Digital Body Language

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Digital Body Language

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Also by Erica Dhawan

Get Big Things Done: The Power of Connectional Intelligence (with Saj-nicole Joni)

Titlepage

Digital Body Language

How to Build Trust and Connection, No Matter the Distance

Erica Dhawan

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Introduction

Introduction

After co-authoring my first book, Get Big Things Done: The Power of Connectional Intelligence, I traveled the world, speaking and consulting with companies and leaders on the challenges of 21st century collaboration. Among my mission was to help CEOs and organizations solve the practical challenges of managing across global, multi-generational, matrixed and virtual teams.

Everywhere I went, the same questions kept coming up: How do I keep my teams feeling connected to each other and to people on other teams? How do I help people of different ages and working styles who rarely meet in person communicate effectively? Why does it seem infinitely harder to foster trust, engagement, and the confidence to take risks? And finally, why do my own communications so often seem to miss the mark, with unintended and anxiety-producing consequences?

The more I worked with my clients to solve these problems, the more obvious it became that the problem was caused by the very digital tools that had set them free in so many ways. That our failure to grapple with the ways that the shiny new tools of the digital workplace—email, text messaging, PowerPoint, Zoom—changed communication, created widespread misunderstanding and conflict that manifested as across-the-board anxiety, fear, distrust and paranoia.

The good news is that this problem is eminently solvable, with some attention to a skill I call digital body language. I have taught many leaders how to model digital body language for their teams, and how to introduce it to their cultures, with remarkable results. I have trained managers, HR teams and coaches how to embed digital body language skills into their leadership programs. And I have advised everyone from doctors using telehealth to professors in online learning to lawyers, consultants and board directors in virtual boardrooms to master this skill. One leader told me that simple changes in digital body language not only transformed the way her entire organization communicates, but also the customer experience that she was able to provide even from afar. Another executive told me it changed how he connected with his wife and children while traveling for business.

Now it’s time to show you how too.

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When people ask me how I started doing what I do, I tell them it’s a lifelong story.

As a first-generation American girl born to Indian parents, I came to English in an indirect way. I grew up in a middle-class neighborhood outside Pittsburgh. At home, my parents, both physicians who had immigrated to the U.S. in their 20s, spoke Punjabi, a language close to Hindi, and only rarely English. My mom and dad both placed a big priority on making sure my two siblings and I honored traditional Indian values and customs. Silence was a sign of respect to elders, and listening a prized trait. Learning English, doing well academically and almost everything else came in second.

Growing up in a white, conservative, suburban part of the country, I spent a lot of my childhood trying to fit in. There weren’t many girls who looked like me, or who were the children of immigrants, or who sat down for dinner every night at 9:00 PM. (Indian families tend to eat late.) At the same time, I felt almost no allegiance to India. Whenever I visited, my family there referred to me as “the American-born cousin.” Who in India was named Erica?

Caught between two cultures, I went inside myself.

Often you would hardly know I was there. In school I was shy, quiet, more an observer than a participant. Raising my hand or calling any attention to myself was unimaginable to me. I did well in school and on tests, but every report card from kindergarten to 12th grade said the same thing: I wish Erica spoke up more.

As a girl pivoting between the thickly accented English of my parents and my own bad Hindi, and wanting to feel like I belonged somewhere, I developed a few tricks, and one of them was a talent for deciphering other people’s body language. Body language offered the key to understanding the foreign worlds around me. I became obsessed with decoding my classmates’ signals and cues, no matter how subtle. Tone, pacing, pauses, gestures. The popular girls walked around with their heads high, shoulders pulled back, almost literally looking down on the rest of us. The older kids showed their disinterest by slouching during school assemblies, their eyes turned to the ground or each other—never to the adult speaking. At home, I holed up in my room watching Bollywood movies on my family’s old VCR, focusing less on the storyline (Hindi was still alien to me) and more on the actors’ faces and hands, rewinding over and over again, trying to understand what was being said by observing the actors’ non-verbal cues.

My preoccupation with translating what people convey non-verbally soon became a source of power as I learned to mimick the body language of my more confident peers and decode what my Hindi-speaking family members were saying to me with their furrowed brows.

After September 11, virtually everyone who looked like me in America was suddenly clouded by instant suspicion in public spaces. One afternoon around that time, my father was waiting to pick me up at the local YMCA after tennis practice. Someone behind the front desk panicked—my dad “looked suspicious,” I guess—and called the police. For the next 45 minutes, my father fielded questions from the officers, politely explaining that he worked as a cardiologist at a nearby hospital. I looked on as he sat behind a table, speaking patiently with the officers, his eye contact direct, his palms wide open, signaling his respect to the officers and his understanding of why this was happening. I could also tell by his flushed cheeks that he was embarrassed. A few months later, my dad went even further, donating a significant percentage of his income that year to the 9/11 Fund.

I remember being angry at the police, but also at my father. How could he respond with kindness to what I saw as racial profiling and ignorance? Patiently, my father told my siblings and me that instead of responding with indignation or rage, wouldn’t it be a better idea to consider what other people might be thinking and feeling? To put ourselves in their shoes? I can’t be sure, but that was an inflection point for me, a day I began thinking harder about how humans convey empathy via body language, and what it could accomplish.

My interest in nonverbal communication continued in college, where I read every book on the subject I could find, later calling on my growing expertise professionally when I began teaching public speaking. Being able to understand and classify cues and signals, along with the poise and confidence this skill gave me, helped me win internships and eventually, ridiculously competitive job opportunities. All of this in spite of my father insisting that Indian-Americans couldn’t succeed in business, and that therefore I should focus on an occupation like medicine, or engineering, where Indians at least had a tradition of succeeding. But I persevered—and it seemed to pay off.

My preoccupation with body language gave me the confidence to teach courses in leadership as a graduate student and, later, a teaching fellow at both Harvard and MIT. It motivated me to start my own business before I was 30, and scale it from a what-if? idea into a global company, despite having no clue what I was doing, or any media experience, investors or connections. Before I knew it, I was addressing global leaders at the World Economic Forum, getting interviewed by Good Morning America host Robin Roberts, and becoming a “sought-after” keynote speaker by CEOs and top executives, teaching 21st century collaboration skills to thousands of leaders across a range of industries, companies and countries.

If it sounds like I’m bragging, please! I hope it’s clear by now that what I consider my “expertise” comes from shyer, humbler beginnings. There’s a lot to be said for being withdrawn, never raising your hand in class and watching Bollywood movies alone in the dark after school. The point is, my whole life I’ve believed, as many do, that the essence of empathy and trust isn’t about what we say but how we say it, and how often we check ourselves to make sure that our words and their meanings are as deliberate and clear as possible. Studying my own and people’s body language had taught me a lot through trial and error, in my case mostly error.

Hadn’t my own experience taught me that poor posture and a dead-fish handshake made a negative impression on prospective employers? Hadn’t one teacher told me that my habit of nervously twirling my hair signaled my insecurity? Hadn’t I found out that a professor’s tightly set lips, or the tensing of a nostril, signaled whether I had aced or blown a test or paper? As a speaker, didn’t I know that the difference between success and failure was about intuiting what an audience wanted, and adjusting my message accordingly?

Once, early in my career, I delivered a keynote presentation in front of a big audience. It was the weekend, and the fourth day of an all-firm lawyer retreat. Not surprisingly, the audience was tired, peevish, disengaged and tuned out. Some people looked overtly hostile. Others were slumped in their chairs, heads hanging to the side, eyes glancing up at the clock. The last thing anyone wanted to hear about that day were the advantages of collaboration. Their body language almost begged me: Not another framework, please.

So I pivoted. Removing my heels, I took a seat on the edge of the stage, and scrapped my usual introduction. “Talk about the two emotions you’re feeling right now,” I said. “Fatigue, tension, boredom, anticipation, rage, you name it . . .” Well, the mood in the room changed, like that. I was no longer talking at the audience; I was talking with them. Everyone started to loosen up, relax, smile, laugh. A speech that could have been a disaster turned into an interactive hour of genuine connection and animated discussion.

Over the next few years, I made it a point, as I do today, to suss out the body language of audiences. Blank expressions mean that I’m going too fast and need to slow down. Crossed arms signal defensiveness or resentment. As for me, I know that gesturing or adjusting my hair too much signals my own lack of confidence.

This brings me to two years ago, when I started hearing one story after the next, all centering around the same theme: miscommunication in the workplace.

As I said, I’d been giving keynote speeches and consulting clients around the world, teaching people about how to collaborate better at work. The most common question in the Q&A? How can we innovate faster and further by leveraging my experienced workforce that is comfortable in its ways, while capitalizing on the expertise of digitally fluent employees? And how can I get these two groups truly collaborating with each other? I began noticing that more and more clients and audience members of all ages were expressing high levels of fear, anxiety and paranoia about communication in their workplace. Leaders were doing what they’d always done, e.g., sharing messages of support and trust with their colleagues and teams—but more and more those messages were being misunderstood, misinterpreted or missed altogether. These people weren’t dumb or lacking in social skills, and many were conversant in cutting edge work on how to build strong cultures.

As I dug more deeply, the biggest complaint seemed to be about how communications were being translated inside those same workplaces. That is, how a message that was meant to be friendly and to-the-point could be read by the recipient as angry or resentful, causing less engagement and innovation and even the loss of top performers.

This issue was illustrated by a meeting I had with a client, a senior leader at Johnson & Johnson.

Kelci had gotten some tough feedback from her team around morale issues. In her review, her boss commented that Kelci’s “empathy was weak.” When Kelci and I first met, and began talking, I kept my eye out for the standard, universal markers of subpar empathy: an inability to understand the needs of others; proficiency (or the lack of it) in reading and using body language; poor listening skills, a failure to ask deep questions. I was confused. Kelci was fantastic at all these things. She could make anybody feel at ease in a room, her body language signaled respect and understanding, and she listened deeply and carefully. What was going on?

The answer had less to do with Kelci and more to do with today’s tech-reliant workplace. Instead of being low in empathy, Kelci, like nearly everyone I counseled, didn’t know what empathy meant anymore in a world where digital communication had made once-clear signals, cues and norms almost intelligible. A tone of voice? Approachable body language. Those things didn’t cut it anymore. digital world required a new kind of body language. The problem was no one could agree on what it even was.

For example, Kelci believed she was doing everyone a favor by keeping her emails brief. But her team found them cold and ambiguous. Kelci sent calendar invites at the last minute with no explanation, which made her teammates feel disrespected, as though Kelci’s schedule mattered more than theirs. During strategy presentations, Kelci would glance down repeatedly at her phone, making others feel she was checked out.

Kelci’s digital body language, then, was abysmal. It canceled out the very real clarity that comes when workplace colleagues (okay, humans in general) feel connected to one another.

I realized that our understanding of body language needed to be redefined for the contemporary workplace. Today we’re all “immigrants” learning a new culture and language, except this time they’re digital. Being a good leader today means not only being aware of the signals and cues other people send out, but mastering a new digital body language that didn’t exist twenty years ago, and which most people today “speak” as badly as I spoke Hindi as a kid!

It was the world’s dirty little secret: Some of the time—most of the time—people couldn’t make heads or tails of the messages they were getting in emails, text messages, conference calls and so on. Nor were they entirely aware of how their own messages were being received. More than just a glitch, or a nuisance—technology is such a pain!—it was causing serious issues. Work and decision-making had slowed. Teams were in disarray. Employees were left unmotivated, distrustful, uncertain and paranoid.

It seemed that “digital body language”—or rather, the lack of a set of universally agreed-upon rules—was creating big problems across the globe—in workplaces, communities and even families. Everyone knew about them, but no one talked about them, except anecdotally. There was no rulebook either. We had all grown up knowing how to read and write, some of us better than others (says the girl who remembers the day in school when reading aloud from George Orwell’s Animal Farm in class, she pronounced the word “peculiar” as “Peck-You-Liar,” which her classmates never let her forget), but there was no instruction manual about how to read signals and cues in a digitized world. Instead, people at work were squandering hours or even days sunk in uncertainty, anxiety and disquiet.

I was hardly a Jedi-master at all this either. I’d wasted entire mornings endlessly re-reading a single email, trying to figure out what an ellipsis or the word, Thoughts? meant. I’d heard about friendships imploding over a WhatsApp conversation. What about the “Like” on Facebook or Instagram from a colleague who hadn’t returned your two recent phone calls. (Did it signal “I’m sorry”? Was it a prelude to calling you back, a way of testing the friendship waters? Or was it a signal that from now on, you and that person would now be communicating exclusively via social media? What did it all mean? Something? Nothing?) What about the executive who signs off every email with “Thank you.”—doesn’t that show clarity? On the face of it, sure—so why does it come across to his colleagues as insincere and inauthentic?

I genuinely believe most people have good intentions. They just may not know how to convey those intentions.

How can we re-learn how to establish genuine trust and connection, no matter the distance? By creating a nuts-and-bolts rulebook for clear communications in the modern digital world. Communicating what we really mean today requires that we understand today’s signals and cues at a granular level, while developing a heightened sensitivity to words, nuance, subtext, humor and punctuation that we mostly think of as the field of operations for professional writers.

But if you think writing clearly is a niche or inessential skill, think again. When asked what the best investment professionals could make in their careers, Julie Sweet, global CEO of Accenture, answered, “Develop excellent communication skills.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Sweet added that any employee, even a junior-level one, could significantly heighten their value by “articulately summarize (ing) a meeting . . . put (ting) together a presentation and (sending) emails that are really salient and to the point.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Much has been said about developing top-of-the-line presentation and public speaking skills, but Julie Sweet has seen the future, one in which a supposedly “soft” skill—communicating well, especially in your writing—is a critical competitive advantage.

What does good digital body language look like in action? It means never assuming that our own digital habits (e.g., answering every email we get within 3o seconds, or never listening to our voicemails) are shared by everybody else. It means taking a few extra seconds to ask yourself whether our sentences, words or even punctuation might be misinterpreted. It means being hyper-conscious of the signals and cues we send out, constantly checking in with ourselves, and learning along the way.

The book you’re holding in your hands decodes the signals and cues of who gets heard, who gets credit and what gets done in our ever changing world. It will serve as a commonsense playbook that will help you understand how to communicate your ideas, negotiate relationships, speak your truth and build trust and confidence with people very different from you. the pages ahead, I will introduce simple strategies to help you and your teams understand eachother and banish the confusion, frustration and misunderstandings that arise from email, video, instant messaging and even live meetings. My mission is to help you get closer to anyone—intellectually, emotionally, personally, professionally—and make yourself stand out as a trusted, straightforward leader, no matter the distance.

Part One: Digital Elements of Style

Part One

Digital Elements of Style

Chapter 1: What Is Digital Body Language?

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What Is Digital Body Language?

They had been going out for three years when the fight occurred, conducted exclusively via text-message. The fight lasted for hours, back and forth, until at one point, frustrated and weary, Laura tapped out, “So r we thru?” “I guess so,” Dave replied.

Laura was devastated. She called in sick to work the next day, and spent the next 24 hours mourning the loss of her relationship by meeting with friends, looking through old photos and crying. The next night, Dave appeared on her doorstep. Laura, puffy-eyed, answered the door. “Did you forget about the dinner we planned a few days ago?” he said. “You said we were through,” Laura said. “I meant we were through arguing,” Dave said. “Not through as is you and me.”

Oh.

Most of us have had exchanges like these in our personal lives (though maybe not quite so dramatic), communications so confusing and crowded with innuendo that we spend an entire afternoon trying to make sense of them.

Now take these same dynamics and transfer them to the average workplace:

Jack, a mid-level manager, gets an email from his boss. The last sentence—“That’ll be fine.” leaves him anxious. The period that punctuates it seems to dominate the screen, a black bead, a micro-bomb, lethal, suggestive and—Jack would swear—disapproving. Did he screw up? Or is he merely overthinking it? If he’s not, how can he work for a boss who’s so oblivious about the implications of a period?

Here’s another:

A positive, enthusiastic female boss headquartered in New York is assigned to lead a remote team based in Dallas. One of its members, a young guy named Sam, flies to New York a few months later for his first face-to-face meeting with his new boss. After a good preliminary discussion, the boss asks, “So what were your first impressions of me?” Sam hesitates, then admits they weren’t all that good. Almost all his boss’s communications were no-frills and to-the-point, leading Sam to believe she was unfriendly, withholding and probably cold. In person, though, she’s the opposite. What made him feel that way, she asks? Sam had to confess it was because she didn’t use abbreviations or exclamation marks .

!!!!!!!!!

When punctuation and acronyms set us off into bouts of uncertainty, self-doubt, anxiety, anger, self-hatred and mistrust, we can be sure we’re living in unmapped times.

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I grew up reading—and re-reading—the books of Deborah Tannen. In 1991, Tannen, a professor of linguistics at Georgetown University, published her book, You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation. I wasn’t the only one; everyone seemed to be reading Deb Tannen’s book. An analysis of how we talk to one another using indirection, interruption, pauses, humor and pacing, You Just Don’t Understand dominated national conversations, spent four years on the New York Times bestseller list and was translated into thirty languages.

None of us need a linguistics degree to know that the ways we communicate meaning today are more confusing than ever. Why? Well, Tannen studied body language almost exclusively in face-to-face interactions. Her work was informed by linguistics, gender and evolutionary biology, but also on what you and I convey whenever we cross our arms, look away or blink. None of us, including Tannen, could have predicted that today, the majority of our connections would be virtual. Contemporary speech relies more than ever on how we say something rather than on what we say. That is, our digital body language. When the internet came along, everyone was given a dais and a microphone, but no one was told how to use them. We all just picked things up as we went along. And the mistakes we’ve made along the way have had real consequences in business.

You see, these days, we don’t talk the talk or even walk the talk. We write the talk.

Texts, emails, instant message, and video calls are ultimately visual forms of communication. What’s more, each of us has different expectations and instincts about whether we should send a text versus an email, when to look in the camera in a video call, how long to wait before we write someone back, and how to write a digital thank you or apology without seeming sloppy or insincere. Our word choices, response times, video meeting styles and the way we sign off emails and even our email signatures, create impressions that can either enhance or wreck our closest relationships in the workplace (not to mention in our personal lives).

Today, roughly 70 percent of all communication among teams is virtual. We send around 306 billion emails every day, with the average person sending 30 emails daily, and fielding 96.[[3]](#endnote-3) According to the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 50 percent of the time the “tone” of our emails is misinterpreted.[[4]](#endnote-4) Fifty percent! Imagine saying “I love you” to your partner, but half the time their response is, “Yeah, right.” Have I felt that exact feeling with my husband Rahul after a text exchange? Not gonna lie-I’m guilty too!

More data: the New York Times reports that 43 percent of working Americans spend at least some time working remotely,.[[5]](#endnote-5) a percentage that skyrocketed to almost 100 percent during the Covid-19 pandemic. Another study reported 25 percent of respondents saying they socialize more frequently online than in person.[[6]](#endnote-6) A 2015 Pew survey found that 90 percent of cell phone owners “frequently” carry their phones with them, with 76 percent admitting they turn off their phones “rarely” or “never.”[[7]](#endnote-7) The average person spends nearly 116 minutes every day—that’s about 2 hours—on social media, which over an average lifetime adds up to 5 years and 4 months.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Psychologist and science journalist Daniel Goleman was the first to popularize the concept of “emotional intelligence” in 1990. Emotional Intelligence, or EI, refers to our ability to read other people’s signals and respond to them appropriately, while understanding and appreciating the world from others’ perspective.

Today, emotional intelligence and empathy have become buzzwords. They are spoken about at roundtables. They are part of every mainstream education curriculum. They show up in value statements across every industry—from professional services to healthcare to technology. And they are trademark words in political campaigns, and media conversations. Leaders have sold us on the idea that seeing situations clearly from others’ perspectives can transform leadership styles, work cultures and business strategies. Empathy, it seems, advances morale, triggers innovation and produces both profits and learning, engagement and retention. Surely everyone can agree we need more empathy in the world.

Why, then, are we all facing a crisis of misunderstanding at work?

Well, a big problem is that reading emotion and the digital nature of the modern workplace are a mismatch.

When emotional intelligence came to stage, the digital era was in its infancy. Email was a barely unwrapped toy. Smart phones, if they existed, were concrete slabs and rarely appeared at meetings. Texting was what European teenagers did. And video calls were foreign species. Today, many organizations and communities exist exclusively behind a screen. We’ve shifted the way we create connections and, consequently, how we work with our colleagues as well as our customers, community members or audiences.

The loss of non-verbal body cues is among the most undervalued and well-concealed reasons why employees feel so disengaged from others. If used properly, and at scale, empathetic body language equals employee engagement. Disengagement happens not because people don’t want to be empathetic, but because with today’s tools, they don’t know how. Yes a CEO can say, “My office door is always open,” and tell everyone he’s “accessible” and “approachable.” But what if he’s never actually in the office, and the only way to communicate with him is to jump into his daily queue of 200+ daily emails or Slack messages?

Most of today’s workplaces, in fact, minimize the conditions necessary to foster and augment clear communication, leading to widespread distrust, resentment, and frustration. There are more far-flung teams. There are fewer face-to-face interactions. There is virtually no body language to read. Plus, every few months things seem to get faster (or maybe we’re all just imagining it), leaving us no choice but to adapt to the newest normal. We become more thoughtlessly efficient. We grow more accepting of distractions and interruptions, more indifferent to the needs and emotions of colleagues and workmates. This digital disconnect leads us to misinterpret, overlook or ignore signals and cues, creating entirely new waves of organizational dysfunction.

The question is, why?

We are cue-less. It’s worth repeating: non-verbal cues make up 60 to 80 percent of face-to-face communication.[[9]](#endnote-9) Anthropologist Edward T. Hall called these signals and cues—posture, proximity, smiles, pauses, yawns, tone, facial expressions, eye contact, hand gestures and how loudly or quietly we speak—“the silent language.”

How do we create connection when up to 70 percent of communication among teams takes place digitally?

Our ability to care is compromised. Remember how a handshake after a job well done used to go a long way toward making you feel valued? Today, when team members work in different spheres, departments, offices and countries, a handshake is impossible. One research study inserted very small delays into video calls to assess how colleagues judged one another. For delays of only 1.2 seconds, people would most likely be rated as less attentive, friendly, and self-disciplined than if there was no delay.[[10]](#endnote-10) Even on video chats, a screen freezing or that weird echo from your colleague makes it hard for attendees to feel valued, leaving us with the question:

How do we show appreciation nowadays?

Our timing is off. When someone standing two feet away asks us a question, we respond instantly. We also know when a conversation has come to a natural end. But today, we are no longer obliged to respond to someone immediately (we have stuff to do!). At the same time, responding to your employees’ or your clients’ “urgent” texts five hours later may leave them feeling ignored and resentful.

How can we find the balance between busy inboxes and response times that convey respect?

Our screens have altered our traditional body language. When we glance down at our phones or answer “quick” texts during a business meeting, 1:1 or lunch discussion, we tend to lose track of our surroundings. We wrap up meetings faster than we should, overlook the look in a colleague’s eyes, his smiles, or the fact he just put down his pen to listen more closely. In sales conversations, it’s even easy to miss the lean in.

How do we stop digital tools from interrupting even our face-to-face interactions?

Lastly, as we all know, Technology creates masks. Today, we all have the option of concealing what we really feel and think. Choosing to email or text can cloak uncomfortable feelings—but it can also create a whole lot of ambiguity and misunderstanding. For people who like to keep their thoughts and feelings to themselves, performing behind screens is good camouflage. But that’s not how leaders are built. Even when you’re on a video conference, gazing back at your own face on the screen makes it harder for you to relax fully and naturally into the conversation.

How can we remain authentic and connected when a screen divides us?

The answer is understanding the cues and signals that we’re sending with our digital body language and tailoring them to create clear, precise messages.

What is implicit in body language now has to be explicit in the way we communicate.

What is Digital Body Language (and why is it important?)

Digital Body Language offers a systematic approach to understanding the signs of the digital world much as we do those of the physical world. It will identify and explain the evolving norms and cues of digital communications within organizations and in doing so help to create a set of common expectations for communicating, regardless of distance. It’s a little like a French-English dictionary, but in this case my mission is to translate in-person body language to such things as punctuation, video call first impressions, abbreviations, signatures, and the time it takes us to press Send.

By embedding a real understanding of digital body language into your organization or group, communication processes can provide both the structure and the tools that support a silo-breaking, trust-filled environment. This skill, in turn, will lead to enormous efficiencies as people spend less time wondering about that period or (lack of) exclamation marks.

Below are a few practical examples to help you understand how traditional body language has been “translated” into digital body language.

* Traditional Body Language involves: A head tilted to one side, signaling that another person is listening attentively.

Digital Body Language involves: “Liking” a text. Praising another person’s input in an email. Making a detailed comment verbally or in the chat box during a video call when someone expresses an idea, instead of just saying, “I agree.”

* Traditional Body Language involves: Stroking your chin, or pausing for a few seconds, signaling you’re thinking about what’s just been said.

Digital Body Language involves: Taking a few extra minutes to respond to a text, indicating respect for what it says. Writing a long or detailed response to an email that shows thought and focus. Pausing during a conference call to take in what’s been said, instead of blurting out the first thing that comes to mind.

* Traditional Body Language involves: Smiling. (It’s contagious. Our smiles light up the areas of the brain linked to happiness, which is why the people we smile at tend to smile back and/or feel a stronger sense of connection with us.)

Digital Body Language involves: Using exclamation points and emojis (well, within reason). Adding a simple “Have a great weekend” to the end of an email. Laughing during a video meeting.

* Traditional Body Language involves: Nodding. Bobbing our heads up and down makes us seem both interested and approachable. Nods, like smiles, are infectious, meaning that if we nod while we’re speaking, others are more likely to go along with what we say.

Digital Body Language involves: Responding promptly to a text, showing engagement by replying to an email with substantive comments. Writing “I completely agree with what you’re saying” in the group chat during a Microsoft teams meeting. Using a thumbs up emoji in a video meeting.

The skill set in this book sets people up to be their best—to deliver new ideas, speak truth to power, operate with confidence in fuzzy situations and engage others in ways that complement your brand. It restores emotional nuance back into team engagement in ways that are clear, transparent and long-lasting. With this book as your guide, you’ll be able to create new norms of collaboration and behavior that reduce misunderstandings, and enable you to lead with more clarity.

Not least, my mission in Digital Body Language is to help you stand out as a great communicator (and thereby, a great leader).

In order to truly understand this new ideal of communication, we need to understand the four laws of digital body language: Value Visibly; Communicate Carefully; Collaborate Confidently; and Trust Totally.

We’ll take them in order.

Value Visibly

The first law is based on the fact that the traditional signals and cues we use to show our appreciation for other people—a relieved smile, a handshake, a handwritten thank you note—are either invisible in digital communication, or take too much time and effort to implement. Value Visibly is about being attentive and aware of others, while also communicating, “I understand you” and “I appreciate you.”

Value Visibly means we’re always sensitive to other people’s needs and schedules. Value Visibly means we understand that reading the emails in our inbox with care and attention is the new art of listening. When we Value Visibly, we’re willing to sit with others’ discomfort without feeling we have to fix or resolve it. Value Visibly means recognizing other people—and not being in a hurry about it, either.

Inevitably, Value Visibly leads to greater levels of respect and trust. I recall a time that I tried to schedule a phone call with a senior executive who had expressed intertest in working with me. Over the next five months, she re-scheduled the call three times. No, wait, she didn’t cancel, she just didn’t show up. After the first no-show, I sent a follow-up email, and her assistant rescheduled our call. (There was no “I’m sorry” from the executive, or even a madcap excuse.) The second time she didn’t show up, her assistant apologized and again rescheduled. The third time, there was nothing, just dead air. A few months later, this same executive emailed me, as if nothing between us had happened, for advice on how to join a club of which I was a member. This time it was my turn not to reply,

It felt cathartic.

By “respect,” I’m not talking about niceties or apologies. Respect means that others feel appropriately valued, included or acknowledged. Respect means you proofread your email before sending it. Respect means you honor other people’s time, and schedules, and don’t cancel meetings at the last second, or delay your response to an email so long that people have to chase you down. Respect means not using the Mute button during a conference call to attend to five other things as someone is talking. Respect means writing clear subject lines in meeting invitations that explain exactly why you are requesting another person’s time. (At a minimum, respect is about spelling that person’s name right!)

Value Visibly also means acknowledging that solutions that work in one context may not in others. Imagine you’ve just pulled an all-nighter on a project, sent it and your boss responds with “ty” or “tx.” It’s not enough, right? In fact, it’s enraging. Now, imagine handing this same project to your boss in person, and getting a smile and a “thank you.” You’d feel better. Value Visibly is about making the time and effort to communicate the equivalent of a smile or “thank you” across digital channels.

Communicate Carefully

Communicate Carefully means making a continuous effort to minimize the risk for misunderstanding and misinterpretation by being as clear as possible in your words and digital body language. We Communicate Carefully when we establish unambiguous expectations and norms about which channels we use, what we include in our messages, and who we include on the recipient list. We Communicate Carefully when we know why each person copied on the message is accountable, and who is responsible for the next steps.

Communicating Carefully goes a long way toward eliminating confusion. Communicating Carefully allows for a consistent understanding of each team member’s requirements and needs, helping to streamline communication and reduce inefficiencies in teamwork. Finally, Communicating Carefully leads to alignment.

Has the following ever happened to you? You and your team have been working hard to initiate a great new idea. When it’s ready to go, everyone is exhausted but exhilarated. It’s time to reap the rewards for all that hard work! At which point company lawyers step in, ask a few questions and either kill the project or disable it enough so it’s no longer recognizable.

Or what about the marketing team at a professional services firm that spends months on a new product offering only then to realize that another operations team has already created the exact same thing a year before?

Or how about the team that can’t agree on whether a project was a success or a failure because they never agreed on the metrics of success?

Regardless of the scenario, time is wasted, energy is sapped, and the workplace mood shifts from buoyant to discouraged. Why did no one realize this was an issue? Answer? There was no clear communication between silos. The legal team wasn’t brought in until the last second. The compliance officers had no say during the planning stages. Customers were not listened to. The marketing and accounting leads never got together and said, Here is what I want, here is what I think, let’s get on the same page.

Communicate Carefully means that people have to agree whether or not a given project is necessary, and in sync with the organization. Communicate Carefully means keeping employees and teams informed and up-to-date, and then checking in constantly to support their efforts. Who is working on what, and why? Personally, I’ve lost count of the number of times team members jump into projects without taking ten minutes to consider the principals involved, only to find out three months later that another team has been doing the exact same work.

But the biggest impediment to alignment is lack of clarity. Communicating Carefully restores that alignment through digital body language signals and cues—from realizing that a “brief” message is not always a “clear” one, to eliminating tone-deaf language, to everything in between.

Collaborate Confidently

The third pillar, Collaborate Confidently, is about the freedom to take conscious risks while trusting that others will support your decisions.

Collaborating Confidently means managing the fear, uncertainty and worry that defines modern workplaces—and understanding that even when things get crazy, employees are there to support one another, and won’t allow any one person to go down with the ship.

Collaborating Confidently means people are empowered to respond with care and patience, instead of buying into the belief that a 24/7 workplace means we have to respond to everything immediately.

Collaborating Confidently means we prioritize thoughtfulness, while reducing groupthink behavior. What does that look like? Well, it might mean a live meeting that’s moderated by the one remote member on the team, creating a sense of inclusion, and also reducing the bias we tend to have toward teammates who are physically present in the room. It might mean using the virtual chat tool in a video meeting to collect team opinions in writing first and then calling on people with different ideas to speak up, instead of listening to the loudest people who agree with one another first. It might mean designing a structure for work requests in email, so that no one is left speculating wildly about the meaning of an email that ends with the letter “K.” It might even mean something as straightforward as making sure that team members always have what they need to move forward.

Collaborating Confidently decreases the chances you get stuck in the trap of being simultaneously over-attentive and under-attentive, e.g. those times you obsess over minor stuff in one email while racing through others, while overlooking important details.

Collaborating Confidently frees us up to overcome our habitual fears and uncertainties and move forward to action. It allows us to quit obsessing over, “Did she really mean this?” and “Is he angry at me but just isn’t saying so?” and “Are they giving me the runaround?” Instead, we assume the best intent from others, knowing that no one will succeed at someone else’s cost, or by misdirection, or by forcing the upper hand.

Trust Totally

The fourth and final law of digital body language, Trust Totally, happens only after the first three laws have been implemented, yielding 360-degree engagement. The “Totally” part of Trust Totally is key, since it implies the highest levels of organizational faith, where people tell the truth, keep their word and deliver on their commitments.

Trusting Totally means you have an open team culture, where everyone knows they are listened to, can always ask one another for help, and grant favors whose returns may or may not be immediate. Once the first three laws of digital body language are in place, leading to Trusting Totally, congratulations! You’ve broken the stranglehold of fear and uncertainty in your organization and are on your way to assembling the always-elusive perfect team.

Why? Because when we Trust Totally, we get the most out of people. By creating psychological safety on our teams (beginning with our leaders’ own digital body language), our actions create trickle-down calm. Once trust exists, anything that helps support it is prioritized, and everything impeding or distracting from it is addressed and dealt with.

But let’s be clear: Trust Totally doesn’t mean we extend unconditional trust to everyone—especially people with whom we’ve had negative or unresolved experiences in the past. Instead, Trust Totally refers to a workplace environment where no one wastes time sweating the small stuff. One where an ambiguously worded message or late-to-arrive response doesn’t automatically give rise to fear, anxiety or insecurity. One where we confidently assume everyone is on our side. This is a pretty big ask these days, but Trust Totally works.

Over the years I’ve worked with some truly egregious people. I once worked for a boss who invaded my every waking moment. She began drilling my inbox with emails at 9PM, usually when I was in the supermarket, pushing around a cart at the end of a long workday. If I didn’t reply after five minutes, the urgent texts would begin: I need the report on the Chicago meeting! Did you finish? Where is it? I would surrender my half-filled cart, run home, work late, get it off to her by midnight and fall asleep. At 6AM, I would wake up to a new text, under the guise of “Let’s chat this morning to review the report.”

Clearly this was one case where Trust Totally was impossible. I did not feel Valued Visibly; my boss’s messages were not Communicated Carefully; and we were decidedly not Collaborating Confidently. In the years since, I’ve found that when a foundation of Trust Totally exists, people are much more willing to say what they mean fearing criticism or reprisal and, if necessary, come up with substantive improvements, even in tough situations (like with my old boss). Trusting Totally can help transform a passive-aggressive or dominating colleague from an obnoxious pill to, believe it or not, a decent person.

Finally, Trusting Totally leads to empowerment. Yes, I know, empower and empowerment are so overused they’ve become meaningless. So often leaders tell teams, “I want to empower you,” but aren’t willing to give up even a sliver of control to allow other voices to contribute. So, the concept can’t help but ring a little false. But in the context of Trust Totally, empowerment means giving people full ownership of their work, as well as the resources they need to finish it.

Empowerment means everyone feels safe to speak up, introduce a controversial perspective or simply say, “This isn’t working for me,” without fearing they’ve created new enemies. Empowerment implies high levels of psychological safety, information flows, candid discussions about how comfortable people are with failure—and clear ways forward that embed respect, alignment and action across the workplace.

[blank]

Digital Body Language is for people whose bosses and colleagues drone on and on about teamwork, but never seem to do what’s necessary to facilitate it. It’s for anyone swamped with in-person meetings, conference calls, emails, texts and social media platforms, and who has thrown up their hands and decided to just Set it and Forget It.

In the next few chapters, you’ll read stories, learn strategies and adopt common-sense rules that are designed to strengthen any workplace. You will learn about subtext, punctuation,

An extra end

pacing, pausing, delay, the signals and cues of power and dominance, the differences in digital body language across genders, generations and cultures. Whether you lead a team or work alongside someone you can’t understand, or simply wonder why there’s so little empathy around you, this book is for you. My goal is simple: to save you time, liberate you from fear and worry, and make seemingly indecipherable signals and cues as clear as a handshake, a head nod, an eye-roll, a smile or a ringing “Way to go!”

BOX-A

So You Want to Communicate . . .

. . .Trust:

* Traditional Body Language: keep your palms open, uncross your arms and legs, smile and nod.
* Digital Body Language: use language that is direct with clear subject lines; end emails end with a friendly gesture (Text me if you need anything! Hope this helps!); never BCC anyone without warning; mirror the sender’s use of emojis and/or informal punctuation.

. . .Engagement:

* Traditional Body Language: lean in with your body as another person is talking; uncross your arms and legs; smile; nod; make direct eye contact.
* Digital Body Language: prioritize timely responses ; send responses that answer all questions or statements in the previous message (not just one or two); send a simple “Got it!” or “Received” if the message doesn’t merit a longer response; don’t use the Mute button as a license to multitask; and use positive emojis like thumbs up or smiley faces.

. . .Excitement:

* Traditional Body Language: speak quickly; raise your voice, express yourself physically by jumping up and down, or tapping your fingers on your desk.
* Digital Body Language: use exclamation points and capitalization; prioritize quick response times; send multiple messages in a row without getting a response first; use positive emojis (smiley faces, thumbs up, high fives).

. . .Urgency:

* Traditional Body Language: raise your voice; speak quickly; point your finger, or any other exaggerated gesture.
* Digital Body Language: use all caps paired with direct language or sentences that end in multiple exclamation marks; opt for a phone call or a meeting over a digital message; skip greetings; use formal closings, Reply All, or Cc to direct attention; issue the same message on multiple digital channels simultaneously.

END

Part Two: The Four Laws of Digital Body Language

Part Two

The Four Laws of Digital Body Language

Chapter 4: Value Visibly

Chapter 4

Value Visibly

Remember how it felt when someone looked you in the eye, gave you a firm handshake, and said with feeling, “Thank you so much?” In the digital workplace, we Value Visibly by being attentively aware of other people and clearly communicating, “I hear you” and “I understand you” using the new cues and signals of our digital body language. Value Visibly means being more sensitive to other people’s time and needs, reading digital communications with care and attention, and respecting other people—without being in a rush about it, either.

I’ll call him Jim. I was in New York City, and he was in Dallas. I had just started my own consulting business, and Jim was just beginning his post-college career. During our video interview, he responded quickly and intelligently to my questions. He seemed interested in the work I was doing on collaboration, and he was a good communicator, too. Eager to get started, I hired him on the spot as my new marketing strategist.

I chose right, too—Jim was a fantastic employee. I loved what a self-starter he was, and how little oversight he needed. As I rushed forward in my business, he always matched my pace, finishing whatever administrative tasks I texted or emailed him without requiring much guidance. Whenever I sent him a work request, Jim’s usual email quick response, “Sounds good,” gave me confidence he had everything under control. (And my typical ‘Thx’ response made me feel like he knew I appreciated it.)

Fast-forward to our phone check-in six weeks later:

Me: So, how do you think it’s going? Because I think it’s going really well!

Jim: No, it’s not.

Me: No, it’s not? Wait, what?

Jim: No, it’s not going well and I’m thinking of quitting. Today.

Me: Today? Wait, sorry, what?

Jim: Look, I have my Masters Degree, and I don’t want to do only admin work. I thought I would be handed a lot more marketing. Like we discussed in our original interview? And we barely talk about what you’re working on and the larger picture of the business.

It turns out that as I was busy powering forward, for the most part relying only on weekly phone check-ins, Jim was sitting there in Dallas, stewing, uncertain about how he was doing in his job and—even more importantly for a young professional—not knowing exactly why he was doing it. His “Sounds good” emails didn’t signal, “I will take this on happily.” They were code for, “I will do this begrudgingly but I really want to talk about my learning goals too.” My “Thx” emails, intended to communicate, “I really appreciate your hard work” were interpreted by Jim as dismissive. I thought I was being explicit, but in the end, Jim felt both underappreciated and disrespected.

Was I an inexperienced leader at the time? Absolutely. If Jim and I had shared an office, would I have treated him in the same way? There’s no way. Looking back, I realized I’d showed Jim a lot of disrespect. I was always 8–10 minutes late to our weekly calls, wasting his time and angering him with every additional “sry running late” email. Sometimes I ended our phone conversations to take another call without first explaining why I needed to answer the second one right away. By the time I turned my attention back to him, both of us had lost our train of thought, forcing us to waste even more time picking up the flow of our discussion. Lastly, and most embarrassingly, I would send incomplete emails, responding to some of Jim’s questions but not all, since I was otherwise busy prioritizing more urgent tasks.

Jim was right to advocate for himself, and to be honest. He also offered me a chance for redemption. Our resulting conversation, as uncomfortable as it was, reminded me how important it is to Value Visibly, to consciously, outwardly show respect toward people in our professional and personal lives.

Over half of all employees report they don’t receive the respect they need or want from their leaders.[[11]](#endnote-11) That sounds like a whole lot of ungrateful leaders! But could there be another explanation? What if those leaders are expressing respect in ways that some employees don’t recognize? As the signs of respect have changed, so, too, have the skills we need to use to make our colleagues feel valued.

Traditional respect has always been based on signals we share in person. Each personal interaction generated positive signals that our brains understand unconsciously after hundreds of thousands of years of evolutionary training. But today, as I note throughout this book, many of our interactions lack visible cues of meaning and understanding.

When relationships are mediated by screens, how do we make the invisible visible?

After talking to Jim, I realized I was making a mistake that is also one of the greatest killers of engagement today: I assumed that if I didn’t hear anything from Jim, everything was okay. (“No news is good news,” as the saying goes, even though that’s no way to run a business.). With up to 60 percent of teamwork today conducted digitally and via the written word, we can no longer rely on assumptions to gauge feelings of mutual respect.[[12]](#endnote-12) My lack of face-to-face interaction with Jim meant I was missing out on a lot of important information. I had to move from relying on a single conversation per project to multiple touchpoints and from unstated appreciation to stated recognition.

After our conversation, I made sure to end previous meetings on time to avoid causing delays. Jim and I scheduled weekly video check-ins to review work and ensure he felt valued and supported. The video format gave me an opportunity to read Jim’s body cues so I could observe firsthand what made him uncomfortable, and the times he seemed unable to express himself in words or needed more time to reflect on something. Well, “sitting” with someone without rushing back and forth via email solved our communication challenges pretty quickly. We also had the opportunity to discuss Jim’s professional learning goals, ultimately creating a project that he would complete in conjunction with his other responsibilities.

In general, I got better (a lot better) at checking in with Jim, giving him feedback on his contributions, and expressing appreciation for his hard work. End result? Eventually, Jim and I worked together for years. And the lessons I learned still guide me.

Today I leverage digital tools like video calls and weekly or bi-weekly email “check-ins” to ensure that my team feels Valued Visibly. For each person, I choose a communication medium based on his or her personality style (e.g., my college interns communicate best on Slack and enjoy emailed Amazon gift cards at the end of their tenures, while my executive team sticks to emails and appreciate personalized notes), while making sure I express encouragement or gratitude as often as possible. I don’t leave messages unanswered and when meeting with my team, I don’t allow myself any other digital distractions.

Value Visibly means not assuming people are “okay.” Instead, be proactive about explicitly showing you understand their desires and value their participation.

As my experience with Jim shows, respect enables leaders to challenge a situation, not a person, and creates an environment where team members feel valued to engage in healthy, and even heated, conversations. Respect facilitates innovation and creativity by allowing leaders to tap into the power of diverse thinking and multiple perspectives. On the other hand, disrespect (whether intended or not) is the silent killer of collaboration, initiative, and job satisfaction.

Stop Disrespecting Me!

In the middle of doing research for this book, I got a frantic phone call from a client. The head of human resources needed a favor. Fast. One of the company’s leaders was managing a high-profile project and was having trouble keeping teams up and running. It was a start-up of sorts, so people were expected to work long hours based on the expectation of future equity. But the teams were not collaborating, and communication was at a standstill. Everyone felt it too, which was affecting morale as well as speed to market and customer deadlines. Could I help?

Of course! I said, adding that even though I was on a research sabbatical, I would be happy to speak with the executive and create an action plan. The executive and I had a long, informative discussion during which we talked through some solutions. At the end of the conversation, he seemed eager to get moving and asked me to send him a proposal within a week, and to plan to start working together within three weeks. Of course, I said. Working late for the next few nights, I delivered the proposal on deadline.

Then—nothing. I never heard from him again. I later met other consultants who’d had the same experience of getting caught up in an enthusiastic conversation with this same person and then, after delivering the promised work, getting ghosted. I could only guess that he treated all his teams the same way—with a total lack of respect for their time and expertise.

Value Visibly is easy to preach but a lot harder to embed in the modern workplace. There is no shortage of articles talking about establishing respect by building a code of ethics or remembering to greet people in the elevator—but how does that translate to emails, IMs, and conference calls? The inherently distant nature of these communication channels makes disrespectful behaviors easy—even in live meetings.

I’ll never forget a meeting I once had with Anilu, a senior executive at a large company. It took five emails, two follow-ups and one confirmation call with her assistant to find a time that fit her calendar. I showed up at the appointed time. Nearly ten minutes later, Anilu walked into the room, greeted me, and immediately said, “You picked the worst time for this meeting. I have a big interview I have to give later today.” I offered to reschedule, but instead, Anilu asked her colleague to come in and take her place in the meeting while she stayed there prepping for her next meeting on her phone.

The whole situation was bizarre. I felt more disrespected by Anilu sitting in the room on her phone than I would have if she had just excused herself and allowed her colleague to take the meeting. I couldn’t help but be reminded of the great employee I had once almost lost, Jim. That feeling of being undervalued and disrespected stays with you. Why would I ever recommend Anilu to anyone in my own network? Who knows how many great opportunities she’s lost over the years as a result of treating others so poorly?

#EricaTips

BOX-B

Common Pet Peeves You Must Avoid:

-Being in a rush. Sending a message without proofreading. Trying to speed through a conference call in order to get to the next one. Claiming you’re “too busy” to check-in with your teams.

-Not respecting others’ time. Double-booking meetings. Prioritizing your own schedule over other people’s during the scheduling process. Letting conference calls run overlong. Sending “urgent” emails that are in no way urgent. Allowing useless recurring meetings to remain on the calendar.

-Forgetting to show gratitude. Getting into the habit of written-only communication without including phone or video check-ins where teams can actually hear “Thank You.” Sending vague emails. Not crediting everyone on the team when sending in a deliverable.

-Multi-tasking during meetings. In both face to face and video meetings: Routinely “. . .just answering a quick text . . .” halfway through a meeting. Responding to emails and IMs on your laptop. Looking down at your phone when others are trying to make eye contact with you. Not putting your notifications on silent or vibrate mode during important discussions.

END BOX-B

Moreover, in the digital world, it sometimes seems we have too many options—and an equal number of opportunities for potential disaster. When should we email, and when is it better to text? When is a phone call expected? How long should we wait before replying to a message? What’s the right timeframe for digital thank-you’s or apologies? Too soon and we risk seeming slipshod or insincere; too late and we risk coming across as unfeeling. Do digital thank-yous and apologies carry as much weight and import as those delivered in person or by phone?

Today, it’s no longer safe to assume that someone “gets what we mean.” That also includes whether they feel we are valuing them visibly or not.

Value Visibly: The Principles

Considering our probably permanent transition to digital communications, more remote work, flatter teams and a more accelerated pace of change, the new principles of Valuing Others Visibly have never been more critical.

Reading Carefully is the New Listening

By now you probably recognize that whereas we once talked and shared information across a table or phone line, today our conversations happen in written form. Instead of listening as others share their ideas, we read what they have to say in an email or on another digital medium. The problem, according to research done by linguist Naomi Baron, is that we comprehend less when reading on a screen than we do reading print.[[13]](#endnote-13) We devote less time to reading the passage onscreen, are more prone to multitasking, and tend to skim and search instead of reading slowly and carefully.[[14]](#endnote-14)

For example, here’s a recent email exchange I had with a client:

16-yesresponse.pdf

It left me speechless. I’m still speechless!

Always reference details in your communications. It shows you put in the time to really read through the communication, think about the issues and care about the work the other person did.

One big reason we read so poorly online is that typically we’re moving at lightning speed. Instead of taking the time to go carefully through messages, we race through them toward an indeterminate finish line (one that resets every morning). Our need for speed leads to exchanges like the one above—the digital equivalent of talking over each other.

But are we really as busy as we think we are? According to Baron, we’re just . . . not. A lot of our speed, and our anxiety around speed, is artificial and ends up costing us accuracy, clarity and respect. But even if you really are too busy to get back to people immediately, there are ways to show you aren’t blowing them off. You can show respect, for example, by sending a quick note (e.g., got it!) to let them know you got their text or email and are on it. You could give a ballpark estimate as to when you’ll be able to respond at more length. Ultimately, the goal is to show that you’ve really read other people’s messages by addressing all their relevant points and answering any and all questions. If that’s not possible, let your colleague know you’ll get back to them with more answers when the time is right. That way they know you’re not ignoring the other items.

#AskErica

BOX-B

How Can I Show I’m Actively Listening in a Digital Conversation?

* Prioritizing quick response times, even if only to say you’ll respond later.
* Answering all the questions and comments in the message, not just one or two.
* Asking ‘Can I call you?’ or setting up a face-to-face meeting for more complex issues.
* Not interrupting—and stopping others from interrupting.
* Using verbal cues, e.g. “Go ahead,” or “I’m listening,” to encourage others to share their thoughts.
* Not using the Mute button as a license to multitask.
* Asking clarifying questions.
* Taking notes or ensuring notes are sent out after the call.
* Putting your phone away during live meetings to avoid distractions or interruptions
* Giving teammates time to share ideas in a virtual chatbox during a video call

END BOX-B

Writing Clearly Is the New Conversation

Writing well and above all, consciously, is a critical mark of respect. Period. (And no, I’m not angry with you.)

The CMO of a pharmaceutical company was communicating with her team about preparing a presentation for a board meeting. She shared a quick idea over email—do you think we should add more research on oncology to the presentation? In her own mind, she was convinced she’d said, “Let’s add an extra two bullet points on this slide”—but her brain was playing tricks on her. Two weeks later, her team had spent 30 hours or so preparing 40 slides on oncology research. The CMO had no idea the deck was coming, and had frankly forgotten about the two bullet points she’d proposed. But her team had gotten used to responding in full to her requests, and seldom asked questions. Which made them felt even more devalued when their 40 slides turned into two bullet points on a slide.

Bottom line: If you’re the boss, be mindful of writing “think-alouds” and separate them from true marching orders. If you’re on the receiving end, don’t be afraid to ask clarifying questions up front. A clarifying question is less embarrassing and time consuming than poor work product down the line.

When writing, do the little things. Check your tone and think about how your message may be perceived, especially based on your rank.

A lot of the time, misinterpreting an email is a question of a dropped word or punctuation that’s misleading. The solution is simple: proofread your emails! Proofreading is both a habit and a skill: making it a point of pride to send clean, unambiguous copy will help people take what you write more seriously.

A phone call is worth a thousand emails.

A German client once told me, “I was having a never-ending email back and forth with a French and an Indian colleague who were having a circular written dialogue, covering the same ground over and over without understanding each other. I got them both to hop on the phone with me, asked a few questions a few different ways, and we got to the bottom of the issue. Sometimes, I think we are all guessing what the other parties mean on an email chain when we actually have no idea.”

A good phone conversation is fast becoming an obsolete art. Which is too bad, since a call can save lots of time while simultaneously generating good will. (C’mon, we can’t explain everything digitally!)

If you just received a vague or confusing text or email, don’t be afraid to ask to request a phone conversation or, if possible, a video or in-person meeting. If it’s a sensitive dialogue, requesting a quick call shows you’re being thoughtful. Instead of making you look indecisive, waiting a few beats before responding to questions shows the other person that that you are listening and taking your work seriously.

With so many written platforms at our disposal, we can also get caught up in asking too many questions in email or group chat. Phone, video or live meetings safeguard us from asking one tiny question after the next, instead requiring us to formulate the right questions.

At the beginning of any project, it’s more helpful to ask open-ended questions than nuanced ones. “It helps me see whether the other person understood what I’m saying,” a leader told me once. Questions like, “Tell me what success looks like for you,” or “Help me understand what the best next steps look like” shuts down a slew of frenzied email chains, ensuring that everyone on the team is clear about the project goals and their individual roles.

Value Visibly in Action

Practice Radical Recognition

The absence of respect can turn small details into big deals. Let me explain.

I won’t ever forget a 30-minute phone call I once had with four colleagues in which the host waited until approximately the 26th minute to ask, “Does anyone on the line have any thoughts?” Up until then, instead of taking advantage of the four subject matter experts he had on the call, he’d spent most of the meeting lecturing us! Not only did he come across as rude and self-centered (okay, he was rude and self-centered), but by not allowing anyone else to say anything, he was short-changing himself.

Whenever I host digital meetings, I usually ask remote attendees to lead parts of the agenda. They feel valued, and what’s more, everyone can get to know one another’s names, faces, and presentation styles. Typically I schedule a discussion based on pre-reads I sent one or two days before the meeting. During my live webcasted workshops (where some attendees are in the room with me and others are watching online), I start my Q&A by asking virtual participants to share their questions first, making it a point to remind the people in the room that they are not the only ones participating in the workshop.

Anyone can create new norms and rituals to help ensure a company’s culture puts a premium on recognition and respect. For example:

Scott Gerber, CEO of The Young Entrepreneur Council, sends video messages to convey his gratitude.[[15]](#endnote-15)

A senior leader in China named Xu initiated a monthly 60-minute-long videoconference call with staffers in all branches to update them on business performance. Teams also use these calls to share their success stories. Most begin with a quick self-introduction by new joiners, and a “celebration” of birthdays during that month. Six months into his new leadership position, Xu is reaping the benefits. “People feel more engaged, more a part of the mission,” he says, “because they know just how well they are doing both at every level.”

Aria Finger, CEO of DoSomething.org, implemented a handful of simple yet memorable actions in her non-profit. Everyone who has been at DoSomething.org for three months is awarded “a personal emoji on Slack,” and stand-out team players are celebrated at an “awards” ceremony.[[16]](#endnote-16) DoSomething.org has been named of the Best Places to Work and has a high retention rate among its nonprofit peers.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Another executive I know runs an organization of over 1,000 employees. He calls every employee on their birthday, congratulates them, and thanks them for their hard work. As daunting as it may sound, the impact has been overwhelmingly positive.

In a study published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, participants received one of two emails requesting help writing a cover letter. Half of them received an email with a line including the words, “Thank you so much!” and the remaining half got the same email minus the show of gratitude. The study found that the recipients who received the “Thank you” email were more than twice as likely to offer assistance.[[18]](#endnote-18)

These are all good examples of how we can show recognition in our digital body language inside our workplace. It probably goes without saying that expressions of gratitude and respect don’t have to be fancy or formal, nor do they require a lot of time. Typing just four extra words—thank you so much—can yield amazing results.

Acknowledge Individual Differences

One of my clients, Lisa, a technology executive, once shared with me the challenges she has in meeting the needs of both the introverts and extroverts on her team. “It’s hard enough to manage the differences between introverts and extroverts with regular face time with my team,” she told me. “Now I find my introverts won’t jump in on phone calls or in rapid email exchanges because the louder voices still monopolize the conversation.” Lisa also found that her whole team was less likely to share difficult news with her on team calls because they feared it would sound disrespectful, as though they were trying to throw others “under the bus.”

To address this, Lisa has created a process following every monthly strategy call. She asks every team member to email her directly by the end of the week and answer two questions: “What’s the bad news I don’t want to hear?” and, “What might we have missed in our last discussion?” She does this for a couple of reasons.

First, asking for bad news creates a regular space to speak up about challenges in the business. Second, Lisa’s introverts require more time to process ideas, and are more likely to speak up in an email or one-on-one. By giving them the space to think through the questions, Lisa gets excellent insights she wouldn’t have gotten in the meeting, while reducing overall cultural groupthink. Lisa is also aware of the different ways team members engage in conversation, and goes out of her way to meet them where they are comfortable—during a one-on-one post-meeting call, or at a small group lunch. Bottom line: everyone feels more respected.

#EricaTips

BOX-B

How to Connect with Introverts:

* Schedule time in between long meetings for down time.
* Practice waiting 5 seconds before jumping in to speak.
* Send questions a few days before a meeting so they have time to process and prepare.
* Encourage them to email or message you with their thoughts after a meeting.
* Create a time limit so that louder voices don’t take up all the airtime.
* Stop interrupting. Use tools like a chat bar or hand-raising feature to designate who has the floor to speak, and choose a moderator to ensure that it’s upheld.

How to Connect with Extroverts:

* Set up regular face-to-face or video meetings so they can talk things through with you.
* Use breakout groups, then reassemble as a larger group, so that they get a chance to talk out their ideas.
* Maintain watercooler spaces in your office or online so that they can recharge with social interaction between blocks of work.

END BOX-B

Then there are unusual situations. Sue was the head of licensing at a publicly traded fashion house. Every quarter she met with Doug, the CFO, to review her team’s budget. Four times a year, her staff worked long hours, planning and documenting every aspect of its complicated budget. While Sue and her team had a great deal of mutual respect, at budget time the same issue always came up.

It was this: Doug preferred to discuss the budget alone with Sue. Needless to say, this made her team feel excluded from the project they had all worked so hard to accomplish. Even more demotivating, there was never any recognition of the team’s work, nor any explanation of subsequent budget changes. When Sue finally recognized the problem, she initiated a couple of simple processes. First, she made sure that everyone’s name went into the final presentation, which clarified who had created what. Following each and every quarterly budget meeting with Doug, she also scheduled an immediate one-hour meeting with her team, during which she reviewed Doug’s comments and feedback. She also wrote the CFO a follow-up email that acknowledged her team’s individual efforts, citing the contribution each person made to the end product. Of course, she cc’d her team as well so they could witness her singing their praises.

In our increasingly competitive workplaces—where both the pace and the technology make it easy to lose touch with the human connection—this kind of valuing process makes a difference.

Become a Meeting Ninja

Valuing visibly requires you to “watch the clock”—and I mean that literally. This may seem overly tactical to some people, but I find that when you don’t respect others’ time in meetings by phone, video or face to face, it sends the implicit message that you don’t value them at all.

Take Jonathan, who was invited to join a team conference call the night before it occurred. Being added late made him feel overlooked before the discussion even began. To make matters worse, nobody told him what the meeting was even for. As the meeting began, he soon realized that most of the others had no idea why they were there, either, who else was coming, how long the meeting was going to last, or why what was being discussed couldn’t have been communicated in an email.

Five minutes into the discussion, Jonathan stopped the host. “Excuse my interruption,” he said, “but before we really dive in, can you share what success looks like at the end of this meeting and what the agenda will be? And could we do 10 second introductions of who’s on the call?” Immediately, a clear purpose was established. Everyone had clarity on the value that they were expected to provide to the meeting, and what they should expect going forward.

How can leaders create meetings that value and respect their teams?

Design meetings with a clear agenda and plan to offer clear action steps at the end. This shows respect for your colleagues’ time, while also communicating accountability. At the beginning of a meeting, say, “What success looks like for this meeting is XYZ . . .” At the end, recap if you’ve achieved that success, or list what’s missing.

At the start of every meeting or phone call, set aside five minutes to make introductions. Ask everyone to share one personal or professional update. This allows for increased vulnerability, familiarity and trust, and helps everyone involved understood where their colleagues are at. Twenty-four hours before the meeting, distribute an agenda that encourages different members to lead a section of the meeting. Periodically ask for input, instead of waiting until the end. Let everyone pitch in. If you’re on a phone call, ban the Mute button in order to minimize awkward pauses and multitasking.

Becoming a meeting ninja is also about knowing when to exclude others from meetings in deference to their time. For example, one chief of staff for a Fortune 500 Chief Digital Officer regularly removes senior leaders from recurring meeting invitations when their input is no longer needed.

Put simply, we all value our time, and showing our respect for it has an outsized impact on people’s happiness and overall commitment to work.

#EricaTips

BOX-B

How to Make Meetings More Valuable to Everyone:

* Make sure everyone can answer the question: “Why am I in this meeting or conversation?”
* Schedule meetings only for the minimal time required. Remember Parkinson’s Law: Work will extend to the time allotted for it.
* Start and end meetings on time.
* Send out a clear agenda or defined outcome before a meeting.
* Host a weekly one-hour “virtual office hours” session to handle smaller issues that don’t warrant group meeting time.
* Audit recurring meetings and eliminate the ones that don’t add value.
* Do not create a meeting with more than eight attendees unless it is a broader team strategy session, town hall or division-wide update.
* If you have invited a senior leader to a meeting, clearly state whether their attendance is optional or whether a proxy is requested if the senior leader can’t attend.

END BOX-B

Ban multitasking.

It’s 4:15 p.m. on Wednesday, and I’m responding to my emails on one tab, doing some early Christmas shopping on another, and choosing a restaurant for dinner on my phone. Just as I’m closing in on the perfect Christmas gift, a voice shocks me back into reality . . .

“Erica, what do you think? . . . Erica. Erica? Erica!”

Right. I’m on a conference call. “Sorry about that, I was on mute,” I say, even though I wasn’t on mute, I was just focusing on other things. What was everyone just talking about? Business planning? “Yes, I’m in total agreement with that last statement,” I blurt out, swiftly shutting my half-dozen open browser tabs, and taking a deep breath. Did everyone know I hadn’t been listening? “Oh, wonderful, that’s good news,” someone says. “Thanks Erica.” Saved. Barely.

We all have weaknesses, and mine are browser tabs and Mute buttons. As everyone knows, it’s dangerously easy to multitask during a phone or conference call, though I’m guiltily aware it reduces my active listening. Well, at least I’m not alone. In one study, roughly 65 percent of respondents admitted to doing other work or sending emails while participating in conference calls.[[19]](#endnote-19)

That’s why I’ve made it a point to ban the use of the Mute tool on all my team calls. I also try to plan meetings that are to-the-point and engaging so that the participants are less tempted to let their minds wander.

I once presented a workshop before thirty people at a pharmaceutical company. Everyone in the audience seemed engaged, with the exception of one woman in the back row, who couldn’t tear her eyes away from her phone. Even when I was standing three feet away from her, she remained glued. It bugged me, and it even distracted the other people in the audience. And she wasn’t a junior person; she was one of the most senior people in the room! We’ve all done this. Our goal, then, is to become aware of the perils of multi-tasking and realize how it affects our own attention.

[blank]

In the end, the goal of Value Visibly is very simple. It’s all about making people feel appreciated in the workplace. Use the techniques in this chapter to ensure you are consciously valuing your team online. Use the following assessment to analyze whether Value Visibly is present on your team. Check the box next to each statement. The more you “Strongly Agree,” the higher the level of Value Visibly in your organization.

TABLE

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly Agree | Somewhat Agree | Somewhat Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| Excellent work is acknowledged and rewarded in your organization. |  |  |  |  |
| Your expertise and skills are valued and deployed. | Chapter 2 |  |  | book |
| Your time is respected. |  |  | EXTRACT |  |
| You are not overworked or burnt out. |  | END |  |  |

END TABLE

Chapter 5: Communicate Carefully

Chapter 5

Communicate Carefully

We Communicate Carefully by sending messages that say what we mean and state what we need, from whom, by what time frame, thereby eliminating frustrating ambiguity across teams.

As the youngest child in an immigrant Indian family, I picked up basic English grammar fairly easily. But I still lacked many of the contextual cues that came naturally to my peers. I remember once inviting a middle-school friend to join my family for dinner at a local restaurant. At one point my friend whispered to me that the waiters considered our party “rude.” It wasn’t what anyone said, it was our tone and our cadence. You see, in Indian English, when people ask for something, they use an intonation with a falling contour so it comes off sounding like a statement, rather than a question. Most Americans are accustomed to requests that end in a rising contour. At that moment I knew exactly what my friend meant: without being aware of it, everyone in my family came off like hosts ordering around their staff!

When people communicate, without being aware of it they make use a broad range of “contextualization” cues that help others assess the meanings behind their words. For instance, “I love that film,” accompanied by a head nod signals something entirely different than “I love that film,” paired with an eye roll or a wink.

As I noted earlier, we’re all “immigrants” in today’s digital workplace, meaning that the subtle cues that help us understand what others may really be saying require time, patience and even reflection.

Consider, for example, the story of Docstoc, an online document sharing resource that launched in 2007. On the first day of its launch, Docstoc attracted 30,000 unique users.[[20]](#endnote-20) CTO Alon Shwartz found this number to be cause for celebration. Thirty-thousand unique users! But when he shared these number with the company CEO, Jason Nazar, his enthusiasm was quickly doused. Their conversation, in summary:

Shwartz: We got 30,000. That’s great!

Nazar: We got 30,000. That’s horrible!

Shwartz’ success, it seemed was Nazar’s failure—and they were working on the same project! (Older readers will no doubt find this disconnect recalls the scene in the 1977 film, Annie Hall, when a therapist asks the protagonist, Alvy Singer, how often he sleeps with his girlfriend. “Hardly ever,” he replies. “Maybe three times a week.” Asked the same question, Annie, his girlfriend, answers, “Constantly. I’d say three times a week.)

Ultimately, Shwartz and Nazar realized that they’d never taken the time to define what success looked like. Shwartz’s takeaway? “If you don’t define what success looks like, and are not engaging in mutual validation, how do you know when you’ve succeeded?” He adds, “It’s hard to reach a goal that is not clearly defined.”

Stories like these are pretty common. The complaints range from “Our departments have no common language” to “Nobody knows what our division is up to.” In the end, it all comes down to a major stumbling block: no one is Communicating Carefully.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Up to 80 percent of all projects suffer from a lack of clarity and detail.[[22]](#endnote-22) A recent survey shows that 56 percent of strategic projects fail as a result of poor communication.[[23]](#endnote-23) In the United States alone, this adds up to a loss of 75 million dollars for every 1 billion spent.[[24]](#endnote-24)

When I met with my client Selena, she was nearly at the end of her rope. In a new role as a manager of a design team, she was busy building relationships with a team spread across the American Eastern seaboard. Problem was, she’d been clashing with one of her senior designers, who had sent her what she considered a sloppy, incomplete second-round draft. “This is ok,” Selena wrote back, enclosing a list of the things she thought worked, and that still needed fixing. “Ok. I’ll get the changes to you shortly,” came the reply. But when the next draft arrived, none of the changes Selena had requested had been made, prompting her to call him and command he make the changes. The designer was incensed. “You told me that this was ok. Now you’re lashing out at me?”

Lacking cues like eye contact, tone of voice or body language to clarify Selena’s intent, the designer interpreted her “This is ok” as more or less straightforward feedback. It wasn’t—it was a subtle warning. The same went for the changes Selena proposed—they came across as optional. When the designer ignored them, was it any wonder Selena felt he wasn’t listening, or that the designer believed his boss was now changing her mind?

Gently, I explained to Selena that the problem was on her end. Her natural mode of engaging with colleagues was well-intentioned but off the mark in a digital age. If she wanted to succeed in her new leadership role, she would need to be much clearer. It wasn’t that she lacked people skills—Selena was doing everything possible to connect with her managers and staff—it was that she needed to adjust her digital body language.

The good news? Selena realized that clarity trumped politeness and would also help her colleagues thrive. She changed her feedback style to be more direct—even including a bullet pointed list of requests! In no time at all, the designer delivered on what Selena wanted. It was all good.

Once, people could “clarify” what others were saying by picking up on their physical reactions—a quizzical expression, a stunned stare, the hint of a smile. This still works in real life, just not in the contemporary digital world. Even on video calls, there is a disconnect when people don’t look at their cameras or you can’t quite gauge expressions from the small participant boxes. Today, it’s everyone’s responsibility to consider the potential ways our communication could be interpreted (or misinterpreted), and adjust our writing style and tone accordingly.

Communicate Carefully means putting out clear signals that keep everyone fully informed and aligned. It doesn’t mean that everyone has to agree—that almost never happens—but it does mean that goals are understood and shared. When team members are genuinely aligned on objectives and expectations, this higher level of mutual understanding frees everyone up to focus on being the best at what they do.

Communicating Carefully means getting to the point while considering context, medium, and your audience.

The speed and pace of change in most businesses today make Communicating Carefully even harder to implement. Company leaders used to spend months crafting a robust vision of strategic alignment before carefully communicating that vision over a face-to-face campaign, from investors to business units to customers. Today, leaders need to disseminate information fast.

This means that people are expected to present their ideas in bullet points, using headlines as proxies for the ideas that support them. The universal chaos of unread email inboxes, Ims, texts, and calendar invites makes most of us crave a simpler, easier era of phone calls, office drop-ins and uninterrupted client dinners. Back then, a day could go by before we finally responded to a voicemail (Call Jack back, we scrawled on a random piece of paper, which we then lost.) Needless to say, Communicating Carefully in today’s high-velocity, shorthand world demands a more concrete approach.

Communicate Carefully: The Principles

Since most of us communicate most of the time with our thumbs, we need new rules of thumb to help us communicate clearly and persuasively.

Think Before You Type

It was 8PM on a Sunday night, and I was frazzled and tired. Unfortunately, I couldn’t start winding down before sending a few emails in anticipation of a busy Monday morning involving meetings and travel. Wearily, I drafted an email to my client Katie, incorporating specific guidance connected to her current team challenges, along with a draft of a presentation I would be sharing with them later that week. It looked good, I thought: clearly written, with bold headings, bullet points and italics. I typed “Katie” in the TO: line, and when her email address popped up, I pressed Send. Done.

Two seconds later, my relief gave way to panic. I’d sent my email to another Katie at another company. This “other Katie” was a potential business prospect, a woman I was hoping someday to work with. I felt embarrassed—how stupid this must look to her. If I had only taken a few seconds to think clearly, and been more careful about my communication, I could have avoided the whole thing.

It may seem obvious, but this kind of thing happens all of the time. And once we press Send, we cede control over where our words end up. A private email we send to an acquaintance might show up later in a post on his or her public Facebook page. Messages and posts can be copied, forwarded, altered and updated in ways that alter their fundamental meaning, not to mention translated instantly (and not always correctly) into almost any language. An email can show up from a customer or client without us knowing that our boss’s boss is included as a BCC.

All this means one thing: we need to be very careful.

One former manufacturing executive I know sent his colleagues a voluminous, twelve-paragraph email, giving them a friendly heads-up about a possible future acquisition. Without his knowledge, two words from his long email were copied (out of context, too) and widely forwarded across the organization: Expect layoffs.

Esther, a hospital administrator, experienced the embarrassing and painful chaos that Reply All can create when she emailed the entire hospital staff with the latest draft of a controversial policy. Despite her best efforts to regain control, she spent the next week fielding Reply-All feedback from 800 or so staff members.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Our fast-moving culture means that don’t always take the time we need to proofread or reconsider the words we’ve written before we press Send. But today, rereading an email before we send it (and not ten times after we send it) is mandatory. How often have you heard the words, “But I sent you an email,” or, “Didn’t you get the email?” or “I am sure I covered that in the email,” when you’re staring directly at the email in question and the information just isn’t there?

The first rule of Communicate Carefully? Slow down.

#EricaTips

BOX-B

Try This Think-Before-You-Type Checklist:

* Who needs to be included on this message?
* What do I want the receiver(s) to do after they read this message?
* What context or information do they need?
* What is the appropriate tone?
* When is the best time to send this message?
* What is the best channel to convey this message?
* How comfortable am I if this message is screenshotted, forwarded, or otherwise shared? What can I do to change it? Or should I save this for a phone call or face-to-face meeting?

END BOX-B

If you don’t take a few moments to slow down, well, consider the following, very common scenario. Roz sends an email to her colleague, Jon:

“Hi, Jon, How was your ski trip this weekend? Hey, can you possibly send me the sales recap that went around to your group on Friday? I need to put a sales report together for the team. Also, did any of the accounts fail to report their numbers? Thanks so much for your help!—Roz

Seconds later, Jon responds via text:

Yep, we did $457K for Feb!

As always eager to please, Jon feels great about the exchange (fact is, he barely thought about it afterwards). He’s helped Roz out, and now he can move on to the next agenda item. A win-win. On her end, Roz is irritated for any number of reasons. First, she needed the full sales report; second, Jon didn’t answer her question; third, Roz sent an email, but Jon answered her with a text—why?; and finally, Jon skipped over the pleasantries, not even acknowledging Roz’s folksy greeting. (Ironically, Roz would have felt annoyed if Jon had taken too much time to respond.)

It’s easy to assume that suspending cognition before typing is a “younger person” thing, common to so-called Digital Natives. But my research has shown that this particular challenge to in digital body language has perpetrators of all ages and at all levels in organizations, especially executives, who are responsible for communicating so many messages that most settle for speed over clarity. The result is widespread confusion across teams.

One former client of mine, Joe, had a team with a low employee engagement score. As we dug in to figure out why, we saw that many of his team members reported feeling overwhelmed. They often worked on weekends and late at night. Joe realized two things: He hadn’t created time boundaries around when his teams should communicate, and he was also guilty of sending emails at all hours. Was it any surprise his teams felt they needed to be in touch 24/7?

So he made some changes. Today his teams know that Joe writes and answers emails on weekend afternoons, but doesn’t expect a response until Monday morning. Joe even went the extra step of coining a new acronym, ROM, or “Respond on Monday.” This way, Joe doesn’t have to wait to send the email (and risk forgetting it altogether), but his team still gets their weekend.

Be Tone-Deft, not Tone-Deaf

Tone—the overall attitude, or character, of a piece of writing—is another key component of Communicating Carefully. Ask yourself: Who is the recipient? Who is the audience? What’s the context here? Tailor your communication accordingly, or as tell my clients, make sure you “read” the room!

Naturally, this means anticipating how your words are likely to come across to others. When you write, text or call your boss or colleagues, for instance, it’s best to keep your tone neutral until you develop a rapport that would indicate differently. Focus on being informative, or persuasive. Edit yourself, so that you stick to the essential facts.

Offline, a loud tone of voice can convey emphasis (This matters!), serve as a switching signal (actually, this is the thing that matters) or express extreme feelings (I’m furious!). A softer voice conveys “I don’t know,” signals calm, or indicates that maybe it’s time for someone else to speak. The good news is that you can also modify the volume of your digital voice.

Consider the following email message: “THIS IS NOT GOOD, NEEDS A LOT OF WORK!!!!” It sounds like Zeus ordering a hit job on a lesser god—all caps, terse sentence structure and a crazy picket fence of explanation marks. If someone was trying to tear your head off, then mission accomplished. But if that same person was trying to convey respect, whoops!

Be aware, then, of the visual impact of your message.

Ethan, a manager I coach, once told me about an interaction with a senior leader that left him feeling unappreciated and belittled. As requested, he had sent this leader a detailed plan about increasing productivity. The plan set forth a different way of working that Ethan was certain could help teams avoid duplicating their efforts while creating new levels of transparency. Ethan was excited about the plan, and even included specific questions for the next team meeting. Expecting a positive response, maybe even a few follow-up questions, what he got back from the executive was this: “k.”

Sorry, what? K-what? K-pop? Ethan felt confused and insulted. His proposal was clear and comprehensive. Didn’t it invite a matching response? Was the executive even thinking about Ethan’s plan—or was she dismissing it outright? Did “k” mean she was giving him the green light to proceed, or was it a subtle command to put his dumb idea on a back burner? It was impossible to tell. Also, did the senior leader think so little of Ethan that she couldn’t be bothered to write more than a single letter? Even something pedestrian, like “okay I’ll get back to you,” would have conveyed more respect and attentiveness than that “k.”

#AskErica

BOX-B

How do I write messages people actually read?

* Assign Email Tasks Using the “3Ws.” Every message should have a clear Who (the name of a specific person, versus a group); a clear What (an explicit description); and a clear When (the exact time and date, 4H = 4-hour deadline, 2D = 2-day deadline.)
* Specify in the subject line or first sentence of a message if it’s an FYI, Decision Request or a Request for Information.
* Create Clear Acronyms (NNTR = No Need To Respond, WINFY = What I Need From You).
* Write the Perfect Subject Line. Summarize the body of your email, use prefix modifiers, and stick to the same subject line unless the subject changes (this isn’t the place to throw in new or tangential questions). If the subject does change, create a new email thread with its own subject line)
* Break long messages into two parts. Label them “Quick Summary” and “Details.” Know what you really want first, then get to that point at the top of the email.
* Make Your Messages Scannable. Use bullet points, subheadings, white space, highlights and bold text.
* Show Instead of Tell by Attaching Screenshots. They are valuable when you need to give someone instructions, or to highlight slides in a deck.
* Use “If . . . then . . .” statements to increase accountability, create expectations and provide clarity on next steps.
* Present Options: Ask, “Do you think we should do A, B or C?” Try not to ask open-ended questions like, “What do you think about this?” or “Thoughts?”

END BOX-B

Tone deficiencies go well beyond team discussions. Some can come close to blowing up a brand.

The first week in April 2017, didn’t start out well for United Airlines CEO Oscar Munoz, and in no time at all it turned into a disaster. A viral video emerged showed a United Airlines passenger being yanked from his seat, and dragged down the aisle of an airplane by a team of security officers. A terrorist event averted? Uh, no. United had overbooked the flight, and when a randomly selected passenger refused to vacate his seat, the man, a physician, was forcibly removed.[[26]](#endnote-26)

Obviously, this required a rapid response from the company and its CEO. In response, United representatives Tweeted a tepid apology for having overbooked the flight, without mentioning the passenger, a tweet that was unanimously derided and ridiculed. Six hours later, Munoz Tweeted his own public apology to the public, one that was widely received as lame, tone-deaf and the opposite of saying “I’m sorry, we messed up.”

17-munoztweet.pdf

While Munoz and United eventually issued a proper apology, the damage was already done. Technically, of course, Munoz did the right thing by responding personally. Nonetheless, his tone was detached, and his language sounded hollow and inauthentic. The tweet also came too late. The world’s angry, derisive response to how United had mishandled a public relations crisis resulted in a temporary $1.4 billion drop in the airline’s stock price.[[27]](#endnote-27)

It didn’t have to be that way. In 2018, Southwest Airlines came up against their own terrifying situation when an engine exploded mid-flight, obliterating an aircraft window and killing a passenger.[[28]](#endnote-28) When the flight landed, Southwest responded quickly.

First, the airline released a short announcement on several social networks, reporting everything they knew. A follow-up announcement provided a link to an appropriately emotional in-depth statement issued by Southwest:

We are deeply saddened to confirm that there is one fatality resulting from this accident. The entire Southwest Airlines family is devastated and extends its deepest, heartfelt sympathy to the customers, employees, family members and loved ones affected by this tragic event.[[29]](#endnote-29)

As the airline amassed additional facts, they passed them to the world in real time, along with a video from company CEO, Gary Kelly.[[30]](#endnote-30) Southwest’s website header and Twitter profile image changed overnight from a default red, yellow and blue heart symbol to a gray shattered heart. All other marketing messages were pulled. It was obvious that the Southwest PR team had considered the broader context, put themselves in the public’s shoes—and struck the right tone.

Know when to Change the Channel

Several years ago, following a collaboration workshop I led at a large retailer, I was asked to work with two employees whom I’ll call Samantha and Tony, who had agreed to act as “collaboration champions,” despite living in different US states, and communicating primarily via email. Their job, we agreed, was to continue to role-model and reinforce various behaviors we’d discussed during the workshop.

Well, if Samantha and Tony were collaboration champions, I would hate to see who came in last. The complaints started almost immediately. According to Samantha, Tony was a smug, annoying smartass. I tried to stay above the fray as I gave Samantha tips on how best to deal with Tony’s particular brand of sarcastic humor. At the same time, I was also counseling Tony about putting aside his sarcasm in favor of optimal clarity.

Still, nothing I did seemed to work, and the tension between the two only worsened. A month later, Samantha had had enough. She wrote a forceful, passive-aggressive email to Tony that detailed all the things she hated about his tone, how his sarcasm was driving her nuts, and why, in her opinion, he wasn’t taking the project seriously. The worst part? She CC’d me and affixed this note to the end of her email:

Erica, I believe you probably agree with everything I’m saying, as Tony is constantly going against what we learned in your workshop.

That wasn’t a good day. I found myself caught in a back-and-forth email chain, all the while feeling like a put-upon pre-school teacher on the verge of screaming, “Time out!” In an effort to hash things out between them, I set up a video conference call.

Ultimately, Samantha and Tony were able to tolerate each other—just barely, but enough to complete their tenure as—what was the hopeful expression?—“collaboration champions.” It wasn’t that they couldn’t work together. Instead, they needed to change the channel they were using from email to regular video calls. Video calls eliminated the miscommunication that resulted from their wildly different email styles, while adding visual cues that conveyed their emotions and (it’s true) mutual good intentions.

Then there are some people who get it right from the start.

A web applications company called Zapier has seemingly cracked the code around using the right collaboration channels, even coming out with a guide to help other companies do the same thing.[[31]](#endnote-31) Zapier’s workforce is entirely remote, with almost everything shared via written communication. Every one of the company’s collaboration tools serves a clear-cut purpose, while mimicking a parallel real-world office environment.

For example, the instant messaging platform Slack serves as Zapier’s virtual office, e.g., “if you’re in Slack, then you’re at work.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Within Slack, company employees have created both work and non-work related channels (messaging chains), ranging from “marketing” and “hacking” to “water cooler.” These discreet “rooms” ensure that employees’ messages are seen by the appropriate audience, especially as teams grow beyond a dozen or so people, increasing the likelihood of duplication across channels.[[33]](#endnote-33) Every “room” also has its own working policies and moderators that are revised and upgraded over time. Zapier also makes use of Slack tool integration like Trello, GitHub and Google Docs, with each one, again, serving a clear purpose. Finally, the company keeps everything organized by adhering to detailed norms around when and how to use each tool.

One of the most powerful things we can do is take pains to specify appropriate channels and formats across the culture. You don’t have to always stick to the same communication medium, but make sure you choose the right one for the right message. Using the wrong channel at the wrong time can even have professional consequences, damaging trust or even branding you as unsophisticated or unsympathetic.

I teach clients about the implications of choosing the right channel by focusing on three issues: Length; Complexity; and Familiarity.

Length, Complexity, and Familiarity

Length: How Deep is the Ocean?

Of these three issues, length is the easiest one to manage. Most of us have family members, or colleagues, who send multiple, consecutive texts, as they’re seemingly unable to squeeze their thoughts or ideas into one or two. If you want to provide someone with a lengthy (e.g. more than a short paragraph) update, use email, and for heaven’s sakes, refrain from using channels like instant messaging. Use bold, underlined headings, attachments if applicable, and make sure you share specific context briefly upfront so readers understand why it’s important. Bottom line: if your message doesn’t match the medium, find a more appropriate channel.

Complexity: Parsing Intricacy

Complexity is a lot harder to figure out. The general rule of thumb is that bigger, broader ideas require more reflection and/or nuanced thinking. If you’re gearing up to make a complex argument, it’s best to choose a medium (including posting a deck or blogging), that permits a greater level of detail, and that also supports add-on elements like photos, video or space for feedback or comments.

Again, always be aware of the visual impact of your message. If it goes on too long, you risk overwhelming people. Also, too many boldfaced or underlined words can come across as chaotic. Images (appropriate ones) can both clarify and enhance trust, but superfluous ones are too often distracting.

Be conscious as well of the timing of complex messages. Don’t expect your team to absorb a novella-length email that you decide to send it out at 5pm on a Friday, and respond to it thoughtfully an hour later. Nor should you wait until the last minute to send complex messages that may invite some back-and-forth. In both cases, it’s best to end your message with an invitation for a phone call or an in-person meeting to go over the smaller details.

Again, always use the channel that suits the tone and message you want to convey, bearing in mind that just because we live in a digital world doesn’t mean digital is the only way to go.

TABLE

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Complexity of argument | Best Channels to Use | Why? |
| High | Posting or Blogging, Visual presentations, Video calls | Allows for greater trust-building, and can also include supporting elements, like photos, video and even a feedback or comments option |
| Medium | Email, phone and group conference calls | Allows for more context and color on the topic, as well as back-and-forth exchanges for discussion |
| Low | Group messaging tools (IM, text, chat tools) | Allows for immediate and low-impact distractions, time to process or send immediate response if preferred, ability to use less context |

END TABLE

Familiarity

Familiarity refers not only to our relationship to the recipient(s) of what we write, but also the content of what we’re saying. Who is your audience? If you have a close relationship with someone, sending that person a text may be a welcome, neutral disruption. But in a business relationship, most people prefer communicating via email, which allows them to scan the subject line and decide when (or even if) to open and read your message.

Consider your content. Is it personal or confidential? If it is, make sure you build trust by sending a direct private message, versus a public tweet or group IM.

Length, Complexity and Familiarity: Putting It All Together

We’ve now gone over the three factors involved in choosing the channel that shows your respect for other people’s limited time and attention. Within each one, of course, are variations, or special circumstances. For instance, I often hear that video meetings are a preferred option when face-to-face meetings aren’t possible. But, as we all know by now, video meetings are far from perfect, with many feeling decidedly un-collaborative and more like siloed lectures, where one or two people at a time bang on while everyone else is forced to listen. But there are ways around this. Zoom, for example, offers “Breakout Rooms” that sequester meeting participants in standalone rooms of any size. Zoom also lets participants use a virtual whiteboard during sessions, so that everyone present can write, collaborate simultaneously, thereby building shared context.

Recently, an organization brought me in to assess one of its team’s digital communications, which made up most of their “update culture.” The division leader wanted to know why there was so much daily dysfunction: missed deadlines, emails ignored, reports of uncomfortable chat room conversations, and a lot of peer-based passive-aggressiveness.

It didn’t take me long to discover that the team in question was using its collaboration tools in every which way but the right one! In the team’s hands, Microsoft Teams chat had become a way for members to avoid face-to-face collaboration. Members were also sharing the same messages and documents using multiple collaboration tools, making it hard for anybody to know where to go for what. Finally, some members were commenting on tasks using 10-word IM messages, without explaining if their message was an opinion or a request for action.

Eventually, the team and I created norms around the best, most proper use of every communication channel. Here’s what we built:

Image001.pdf

Setting collaboration channel norms wasn’t hard. No, the hard part was making sure teams followed through with these new behaviors, and didn’t gradually slide back to their old ways. Mindful of this, we identified two or three channel advocates, whose role was to encourage best practices within each channel, and give shout-outs to those who were modeling the right behaviors. Finally, we developed a practice designed to eliminate situations where individuals duplicated content unnecessarily across multiple channels by rolling out the phrase #killduplication.

The #killduplication phrase is now a staple in the team culture, helping to eliminate wasted time and ensure colleagues optimize the use of each digital medium.

The Commitments are in the Details

A longstanding client of mine, an accounting firm, once called me in the wake of the failed product launch targeted at a new customer segment.

The project had been launched only a few months earlier. Here’s how it was done. First, the marketing department invited 660 attendees (50 percent of all employees) to a town hall meeting hosted by the CEO, who presented a formal PowerPoint presentation followed by a half-hour Q&A. Other members of the marketing team hosted a follow up chat on Yammer (a closed-network social platform), and a special lunch for second level managers. Everyone went around using language like “This is a big opportunity” and “Let’s spark a change” to make sure employees understood they were embarking on something extraordinary. They were perplexed when, a month later, nothing happened. All of the ideas had become stuck in the planning stage and many were set aside completely for ‘more pressing’ work.

Well, here’s why nothing happened. At no time did the leadership team ask managers to write down clear, transparent commitments around what they and their teams planned on doing to engage customers, or work alongside the marketing department, or which benchmarks they should prioritize.

To get everyone back on track, the executive team and I asked each team member to commit to communicating the details of the new offering to existing and potential clients by the end of the week. Next, we used Microsoft Teams to track their progress, with mechanisms in place to provide scripts, share client FAQs and enlist executives in high priority discussions. This simple practice allowed the teams to make fewer, better commitments and stick to them.

The hardest part of any promise? Staying on track. The more networked an organization is, the more touchpoints and requests and people to say “yes” to a team has to deal with. To reduce confusion, I always advise writing down and tracking individual and team commitments. At every stage of a project, list your key ongoing commitments. For example: “I will provide my team with the resources they need in these areas: website updates, product rollouts, and communications.” Under those, list your specific promises, e.g. “I will hire two new engineers by the end of September.”

#AskErica

BOX-B

How can I make sure my team follow through with commitments?

* Is the commitment observable and measurable?
* If the commitment is carried out well, will it support or leverage change that works toward the team’s stated goal or benchmark?
* Do individuals or teams have all of the resources they need to fulfill this commitment?
* Does this commitment risk overextending our team? Will the team require additional support?

END BOX-B

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Weak Commitments | Powerful Commitments |
| At the next team meeting, I will share what we talked about in the offsite. | I will meet with my reportees next week to review our revenue projection, and complete a validation analysis. This information will inform the next steps we’ll take to meet our targets. |
| Talk with director about the need to improve outcomes by altering the culture change engagement process. | I will collect information and data to demonstrate what is and isn’t working as we try to change culture. Link to best practices from other companies. By the end of the month, I will make a culture implementation recommendation to the director. |
| Design recruiting event | By next month, two Midwest recruiters and I will attend two job fair state conferences to gather best practices on designing our events. We will present our design recommendations at the next quarterly meeting of the talent group. |
| Use performance feedback in my work. | I will review my feedback and reflect on the conflict that arose between my director and myself. I will implement a strategy to address that conflict by next week, with a plan on how to address each of his possible reactions. |

Communicating Carefully establishes the base from which a team can successfully execute its goals. Ask yourself: “What do I want the person who reads this to do after I communicate this message?” By considering the Who, What, When, Where, and How of all your communications, and including the context the person or people getting these messages might need to understand them more fully, your team’s performance is bound to improve.

Also: make sure you measure success with details. Confirm that everyone understands what he or she has agreed to, including the owners, actions, and deadlines you expect. Lastly, set up a process to regularly review these measures of success to track progress and make ongoing adjustments whenever necessary.

Put simply, Communicate Carefully is about ensuring that all the relevant players are on the same page. It’s harder but not impossible to accomplish this when you’re working with digital teams.

Remember: Think before you type, choose the right channel and focus on the detail of your communication.

Use the following assessment to analyze whether Communicate Carefully is present on your team. Simply check the box beside each statement that most closely resembles your level of agreement with the statement. The more “Strongly Agree” boxes are checked, the higher your pre-existing level of Communicate Carefully.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly Agree | Somewhat Agree | Somewhat Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| You understand the specific goals and objectives of each team project. |  |  |  |  |
| After each meeting, you are clear on next steps and have minutes to look back on just in case. |  |  |  |  |
| Your team has a clear set of norms regarding channel selection and response time. |  |  |  |  |
| You understand what is being asked of you in the messages you receive. |  |  |  |  |

Chapter 6: Collaborate Confidently

Chapter 6

Collaborate Confidently

Teamwork in a Digital Age

Collaborating Confidently means that even when things get crazy (e.g., most of the time), employees are there to support one another, and won’t allow any one person to crash. Collaborate Confidently is about taking conscious risks while trusting that others will defend your actions and decisions. Collaborate Confidently frees everyone from the paralysis of daily fears and uncertainties and move forward from alignment to commitment.

I come from an Indian family of loud talkers. It’s just how we were raised and learned dialect in our culture. In my family, either you talk loudly or you don’t get heard. As a public speaker, there are times today where I don’t even need a microphone, even when I’m talking to 100 or more people.

Still, it wasn’t until I was sharing an office with a too-loud colleague that I realized the downsides of my own volume. We had glass-enclosed office spaces directly across the hallway from each other, yet it always seemed like he was screaming directly into my ear. I couldn’t hear myself think around this person, but I was afraid to say anything. Was there a polite way to tell him he should consider lowering his voice during meetings and when he was on the phone? If I shushed him, could it offend him and affect our ability to work together?

I rehearsed a few different ways I could say something. I’ll tell him over lunch, casually at the water cooler, or as I’m walking past his door? Wait! I’ll get someone who knows him better to do it? No, wait again! I’ll write him an email! I drafted one, slept on it and the next morning deleted it.

Later that same day, I said to him finally, “Could you please speak a bit more quietly or maybe close your door when you’re on calls?”

“Sure, I’m so sorry.” he said.

That was it. It wasn’t hard at all. Imagine all the time and energy I could have saved if I’d been confident that my request would be taken as helpful and well-intentioned (as it was).

Confident collaboration requires us to put aside whatever fears and anxieties we might have about what others might think or say, and speak up! I’m sure we’ve all had a colleague who needs everything right now. All his emails have URGENT! in their subject line, and if that weren’t emphatic enough, he texts you a few seconds after emailing, and then, if you haven’t responded in a few hours, the phone rings, and guess who it is? You might have even dropped a deadline or two to help him finish something—he’s on deadline!—only to discover that his deadline was in his own head.

Or maybe you know his counterpart. She has the opposite problem. She’s habitually un-urgent. She agrees to complete a large piece of work, but when you send her multiple follow-up emails, she doesn’t answer, even when the deadline has come and gone. Is she stressed out, or overburdened? You have no idea, but as you await a response that never comes, you end up missing your own deadlines.

People like these make collaboration difficult, especially in a digital workplace (there’s no way to pop by their desk to alleviate their concerns, or remind them to respond). Often, negative workplace behaviors like these are based on fear and anxiety that mutate into chronic delays, passive-aggressiveness and the erosion of trust.

Based on responses from a CEB workplace survey of over 23,000 employees, a recent Fortune study reported that 60 percent of all employees have to consult with at least ten colleagues daily just to get their jobs done.[[34]](#endnote-34) Half of that same 60 percent needs to engage with more than 20 colleagues to do their work.[[35]](#endnote-35) Over the past five years, the time required for one company to sell something to another has risen 22 percent.[[36]](#endnote-36) In a world entrenched in teamwork, we need to focus on getting beyond negative, fear-based workplace behaviors and uncovering the best ways to collaborate.

The third law of digital body language is Collaborate Confidently. We collaborate confidently when we state our needs clearly, including when and why we need something, leaving no room for misinterpretation (or fear. Or anxiety.)

Why is it so hard to collaborate confidently in the digital workplace?

In traditional office settings, it’s easy to stroll past a colleague’s desk—can you spare a moment? Short conversations (if you can even call them conversations) were once ingredients of a larger culture in which our social relationships at work served to strengthen trust and mutual understanding. This spontaneous, drop-in quality is largely missing in today’s work environment. In some cases, we never get to meet our colleagues face-to-face. We may have dozens of them, in fact, spread across different departments across multiple time zones.

In a traditional workplace environment, the signals we once used to convey confidence signals were obvious. We shook people’s hands. We nodded or shook our heads. In case of conflict, we scheduled a meeting, or a phone call. Absent the pressure we feel today to get everything done now, we had more time to think through and process things.

Today, team members are more likely to say something like, “Sorry, saw you called, didn’t listen to the voicemail, could you send a video meeting invite instead?” or flat-out tell you they’re just too busy to schedule a meeting. Thoughtfulness, we hardly knew ye. Everything has to be done this second, and the fact is, most people’s brains just don’t work that way.

Collaborate Confidently: The Principles

Stay in the Loop

Collaborate Confidently is about keeping all relevant parties informed and up to date, while checking in constantly to ensure ongoing clarity in all components.

For example, one of my clients, Kerry, the COO of a division in a technology company, recalls an example of misalignment among project components: “I had to update a senior executive with a project plan that involves three teams in my division. All three teams knew we had to send him one plan. All the different teams sent me different timelines for the final deck. They didn’t even talk to each other about aligning schedules. I’m inundated with insufficient information, it’s 6:00 PM—and the senior executive expects it in his inbox by midnight.”

Or here’s another. An American company in the consumer market was planning a rollout across Europe of a new personal hygiene product. Francoise Henderson, a translator working on the team, got to work translating various marketing materials. At one point she noticed that the ingredients list included in product advertisements was different from the list appearing on the bottles (some ingredients, it seemed, were banned in Europe).

“No one told the marketing department, though,” Henderson said.[[37]](#endnote-37) Five separate company units—marketing, communications, technical, legal and packaging—were supposed to be apprised of updates and changes throughout the rollout. In this case, literally no one was on the same page.

Confident collaboration begins by understanding what other departments do—and establishing clear norms on how they interact with one another.

If anyone understands the problem of confidence gaps in collaboration, it’s Lisa Shallet, the former head of brand marketing and digital strategy at Goldman Sachs and active board member, The teams she oversaw at Goldman Sachs comprised team members and departments that were equipped to address a broad range of topics, including “legal, compliance, employment law, employee relations, technology, tech risk, record retention.”[[38]](#endnote-38) Why were there so many experts in the mix? “So we can get to yes faster,” Shallet says. “Or, if we have to get to no, at least we all are comfortable with why we ended up at no.”[[39]](#endnote-39) At the beginning of any project, Shallet advises asking : “Who’s going to need to know all the things we’re thinking about doing? Where are the risks? Where are people going to really need to understand the processes, the requirements, the regulations?”[[40]](#endnote-40) Most critically, she advocates prioritizing the right people who can make a project better, while also identifying who can best anticipate bottlenecks, or call out the BS.

Posing the simple question, “Who could derail this?” can avoid leaving off important individuals who could later hamper your efforts, from a front-line cashier to a new customer representative to a risk manager. Shallet considers all stakeholders, including people who may not be making the decision but have to implement it. Additionally, she asks all departments involved to break down proposals and issues into layman’s terms. For example, engineering, management and legal all speak different languages. To ensure these disparate voices understand one another, each is expected to express their ideas using clear, jargon-free language.

Caroline, a team leader at a pharmaceutical company, designates “Project Team Members” and “Project Advisors.” Team Members are involved in decision making and control of the day-to-day activities, while Project Advisors are subject matter experts, and are only included on meeting summaries (this keeps them in the loop) or in 1:1 conversations when their expertise is required. Project Team Members who can’t attend a meeting are responsible for appointing a proxy to make decisions for them.

Assigning these roles has reduced Caroline’s 30-person brainstorming meetings into 6-person discussions. Things now get done just like that.

Win with Consistency

To battle today’s erosion of confidence at work often caused by changing priorities, it is critical to be consistent in our messages.

What are the best ways to build and earn confidence through consistency?

The answer? Fight thoughtless deadlines; Eliminate chronic cancellations; and Practice patient responses.

Fight Thoughtless Deadlines

19\_deadline1.pdf

20\_deadline2.pdf

21\_deadline3.pdf

The word “deadline” can be traced back to the American Civil War—who knew? Back then, prisoner-of-war camps had “dead-lines,” which, if prisoners crossed them, resulted in their deaths.[[41]](#endnote-41) In short, deadlines are serious.

In some places they still are. In a manufacturing plant, for example, a missed deadline can cause chaos for countless stakeholders along the supply chain. But in other settings, there is less at stake in missing a precise deadline, and deadlines are understood to be rough—calibrated for “noonish,” “ASAP,” or “first thing in the morning.” These requests may or may not feel urgent. Particularly in creative industries that involve iteration and innovation, it’s understood that deadlines may not be met if the idea just hasn’t reached completion. The problem arises when one team or one person’s missed deadline causes a delay down the chain for someone else.

Most organizations deal with all of these scenarios at one time or another. When people are collaborating from different places, time zones, working hours, language barriers, and more all contribute to a more difficult time meeting deadlines. And so it’s important that managers have a system in place that creates realistic deadlines, are clear about the consequences of missing them, and considers contingencies for when (inevitably) something goes wrong.

Be thoughtful about deadlines. When setting major deadlines with her management team, Mary, an SVP at a hospitality company division, always prefaced her scheduling meetings with a caveat: “I’m thinking out loud and believe the deadline should be December 1. I haven’t finalized the deadline. I want everyone to give me their opinion.”

Why did Mary do this? To give her team permission to speak up about any issues that came up, instead of remaining silent out of the mistaken belief that she’d already made up her mind. In addition, Mary welcomed email from employees who didn’t speak up in meetings. Email gave those employees the psychological safety they needed to contribute to the conversation, helping them accept her final deadlines even when their opinions didn’t change anything.

#EricaTips

BOX-B

How to Build Team Confidence:

* Measure success in results, not hours. Avoid hounding people over not working enough, or working too many hours. If you tell them they need to work 8-hour days, but they know they can get the work done in 5, they will spend more time getting sidetracked instead of getting the job done.
* Set clear roles and expectations. Tasks should be framed as steps to accomplish a common goal. Be clear on the direct line between the two. Typically I end all phone calls with a question: Who is doing what—and by when? That way, the entire team is clear, and individuals feel a sense of accountability towards their peers as well as the team leader. As tasks are getting done, I like to use a project tracking software like Trello to increase accountability.
* Agree on what success looks like.:At the start of a project, ask three questions: What does great look like? What does done look like? What is out of scope? From there, work backwards as a group to decide on a realistic deadline.
* Be available. If team members can’t reach you with a question about a task, they are more likely to lose steam. Think of all the hours that could potentially be wasted if you don’t make yourself available to answer a five-minute question!

END BOX-B

Eliminate Chronic Cancellations

18-reschedule.pdf

Canceling meetings is a real problem in the workplace. It’s getting worse, too, since we’re all so overscheduled and overworked (at least we think we are). It’s easy to book time on someone else’s Outlook calendar—why don’t we just do it now, and bow out later if we have to?

But chronically cancelling meetings can have company-wide repercussions, including lowered morale, lost team brainstorming time, and a general loss of confidence in leadership.

Here’s an example: Nadia runs an internal marketing team at a large insurance services firm. Her team worked three weeks on a one-year strategy plan for the Chief Innovation Officer, only to have him cancel the meeting just hours before its start. Sure, the meeting was eventually rescheduled, but the previous cancellation (all that work) made the team feel devalued and unseen. It also signals ambivalence—if the meeting were actually important, it would have happened.

‘Even worse than the meeting getting cancelled, almost, was the curt email announcing the news. While you will inevitably have to cancel some meetings, when you do, there is a right way to do it. He should have sent a direct note saying “I’m sorry” and explain why the meeting was cancelled. He also should have been respectful in how he communicated his reason, such as “I understand how important this is . . .” or “Let’s reschedule this as soon as possible . . .”

Practice Patient Responses.

“unsubscribe”—a message sent to the massive reply all chain that went too far

“oops I really shouldn’t email before having my coffee.”—a self-correction to a hastily written, hastily sent email

“Not trying to be rude but . . .”—the beginning of a passive aggressive email sent a few beats too quickly

As I’ve said more than once in this book, today’s channels are asynchronous, meaning that multiple messages can show up at the same time, throwing a wrench into the very concept of “sequence.” We forget the truism that in the long run, less haste ultimately equals more speed. Missed or crisscrossing messages can undo collaboration confidence by creating misunderstandings, leading to broken commitments or canceled meetings. They can also lead to widespread inaction or worse, chaos.

The gaps we all experience in response times bring with them another problem, namely, that circumstances can change dramatically before we’ve gotten an answer to the first email we sent. In addition, our need for a response increases with every second we sit there, making us feel impatient, resentful and stressed-out. This issue is especially germane for global leaders with teams in multiple time zones.

“I’ll wake up in New York to a flurry of 50 email exchanges about an issue in our Shanghai office,” says Sam, a shared services leader at Walt Disney Parks and Resorts. “People freak out because they haven’t heard back from me yet, don’t read the latest reply with an update before responding and keep sending emails instead of giving me a call.”. As a manager of teams across his company’s Orlando, Shanghai and Paris theme parks, Sam goes bananas when his team sends volumes of emails without checking first that they’re adding genuine value to the infinitely long, “Reply All” chain.

If you can withstand the blind impulse to respond to an email immediately, well, there’s a lot of power and control to be found in the ensuing silence. Unless the message is urgent or time-sensitive, don’t drop everything to respond at once. The collective interest (your own included) is far better served by a measured, strategic reply. Silence allows us to gain perspective, to consider every angle, to review what’s happened and anticipate what might come next.

Digital hastiness can also foster groupthink and undermine team creativity. 6 ‘yes’ emails in a chain make it harder for the 7th person to say no. The mute button reduces creative flow and concentration. A “Does everyone agree” at the end of the video meeting doesn’t feel like a true invitation for discord.

Take a few additional moments of pause to re-read what you’ve just written. Are you saying what you *think* you’re saying? For all its drawbacks, asynchronous communication gives us time to process our words, instead of just blurting them out. Needless to say, this is a very real advantage. Don’t automatically choose immediacy over a response that can become all the more valuable when you delay sending it.

#EricaTips

BOX-B

How to Avoid Digital Groupthink:

* Be careful about saying “yes” to a task without first understanding all of the details, including deadlines, who will be working alongside you and what resources you’ll have at your disposal. When these aren’t clear at the start, communicate proactively and find them out before planning a roadmap for the task.
* Don’t expect instantaneous responses to the messages you send. Realize that sometimes people are working on other things. Set a reminder for yourself to follow up in 2 days—unless its urgent, in which case you may try reaching out on a second channel once an unusual amount of time has passed.
* Re-read your messages at least once before sending them. Hastiness does not generate the best solutions
* Check for both grammatical errors and clarity. Are you saying what you mean, providing necessary detail, and being clear in your ask? Do you describe what the deliverable should look like, the deadlines, and the check-in process?

END BOX-B

Following up Strategically

In college, I had a roommate who, after every single face-to-face conversation, always liked to leave me a follow-up voicemail: “Just checking in if you were able to call the cleaning lady. The kitchen is really dirty. Also, wanted to check if you bought more paper towels. I think you said you were going to do that. Let me know.” Needless to say, when I moved out, I felt like packing the paper towels with me.

Do you know anyone who actually likes getting an email whose first line is “Just checking in”? I don’t! Nevertheless, the proper etiquette around following up is a critical component of collaboration. Are you supposed to follow up on a task using email, text or phone? Is it okay to ask someone if he or she received the message you sent earlier that day, or does that come across as pestering and distrusting?

Collaborating Confidently means being able to follow up strategically—knowing when and how without qualms about it.

#AskErica

BOX-B

I need a response. How do I follow up without being a nag?

* Amend the subject line to clarify the email is a follow-up request, and not a new task.
* Don’t CC new people (Unless You Absolutely Have To).
* Suggest another way to communicate (E.g. Would it be better if we scheduled a phone call?)

END BOX-B

The Keys to Establishing Executive Presence in a Digital World

The houses of confident leaders are always in order. Confident leaders never send emails scattered with typos. They don’t forget to include relevant team members in group messages. They establish norms in their digital communications that create guidelines for their teams on how and when to communicate, what is appropriate behavior on each social channel, and more. Finally, they lead by example by following these rules themselves.

Leaders with a strong executive presence are present, calculated, and careful. Online, this means double-checking all your written digital communications, and treating the virtual ones as if you were there in person.

In digital meetings, executive presence makes itself known in obvious ways—the skill a leader shows by facilitating constructive discussions, for example, or the way she sidesteps the common pitfalls of the medium (people talking over or lecturing one another, or falling prey to offline distractions). Below you’ll find a few more ways that leaders can show strong digital leadership.

First, understand that digital meetings demand more preparation than in-person meetings. Send out the brainstorm topic before the meeting time so that attendees can begin readying their contributions. By asking team members to bring their top three ideas to the meeting, you’ll avoid creating incomplete solutions and running overtime. Consider asking your team to split into subgroups with their in-person colleagues to discuss ideas beforehand. That way, you can use the call time for ideas that have already been effectively pre-screened and pre-validated.

#AskErica

BOX-B

What does executive presence look like online?

* You set deadlines in collaboration with your team.
* You send clear messages with a clear ask, not confusing brevity with clarity.
* You acknowledge individual differences among team members and account for those needs.
* You set and enforce norms for team communications in a collaborative way.
* You serve as a facilitator, not a monopolizer, of team discussions.

END BOX-B

Even in a digital landscape, Collaborate Confidently involves creating durable commitments among your team. The key is stepping back and asking yourself: What seemingly small things will lead to better collaboration? Is it setting norms on the use of digital mediums? Is it responding to messages in full, and respecting others’ time? Is it ensuring that your team’s understanding of “success” isn’t lost in an email chain? Is it, quite possibly, all these things?

Use the following assessment to analyze whether Collaborate Confidently is present in your workplace. Simple check the box beside each statement that most closely resembles your level of agreement with the statement. The more “Strongly Agree” boxes are checked, the higher the level of Collaborate Confidently.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly Agree | Somewhat Agree | Somewhat Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| Teams update one another regularly and follow up appropriately. |  |  |  |  |
| Your manager or team leader is readily available for questions and support. |  |  |  |  |
| Deadlines are honored and valued. |  |  |  |  |
| Members of your team always feel welcome to speak up if they disagree with a majority opinion. |  |  |  |  |

Conclusion

Conclusion

When I sat down to write this book, I knew that digital body language was important. How could it not be? The majority of information we share and express today happens virtually. Yet I still insisted on framing it in my own brain as a mere complement to traditional, everyday body language. I was wrong. Physical body language and digital body language are inseparable. In fact, digital body language is reshaping physical body language, verbal communication and even the way we’ve begun to think.

How many times have you found yourself in this scenario: a group of work colleagues sits down together for a meal. They’re laughing, and swapping stories, and then one of them picks up a buzzing phone, saying, “Hang on, let me just answer this text.” (Similar to an alcoholic protesting, “It’s just one drink,” cell phone check-ins are always preceded by this same word. “just” . . . just answering a text, just taking this call, just checking the weather forecast, just Shazam-ing the song playing). A half-dozen texts later, the table has fallen silent. Since no one is talking, everyone else feels free to pull out their phones, too. A friend of mine once dubbed cell phones “the wonder killers.” Yes, it’s convenient to get answers to random questions we have in real time, but the joy we lose along the way is incalculable.

Our collective addiction not only affects work culture, it also divides us. David, a retail company manager, once described his meetings with Judith, a colleague. “Whenever Judith and I met, she constantly interrupted our conversations to take another call, or respond to a text—something as many as four or five times in the same meeting.” David added, “It was so frustrating, especially since she found it okay. It signaled a lack of respect to me. I felt less important and less relevant.

Offline and online, at our jobs or at home, our phones have altered the ways we make eye contact. We sometimes find ourselves thinking in terms of hashtags or bullet points. Our impatience levels have gone up. We expect others to get to the point fast. And nowhere is transformation more apparent than in the workplace.

But while these downsides of digital life are real, they are balanced by more positive things. Today, it’s easier for introverts to have their voices heard across various digital mediums and for extroverts to find social connection and idea-sharing to help them thrive. The digitally-dependent workplace allows many of us to show what we’ve been made of all along, and to reveal our potentials with more depth than ever thought possible.

It’s a good thing, too, because in the future, even the most conservative, long-established fields and businesses will be obliged to reinvent themselves digitally. I finished writing this book in quarantine with my family during the Covid-19 outbreak. As the world locked down, and many people began working from home for the first time, companies quickly adapted to Zoom, WebEx, Facetime and—oh, right!—the phone. It wasn’t that bad either. The number of individuals hosting Slack chats or virtual happy hours on Zoom went through the roof. We also got very good at sharing and tracking our work by email. As every organization that could entered the digital arena, mastering a common digital body language to enables clarity, speed, and efficiency became more crucial than ever.

Another thing changed as I was writing this book. My original mission was to help people alleviate a widespread source of professional confusion and pain—but along the way I learned that understanding the nuances of digital body language doesn’t merely solve problems, it also opens up deeper, better ways for all of us to relate and foster a sense of inclusion and belonging. This benefits everyone in business, from executives to managers to team members, by creating environments that allow the very best ideas to come forth and shine.

Today, we can access a much broader diversity of perspectives. Digital body language reduces friction, limits bureaucracy, and creates a clear universal language. We waste less time on low-level information. We spend more on the things that matter. When used well, digital body language also flattens the differences across genders, generations, and cultures. Research shows that well-managed, virtual teams that have never met face-to-face actually outperform co-located teams since they make use of a broader range of resources, insight, experience and perspectives.[[42]](#footnote-1) By establishing clear digital body language standards, managers now have a key tool that helps them build even more successful teams in the future.

I hope this book helps you bridge the twenty-first century differences common among teams. By helping us succeed in a modern workspace, Digital Body Language goes a long way toward building greater trust, connection and authenticity, allowing us to communicate better and build stronger relationships, not only when we’re working alone, but also when we’re working together.

Appendix

Appendix

DIGITAL BODY LANGUAGE GUIDEBOOK

How do I apply what I’ve learned?

To get you started, I’ve put together a practical, instructive guidebook that you can find on my website, ericadhawan.com.

* Digital Body Language Style Guide: A digital “Elements of Style” guide that you can use alone or with your team, that includes pro tips and the do’s and don’ts of digital body language. Download the guide at ericadhawan.com/dbl
* Digital Styles Team Exercise: A set of questions you can discuss with your team that demystifies digital body language style differences, and helps you forge deeper understanding and trust. Go to ericadhawan.com/teamexercise
* Getting to Trust Totally: A team facilitator guide that offers up a set of foundational basics to help you build a good digital body language culture. If you learn best by examples and reflection, this section is for you. Go to ericadhawan.com/tt
* Trust Totally Quiz: A short team exercise to help you determine trust strengths and gaps within your team to foster a Trust Totally workplace. Go to ericadhawan.com/ttquiz
* What Your Colleague Can Tell You about your Digital Body Language: A short quiz that reveals your own digital communication style, and what signals you may be broadcasting (even if you don’t intend do!). Go to ericadhawan.com/dblquiz

The Digital Body Language Style Guide

Want to achieve clarity in digital body language faster and more effectively? Below is a Digital Elements of Style Guide useful for any team.

* Email
* Texting and Instant Messages
* Phone or Video Meetings

EMAIL

The Audience:

1. 1. Hierarchy may matter. In some corporate cultures, it matters where people appear in the sequence of recipients. Think of the To, Cc, and Bcc lines as an old-fashioned dinner table. The boss goes at the head, and everyone else falls in line after that, depending on their seniority.
2. 2. Mirror the culture. If you work in a staid, conservative culture, remember to include the appropriate formal greetings, closings, and signatures, e.g.:

Do:Mr. Robinson, or Dear Sam, . . . . Sincerely, Erica Dhawan, CEO

Don’t: hey Sam, . . . . Erica

1. If your work culture is more informal, use your best judgement but make sure to mirror it appropriately.

BOX-A

Common Interpretations of Our Most Used Email Signatures:

No signature—the equivalent of awkwardly walking out of a room, leaving everyone wondering if you accidentally hit Send with your elbow, or if you’re just ill-mannered.

Your name, no send-off—This should only be used when you are very familiar with your recipient, or you have been communicating back and forth in this email chain for more than three or four messages.

Best,—A semi-formal, easy closing. This person wants you to think she’s nice and professional. For newer relationships, opt for the more formal “Best wishes” or “Best regards.”

Regards,—Somewhat outdated, this closing is more or less neutral, but can come across to some as distant.

Love,—Inappropriate for the workplace. Even if it’s your best friend at work, don’t do it.

Sincerely,—This formal closing is commonly used by someone with lower status on the corporate ladder, communicating with their boss’s boss. If it’s not, it’s probably a PR person addressing a crisis. If you don’t fit into these two categories, using “Sincerely” is too formal and in fact, may make you seem insincere.

Talk soon,—I like this one for action-oriented emails or for emails that include some kind of prep work for an upcoming meeting or phone call. It’s smart, casual, practical and friendly but not too friendly.

Thanks in Advance—This has actually been shown to be the most effective email closing around![[43]](#endnote-42)

END

The Timing:

1. 1. Email is getting faster. A 2015 study by the USC Vertebi School of Engineering found that 50 percent of all email responses were sent within an hour. For those sent by people ages 20-to-35, that number dropped to 16 minutes. People between the ages 35 and 50 typically answered within 24 minutes; and people 50 and older responded roughly 47 minutes later. In the time since that study was published, arguably we are only getting faster, since more of us are using our mobile phones to respond, lowering response times even further.
2. 2. Value others with a “read receipt.” As email has become a faster paced channel, it’s always a good idea to let the other party know if you got their email, but need more than a few hours to respond. Instead of leaving the recipient waiting (or getting anxious), reply with a quick “Got it! I’ll get back to you by Tuesday.”

The Structure:

1. 1. Use the subject line to set the tone for your recipient before they even open your email. Leaving a subject line empty is a wasted opportunity, and some older recipients even consider it a mark of disrespect. Consider this: how do email marketers get you to click on their message? Answer: a catchy subject line that promises you a discount, a sale, a preview or a listicle. At work, we’re all marketing ourselves—so why not get others to prioritize your requests? Do this by always starting with a specific and action-oriented subject line.

Do: Roadside Inc Project Report Final Edits / Review by EOD 4/10

Don’t: Project Report

1. 2. Be direct. There’s no need to restate the subject line immediately, but skip the pleasantries. For the most part, business emails don’t require you asking questions like, “How’s your day?” or wondering how the kids are doing. Get to the point.
2. 3. Proofread for clarity, not just grammar. Anyone can get confused by an email. Just because you write to coworkers whom you see every day doesn’t mean they can always interpret your intent (or read your mind). Try not to be cryptic. Reread your email and ask yourself, If I wasn’t me, or in my own head, would I understand my message? This isn’t an easy skill to develop, so ask for feedback from the receiver or from another proofreader. If a recipient responds with something other than what you wanted, ask for clarification!

Do: Let’s remove the last page and reduce the total number of pages to 20

Don’t: This document is too long

Pro Tips:

1. 1. Be sparing with “Reply All.” In general, it’s only necessary if it’s a one-time team notification or announcement.
2. 2. Clear the deck. If an email chain continues for more than three or four rounds, the entire subject line becomes a row of “Re:”s and “Fwd:”s. Replace those with a relevant, concise, action-oriented subject line for the email you’re about to send.
3. 3. Avoid stress-inducing subject lines like “Please call me” or “See CEO in his office.” They’re not what we mean by “action-oriented.” Be brief, by all means, but don’t forget to include the necessary context.
4. 4. If you need to add a link, embed it into text by highlighting the relevant words. and using the Insert Link function offered by Office, Gmail, Yahoo, and most other email programs. If your company works on an internal server, you can highlight the location of a document, and embed it into the text in the same way.

When should the email conversation switch to a different medium?

1. 1. Emails longer than 5 sentences are typically skimmed over! For more complex topics and assignments, opt for a phone call or meeting, or make sure you use bullet points, bold and italic text, while highlighting the action points at the end.
2. 2. Ask yourself: Do I or the other person need more context beyond what email can provide? If the answer is yes, schedule a face-to-face discussion or a phone meeting.

TEXT AND INSTANT MESSAGING

Channels: text message, Skype messenger, Slack, Google Chat, etc.

As the level of formality in the workplace decreases, texting and instant messaging have become increasingly prevalent. In this section, we will combine the two shorthand forms of digital communication to discuss them globally, but take note of a few important distinctions along the way.

The Audience:

1. 1. It’s casual. In general, your audience for these channels should be informal. The shorthand, emojis, and exaggerated punctuation we use to create tone in texts and IMs are generally inappropriate in formal discussions. In a professional setting, try to write in complete sentences (though you don’t have to write out every word). Abbreviations are okay.

The Timing:

1. 1. These channels are meant to be—you guessed it—instant. For the most part, a response is expected within the hour, although most come within 3 minutes or less. If you get a text during a meeting and can’t respond immediately, it’s a good idea to let recipients know why they haven’t heard from you.
2. 2. Create boundaries. The instantaneous nature of these channels can be misleading. People often use text and IM outside of work hours, and still expect a quick response. It’s perfectly reasonable to establish boundaries. If it’s the first time, respond to the off-hour text with a quick message telling the sender that you won’t be answering until work hours.

The Structure:

1. 1. Less structure is better. These are informal channels, meaning there’s no reason to include a subject line, formal greeting, or signature. Too formal!

Do: Hey, so nice to connect! Just wanted to shoot you a text so that you have my number.-Erica

Don’t: Hello Stephanie, This is Erica. We met at the 2020 World Leadership Conference Dinner. I enjoyed connecting with you! Here is my phone number. Best, Erica

1. 2. Get to the point. Even more so than emails, texts and instant messages should only be used to relay information that doesn’t require an in-person conversation or a phone call. Keep texts to 2–3 sentences max.

Do: Hey Erica, are you available to meet to discuss a new project this week? Would anytime Tuesday and Thursday 1–5pm work for a 30 min call?

Don’t: Dear Erica, How have you been? I’m starting a new project around collaboration in our office and thought of you. I would love to catch up.

1. 3. Choose your shorthand wisely. Only use abbreviations that are widely known and that you would say aloud. For example, “LMFAO” is widely known, but it’s wise to avoid using it in a professional context. On the other hand, “np” (no problem) is both widely known and appropriate to use at work.

Do: np, talk soon

Don’t: LMFAO yeah sure man, cya

Pro Tips:

1. 1. Create a standard acronym list for common phrases (NNTR = no need to respond, SOS = urgent, \* = typo).
2. 2. Don’t send confidential information via text and IM! Remember even encrypted texts can be recorded by a screenshot.

When should an instant message conversation switch over to a different medium?

1. 1. Don’t text or instant message someone with “hey, do you have a minute” and then proceed to explain the whole task in a follow-up paragraph. In that case, just call the person.
2. 2. If it’s enough of an emergency to warrant a text outside of reasonable work hours (7 a.m.–7 p.m.), it probably warrants a phone call. If not, it can wait.
3. 3. If you need a record of the conversation, switch over to email.

VIDEO MEETINGS AND CONFERENCE CALLS

Examples: WebEx, Zoom, Skype, Google Hangouts, etc.

The Audience:

1. 1. Make introductions, if necessary. Virtual meetings, especially when tuning in from home, have the potential to feel more personal (and uncomfortable) than in-person meetings. Ensure that everyone is identified, along with their position, at the start, and allow a few minutes for social chatter.

The Timing:

1. 1. Keep things short and sweet. Most of us are accustomed to face-to-face meetings and conference sessions that last over an hour. In that kind of three-dimensional environment, participants have a full range of stimuli, fewer outside distractions, and are generally more easily engaged for longer periods of time. Virtual events leave much more room for distractions and multitasking. A planned structure and a ticking clock can help. Productive virtual meetings have a predetermined time frame, limiting the number of ideas that each member will bring.

Do: Ask your team to bring 3 solutions to a Zoom meeting that will be capped at 60-minutes.

Don’t: Schedule a 3-hour Zoom meeting and forget to send out an agenda that your team can use to prepare.

The Structure:

1. 2. Raise your hand. One great advantage of video chatting is that built-in mechanisms often exist for raising your hand (the space bar can generate hand-raising on Zoom). This can help avoid the issues common with phone calls, e.g., people talking over one another, or cutting someone off. If your software lacks a “hand raise” feature, you can establish one in a side chatbox. Designate a signal—like an asterisk—to allow team members to request their turn to speak. (This requires careful moderating and good leadership.) Make sure you’re not overlooking anyone, and try to ask for opinions from the silent types.
2. 3. Require that all participants be on camera. As a rule, if someone else’s camera is on, yours should be too. The camera restores some of the body language cues that digital communication takes away, while allowing team members to see with their own eyes that everyone in the room is fully engaged, and not scrolling Instagram.
3. 4. Always appoint a moderator or MC. Having a consistent face and voice that “stitches together” the virtual sessions for participants adds much-needed familiarity, and helps to lessen feelings of isolation that online occasionally bring. One good tip is to have the event moderator open up the conference or meeting, while taking charge of staying on the agenda and moderating questions for speakers as they pop up in the sideline chat.

Pro Tips:

1. 1. Test your technology. If you haven’t used Zoom or Skype in more than a few days, open your software before the scheduled time and test out both the video and microphone quality. This saves everybody time, while allowing you to skip the “CAN YOU HEAR ME?” section of the meeting.
2. 2. Silence. Insist that everyone use the Mute button to prevent audio feedback and keep breathing, writing, and fidgeting noises (otherwise known as distractions) to a bare minimum.
3. 3. Slow down. Practice the 5-second rule, e.g., wait 5 seconds before speaking after you ask the group a question. This gap allows your team to process what you just said, while filling in the few seconds where everyone is busy wondering “Is someone else going to speak up first?” before going forward themselves.

When should the conversation switch to a different medium?

1. 1. Just like in-person meetings, ask yourself the purpose and proposed outcome and eliminate digital meetings that lack a clear purpose, or are missing a key factor for success.

Digital Styles Team Exercise

The COVID-19 pandemic provided most of us with a sustained period of learning what works and what doesn’t work. Now is a good time to establish formal norms. Remember, creating digital norms if your team doesn’t have universal principles or rules. Each team should first consider the preferences, background, and specific functions of its members. The questions below will help team members understand their own digital body language style, which they can then share with the group. Be on the lookout for similarities and differences. These can help you establish norms, and avoid potential issues.

What’s my Personal Digital Body Language Style?

What are the best channels for others to digitally communicate with me?

What are my digital body language pet peeves?

What do I value most when others communicate with me? (e.g., clarity, accountability, actionable-ness)

Am I a digital adapter or a digital native? How does this

“demographic” affect how I perceive daily communications?

Is my digital style influenced by previous work cultures or bosses? How does this show up in my communications?

The best examples of positive digital body language I have experienced from others in each category:

Emails

Group Chat

Meetings

The worst examples of positive digital body language I have experienced from others in each category:

Emails

Group Chat

Meetings

Have the team share their answers so everyone knows one another’s preferences and peeves.

Questions to Answer about our Team

Now, invite your team to join you at ericadhawan.com/team, click Team Report, and together see if you can answer the following questions:

Rate yourself individually from 1–4. 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (somewhat disagree), 3 (agree), 4 (strongly agree).

When communicating with my team,

1. 1. Value Visibly: I know they value my work.
2. 2. Communicate Carefully: I understand exactly what others mean.
3. 3. Collaborate Confidently: I know what to do next and by when.
4. 4. Trust Totally: I assume the best intent.

Calculate your individual scores in aggregate. Identify the gaps and strengths in team engagement among your individual scores.

What are norms we can set to improve our digital communications?

Getting to Trust Totally

Below are practices that help build the foundations necessary to achieve a culture of optimal clarity. How close are you? The questions below are divided into four categories: General Digital Communication, Collaboration Tools, Team Spirit and Meeting Culture. In each section, consider the four the pillars we’ve discussed: Value Visibly, Communicate Carefully, Collaborate Confidently and Trust Totally.

General Digital Communication

The Basics:

DES: Set checkbox characters in this list and similar lists below

❑ Value Visibly: Slow down and proofread your communications as though they were presentations. Re-read what you’ve written, making sure your message is free of typos and confusing language. Simultaneously check for clarity, and make sure your recipient knows what you expect in response.

❑ Communicate Carefully: Don’t rely too much on shorthand or send messages that are too general. If you want to be brief, agree on and adopt a team-wide set of acronyms to increase efficiency and clarity in digital communications.

E.g.: WINFY: What I Need From You

E.g.: NNTR: No Need to Respond????

E.g.: 4H: I need this in 4 hours

❑ Collaborate Confidently: Assume the best intentions when you read digital communications. Remember: you are missing body language and tone cues from others, which can cause us to misinterpret directness or speed with rudeness.

Questions for Reflection:

What are some of the recent digital communication mishaps that have happened in your team?

Is your team made up of more digital adapters, more digital natives or a combo? How is this reflected in your digital communications?

Think of the last team communications that made you anxious, confused, or angry. Why? Were your feelings confirmed, or was the situation a misunderstanding?

What is the biggest hindrance or annoyance you encounter on a daily basis when communicating digitally across the team?

Collaboration Tools

The Basics:

❑ Communicate Carefully: Create guidelines for channel selection based on message length, expected response time, and the amount of information being transmitted. Make sure these guidelines are easily available to the entire team, especially new hires.

E.g.: When digitally discussing sensitive client information, we only use our corporate email accounts. We do not share this type of information with each other using text messaging, IMs, or any other digital channels.

❑ Collaborate Confidently: Establish expectations for the appropriate timing involved in each tool, including response time, and whether certain tools are off-limits during non-working hours.

E.g.: Please respond to all work emails within 24 hours. If you have not received a response during that time, reach out to the recipient by phone or text.

E.g.: Please do not send text messages regarding work tasks between the hours of 8pm-5am on any day of the week. Use your best judgment in determining whether a message is urgent enough to sidestep this guideline.

❑ Value Visibly: Find a handful of people who are most adept at each channel. These people can help you create guidelines and expectations, and also function as channel advocates, gently course-correcting team members who fall outside of the appropriate usage.

Questions for Reflection:

How many collaboration tools does your team use on a daily basis?

Personally speaking, which collaboration tools personally help you thrive? Consider the potential reasons why (we’ve discussed many of them in this book), which can range from sheer familiarity to your preference for formality.

Alternately, which collaboration tools do you find yourself avoiding?

Is there someone in your organization who uses X or Y collaboration tool especially well? What are they doing that you are not?

Does your team have an established set of norms for when each tool is to be used?

Which channels do you use most often as a team, and what does this say about your team culture?

Team Spirit

The Basics:

❑ Trust Totally: Create digital watercooler moments. Allow for social chatter before meetings, or create group messaging chains specifically desgined for conversations that go beyond work tasks.

❑ Value Visibly: Create spaces for celebration. Share inspiration with your team in the form of interesting articles, podcasts, or books.

❑ Value Visibly: Encourage your team to show appreciation by giving each other shout-outs, or starting meetings with MVP awards or “Wins of the Week.” One company I worked with celebrated new talent by creating a personal emoji for each employee who had been there for six months. You can find your own unique way to create team spaces for social connection. How you do it is less important than whether or not you do.

Questions for Reflection:

Are there “cliques” amongst your team members? How can you bridge the gap between those groups, and form a stronger bond as an entire team?

Is there one team member who almost always speaks the loudest? Is this person helpful or annoying? What are some of the ways you can you get other voices to join in?

Is there one team member who is almost always the quietest? How can you encourage that person to join in?

How does your team deal with conflict? Are there any issues with passive-aggressive behavior? What are some tips you’ve learned in this book to help diffuse bad behavior and/or negative team dynamics?

Meeting Culture

The Basics:

❑ Communicate Carefully: Each meeting should be analyzed using the 5 P’s:

❑ Purpose: Does the meeting have a clearly defined purpose?

❑ Participants: Are all the relevant parties (and only the relevant parties) invited and able to attend?

❑ Probable issues: What are the concerns that could likely arise?

❑ Product: What do we want to have produced when we are done?

❑ Process: What steps should we take during the meeting to achieve our purpose, given the product desired and potential issues we may face?

❑ Value Visibly: Audit your recurring meetings regularly. Every other meeting or so, ask yourself if these meetings are still necessary, if all of the appropriate players are present, and how you can improve the next one.

❑ Communicate Carefully: Make sure that someone on the team is responsible for sending out notes and action items in an email after the meeting.

❑ Collaborate Confidently: Begin each meeting with 5 minutes of non-task related conversation, where participants ask about one another’s days, goals, or if and where help is needed.

❑ Trust Totally: Leaders should ensure that quieter voices are contributing to meetings by rotating leadership, asking questions, and soliciting input across various mediums.

Questions for Reflection:

Think about your most recent meeting. Ask yourself the questions behind the 5 P’s. Are any of the answers “no”?

In that most recent meeting, did you feel heard and respected?

If not, identify the specific moments in which you felt silenced or disrespected. Can these be blamed on communication mishaps? Were you assuming the best intentions? Is it necessary to speak up on a different platform?

How are your meetings generally scheduled? Peer-to-peer or using assistants? Do you tend to have conversations about the need for a meeting, or do you skip ahead to simply sending a meeting request without context?

How can you change your scheduling process to make sure that everyone knows why the meeting exists, and the best time for everyone is chosen?

Trust Totally Quiz

This group exercise can be a great starting point for identifying your strengths and gaps during a team meeting, offsite, or retreat.

Answer the following questions based on how you would respond individually within your work culture.

1. 1. You get a calendar reminder for a meeting scheduled to begin in an hour. You are . . .
2. A. Clear on why you’re invited, what’s on the agenda and you’re happy to participate.
3. B. Not totally sure of why you’ve been invited.
4. C. Befuddled why you are still on this meeting invite, and consider skipping it or canceling at the last minute.

During a typical meeting, the participants . . .

1. A. Are all contributing equally, following the agenda, and sharing the lead based on their areas of expertise.
2. B. Are generally engaged and following the agenda if there is one. The usual loud voices take up most of the time, and their ideas are good. The manager or team lead takes charge of the entire meeting.
3. C. Are getting distracted, checking emails, or answering texts. No one is following the agenda, or there isn’t one. The usual loud voices are forcibly interrupting others when they speak. There’s tension in the air.

When your manager or team lead gives out deadlines, . . .

1. a. They crowd-source your team for what’s realistic by considering overall workloads and outside forces that may create delays.
2. b. They set the deadline on their own, or based on the needs of clients (or other outside forces), and present it along with the task. Usually the deadlines are realistic, but sometimes they create a a time crunch. It’s okay with you since you can’t really control clients or suppliers.
3. c. They set completely arbitrary and unrealistic deadlines. They ask for days of work to be completed overnight. You are frustrated and feel overworked.

You’re having a personal issue that is affecting your concentration, so you . . .

1. a. Let your team lead or manager know what’s going on. You know that they will lend you support and understand any changes you may need to make to your workload.
2. b. Discuss it with a single trusted colleague, but let no one else know. You do your best to get all of your work done and push through your day. You may have to move an important meeting to later this week.
3. c. Don’t tell anyone, and make no changes to your workload or schedule.

You’ve been assigned a project, but you’re not sure you have the expertise to complete it, so . . .

1. a. You decline the project or ask that a colleague with more expertise be assigned to work on it with you.
2. b. You don’t share your concerns with the whole team, but you know where to find the resources you need to get the task done. You may enlist a trusted colleague to help you if they can spare the time.
3. c. You don’t share your concerns with your team even though you have no idea where to find the resources you’ll need to get the task done. You end up working a 60-hour week because you’re turning your wheels and doing a lot of research.

Your team lead shares feedback . . .

1. a. Often. They include kudos in each meeting, along with regular feedback on individual projects that is both useful and specific. You’re not afraid when they ask to meet with you to provide feedback. You have a system of scheduled, periodic evaluations, which you typically leave equipped with actionable tips for improvement.
2. b. Sometimes. They provide feedback only at the end of large projects. You get concerned when they ask to meet to give you feedback, even if you know you haven’t done anything wrong. You have periodic evaluations that are seldom useful.
3. c. Rarely or never. You only really hear feedback if something goes wrong. Your anxiety levels would soar if they asked you to meet for a feedback session.

Your organization’s evaluations are . . .

1. a. 360 degrees. Everyone on the team has an opportunity to hear from all levels. Leaders and executives get feedback from their subordinates. Peers are able to give each other feedback as well.
2. b. A back-and-forth. Team leads get feedback from their subordinates. Subordinates get feedback from their team leads. Peers are not encouraged to share feedback with each other.
3. c. One-sided. Team leads give feedback to their subordinates, but do not receive any. Peers are not encouraged to share feedback with one another.

When it comes to channel selection, your team . . .

1. a. Has a clear set of norms regarding message length, expected response time, and the amount of information being transmitted. You never wonder which channel to use or get annoyed if another people uses the wrong one.
2. b. Doesn’t have a clear set of norms—but there isn’t much confusion about it either. Usually you’re not concerned about which channel to use, but now and then you get annoyed by out-of-the-blue phone calls, confusing or cryptic emails, or inappropriate texts and IMs.
3. c. Is a mess. You don’t have any norms and there is often confusion.

Messages are often chronically lost, or never get answered.

It’s the night before a major presentation and your partner hasn’t added their slides to the presentation PowerPoint. You . . .

1. a. Aren’t too worried. You’re sure they’ll get it done. Just to be safe, you send a text that reads, “Hey, just checking in! My slides are all ready to be integrated with yours. Excited for tomorrow!”
2. b. Are a bit worried that maybe they have the date wrong, or even forgot about it. You send them a text that says, “Hey, any idea when you’ll be done with the project? Just wanted to be able to run through it before tomorrow’s presentation . . .”
3. c. Panic. You know they probably forgot, or else they expect you to do it yourself. You call them, and when they don’t answer, you proceed to just do it yourself.

You feel like a valuable part of your team, . . .

1. a. All the time. You’re asked to contribute regularly, and you feel comfortable sharing opinions and making suggestions. Your teammates and leaders often give you kudos for your contributions.
2. b. When your area of expertise is front and center. You try to stay quiet when you’re not 100 percent sure of your opinions. When you do speak up, your team acknowledges your good ideas.
3. c. Rarely or never. You hold your tongue as much as possible, and complete your tasks narrowly. You seldom get recognition from the other members of your team for your work.

Now, calculate your individual score with the following formula:

(# of A x 3) + (# of B x 2) + (# of C x 1) = Total Score

Now, review the individual scores across the team (between 10–25). What you’ll quickly notice is that team member experiences of clarity vary widely. Often, the leader of a team will have higher scores versus peers, or some siloes will have higher scores than others. Identify the asymmetries in individual scores and discuss why they occur.

If score differences are between 1—15 points: Your team needs a lot of help. Jump to Getting to Trust Totally to get started.

If your score differences are between 3—10 points: Your team is doing fine, but you can do better. Focus on the Digital Body Language Style Guide.

If your score differences are below 3: Congratulations, you are closest to being aligned across your team! Focus on the gaps identified in the questions.

What Your Colleague can tell about your Digital Body Language:

This is a fun, quick and incredibly useful way to get feedback, and help you assess the digital body language signals you project that you may or may not realize you’re sending.

Ask your colleague to identify which person best represents you: Alice, Betty, Charlie and David.

Alice

The emails that Alice sends are short and to the point, but she always takes the time to craft a specific and useful subject line, and to proofread her emails for clarity. She may include a single pleasantry—“Have a great day!” or “Let me know if I can help further.” She uses emojis as additions to texts and IM’s. They don’t take the place of words, but she’ll usually add a smiley face or a thumbs-up to the end of a message to add some emotion. Generally Alice answers emails within 2 or 3 hours, responds to texts within a few minutes, and answers calendar requests almost immediately. If she knows her response will be delayed, she always lets the other person know. In her team communication, she follows the norms in all communication guidelines, honoring issues around length, complexity and familiarity

Betty

Betty’s emails are always polite. Even if she’s apologetic about something, you’ll never know it. Her most used emoji is 🙃. As for response times, well, it depends on the person who sent her the email. If it’s her boss, she’ll respond at once. If it’s from someone she dislikes, she’ll push against the boundaries of acceptable (but never too far).

Charlie

The emails Charlie sends always contain fewer than five sentences. It’s like texting. You and Charlie tend to go back and forth using short emails. Charlie loves emojijs, as they’re much easier than typing out full sentences, and he easily substitute emojis for words or entire sentences. He is more than willing to sacrifice a few typos here and there for the sake of speed.

David

David sends lengthy emails, overflowing with details, avoiding any need for a follow-up email or call. Sometimes his emails contain several paragraphs, bulleted lists, links, and attachments—whatever’s necessary. He would never use emojis at work, seeing them as unprofessional (plus, to be honest, he has no idea what some of them mean). He always triple-checks his messages before pressing Send.

[Separator]

If you are mostly Alice: Great job. The foundations of your communications are solid. How are you using it to propel your career forward?

If you are mostly Betty: Depending on your work environment, your communications may come across as passive-aggressive or confusing. Work on these tips:

* Value Visibly: Remember to express appreciation with a simple “thanks” or simply let someone know when they’ve done a good job.
* Communicate Carefully: Avoid sending messages when you’re angry or frustrated.
* Collaborate Confidently: Be direct about what you need and what you are feeling.

If you are mostly Charlie: You may be sacrificing clarity for speed and efficiency. Work on these tips:

* Communicate Carefully: Slow down. Ask yourself: Is it clear what the recipient needs to do, why and by when?
* Collaborate Confidently: Avoid short, anxiety-inducing messages like “We need to talk” or “That might work.”

You may be sending messages that are too complex and, therefore, unclear: Try these tips:

* Communicate Carefully: Review when it’s better to switch mediums. Bear in mind, too, that complexity is also a factor for channel selection.
* Collaborate Confidently: Get comfortable on phone and video calls! Sometimes we simply have too much to say, and it’s easier to do so using a channel where the meaning of our words is enhanced by tone, and our ability to ask questions as they come up.

Acknowledgments

Acknowledgments Tk

Notes

Notes

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