels of human-AI interactions. Almost immediately, Twitter trolls hijacked it and taught it to tweet offensive, inappropriate words and images. Within 24 hours of its nascence, Tay was retired – forever. Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella could have blown up at his team's oversight. Instead, he wrote them an email: "Keep pushing, and know that I am with you . . . the key is to keep learning and improving." He knew that creating an atmosphere of failure and fear would crush future innovation, so he chose to invest in trust. When the fourth law of digital body language is in place and you can Trust Totally, you can take

calculated risks while knowing your teammates will support you and work together to achieve success. Likewise, being assured you won't get shot for stepping out of bounds – or that a period is nothing more than a little black dot – frees you and those around you to act without fear and try new things. To create this dynamic, first and foremost emphasize vulnerability. Leading by example makes it easier for team members to embrace the uncertainty of discomfort. Statements like "Operations is not my strong suit, and I'm open to your suggestions" or "I may be missing something – Can you help?" can encourage colleagues to speak up. Admitting you need input also reminds them how much you appreciate their contributions. Next, empower others. This involves entrusting them fully with their work, and providing them the means to complete it. Promote an environment of psychological safety in both good times and bad. This lets people know they can always introduce a controversial perspective or say, This isn't working for me, without worrying about the consequences. Inevitably, mistakes and bad ideas will crop up. Remember to criticize the action – not the person. And, like with the Tay scenario, continue to show support. You just might find that in a workplace of absolute trust, even a passive-aggressive or domineering colleague will transform into a decent, collaborative partner. Now that you know how to value visibly, communicate carefully, collaborate confidently, and trust totally, the last couple of blinks will look at how digital body language can be specifically targeted to transcend gender, geography, and generational differences.

The digital workplace can flatten traditional gender biases.

Penelope Gazin and Kate Dwyer were having a tough time. They'd just launched Witchsy, an online marketplace for unusual art products, and were receiving more than a little condescending email correspondence from potential clients and collaborators. That's when they brought in a male cofounder, Keith, who was put in charge of PR. Perhaps unsurprisingly, having a male cofounder immediately boosted the women's business. The kicker? Keith was nothing more than a name on a screen. A less dramatic but more widespread effect of text-based communication? It presents an unprecedented way for women to share authority in a male-dominated workforce. That's because written words deemphasize traditional signs of leadership like voice timbre. At the same time, certain traditional gender norms are being amplified in professional settings. According to the Harvard Business Review, women need to be seen as warm and confident in order for their competence to be recognized. Competent men, on the other hand, are seen as such – additional emotional data be damned. In any case, it's important to be true to your authentic self, but also to adapt to the tone of your workplace. Not using softening exclamations can cause anxiety among colleagues; simply changing an OK to an OK, great!, for example, can build camaraderie and go a long way in boosting your team's trust and engagement. As a leader, you can nix any expectation for niceties by establishing a general rule of starting all workplace emails with WINFY – that's "What I Need From You." To emanate confidence, avoid over-apologizing ("I'm so soooo sorry!") and hedging language ("Could you maybe . . ."). A handy Gmail plug-in called Just Not Sorry can help with this. There's no question gender biases are real, but this brave new digital world is helping to level the playing field. So whether you're drafting an email or setting up a team call, check your own implicit biases. Don't feed into stereotypes, and think about whose voices you could potentially amplify. Remember, each of us has the power to break the status quo.

Bridge divides by being aware of communication differences across cultures and generations.

Here's a question for you: Is it Speak now, or forever hold your peace or The loudest duck gets shot? Here's another: Say one person raised in the West and another raised in China are colleagues. Who's more likely to brainstorm out loud? and who will think in silence? We often don't realize how childhood stories or cultural upbringing influence our communication styles. And so when someone else's norms clash with our own, we judge them as too flashy or too formal without pausing to consider the circumstances. So what's going on here? Communication experts generally divide the world into two types of cultural expression. High-context cultures – countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Mediterranean, Central Europe, and Latin America – rely on implicit communication and nonverbal cues. But in low-context cultures – most English-speaking Western countries, including the US and the UK – explicit verbal communication is essential. To thrive in high-context cultures, read between the lines, build long-term relationships, and employ face-to-face and phone interactions to foster trust. Begin emails with a polite greeting, followed by the question at hand, and then a personal note, like How was your holiday? Be aware of hierarchies – that might mean cc'ing a manager. With low-context cultures, to-the-point emails and messages can be enough to build strong relationships. Use bold text and bullet points to highlight details, only agree to tasks you actually plan on pursuing, and don't mix business with pleasure – oh, and make sure all your messages are legible on a smartphone! But it's not just where you come from. Your generation also informs how you use and perceive communication devices. So ask yourself: Are you a digital native or a digital adapter? For someone who's grown up texting, emails are considered formal, and receiving a phone call out of the blue can trigger panic. But for someone who's had to adapt to digital interfaces later in life, emails are casual convos and phone calls are a cinch. Instead of trying to force your preferences on anyone, be open. Phone-phobia can easily be preempted by sending a preliminary text or email to schedule a call. And lean in to emojis! You don't need to outdo the average person and send 96 per day, but a vivid emoji once in a while can be a useful shortcut to convey intent. Finally, don't be afraid to discuss differences. As with all communication, a curious rather than accusing mindset is key. In other words, a question mark / is better than an exclamation point /– period.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: As our professional and personal lives become more and more digitized, we no longer have traditional body language to help facilitate understanding – and our communication (as well as productivity and morale) is suffering as a result. To reduce friction and banish confusion, we need to establish a universal digital body language based on four core principles: valuing visibly, communicating carefully, collaborating confidently, and trusting totally. Implementing these behaviors with awareness and openness will lead to adaptive, resilient bonds that thrive across genders, generations, and cultures. And here's some Actionable advice: Create virtual watercooler moments. A lot changes when we transition to remote work. But research shows that what we miss most are the spontaneous social interactions: walking by someone's desk to say hi, asking a preoccupied colleague whether she's OK,

or dissecting that Netflix episode together. These watercooler moments are crucial for building camaraderie and trust, while also helping us keep a finger on the pulse of our workplace. So what do you do in the absence of an actual watercooler? It's easy: create online time to hang out and shoot the shit – five to ten minutes at the start of a team meeting can do the trick! Got any feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with Digital Body Language as the subject line, and share your thoughts!