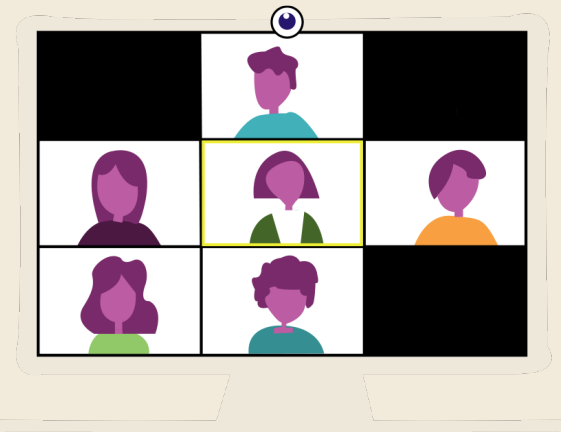


Digital Body Language

Presented by: Kristen Gyorgak

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Digital work; it's here to stay

We connect, communicate and collaborate digitally more than ever before. Our work landscapes are dominated by emails, instant messaging, video calls, and yet *another* new tool your organisation is implementing to improve efficiency.

It's no secret this rapid digital shift has immense conveniences. But it's also brought some complications.



But it comes with challenges

The brain-strain is real

In the [Our Brains at Work](#) Tea & Toast, we highlighted the brain-strain that digital work gives us. Our [lizard brains](#) crave natural environments. 🧠 🌿

Why does this matter? Because our brains have to work extra hard to adapt to the ways we're working - let alone work hard to do the *actual* work we're paid to do. Zoom fatigue? It's real.

We're cueless so we're clueless

Most experts estimate that 60-90% of our in-person communication is made up of non-verbal cues. But, as we know, the digital world alters or fully eliminates our non-verbal cues.

The problem? When we lose non-verbal cues, people are prone to misunderstanding up to 50% of the time. 🤔 🤔

"You see, these days, we don't talk the talk or even walk the talk. We write the talk." (Dhawan, p.5).

Some things are lost in translation

Back to being cluelessly clueless. As humans, we interpret other people's through our own lens. Written communication can strip away the nuances found in face-to-face interactions.

Punctuation, brevity, formality and response times can all be interpreted differently across cultures. This can lead to [tensions](#) as what sounds appropriate to one person can be completely misinterpreted by another.

Our timing is off

Verbal communication is slower online. We miss the instantaneous cues that we get in person and our responses are delayed.

[One study](#) from 2014 found that even micro-delays (1.2 secs) in video calls found the other people were rated as less attentive, friendly and self-disciplined.

Yikes! All that from a video lag that wasn't even our fault?! Put simply, our timing is off and our brains don't like it.

Home sweet home office

The Covid pandemic accelerated the always-on pandemic. The lines between work and home blur to the point they're nonexistent. Constant floods of messages, emails and chats make it harder for us to ever fully recharge and take proper breaks.

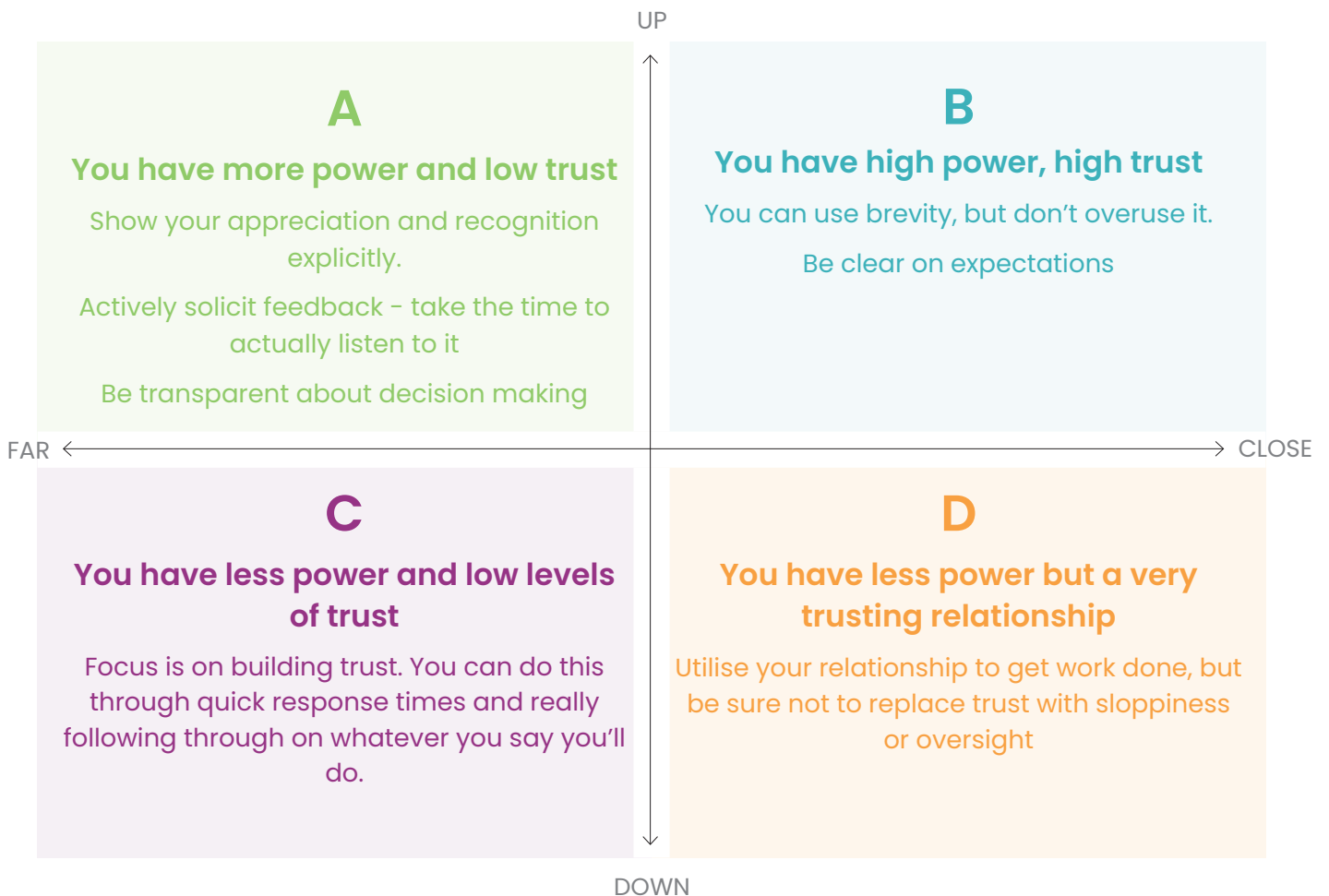
Our commutes become 10 steps down the hall and movement between meetings has been changed from a walk to a few mouse clicks. Not good for our brains or bodies.

And yet, digital work is here to stay. **How can we make it better for all of us?**

Good DBL depends on your context

We connect and communicate differently, depending on who we're talking to and where we are. One way to consider your context is to reflect your relationship with the person you're connecting with.

Dhawan's Trust and Power Matrix



Know yourself and your norms

A cultural lens

Unsurprisingly, different cultures have different cultural norms. Bear in mind, we each belong to multiple cultures - some temporary, and others are lifelong. Every team, every organisation, every region, every country - in fact, every group in general has a culture.

Another reason why explicitly discussing what our digital communication norms are is so important.

In her book, [The Culture Map](#) Erin Meyer compares national cultures based on 8 scales. One of these is *on context and communication - high to low context*. See how this might show up in people's digital communications on the top of the next page.

Are you...

Low context ←-----> High context

<p>Good speakers are: precise, simple & clear. Expect them to say what they need explicitly.</p> <p>Focus: easy and efficient.</p>	<p>Good communication is nuanced and layered. Rely heavily on context clues, what is said is not always what is meant.</p>
<p>Brevity is a sign of respect because the focus is efficiency and clarity. Informal chats or short emails help with this.</p> <p>OK with an email that only says, "Hi, <i>Please see attached.</i>"</p>	<p>Preference for phone interactions > emails. Focus on trust first, include personal non-work-related notes and more details in writing.</p> <p>Because non-verbal cues are eliminated in emails, add more details not less. Brevity might be seen as rude.</p>
<p>Email "receipts" are more common - "Thanks for this. I'll come back to you on..."</p>	<p><i>If the trust is there, I don't need to let you know I've received something, our past experience shows I'll get the job done.</i></p>
<p>Only say yes to tasks you plan to actually do</p>	<p>Ask for a response to confirm work tasks</p>

Are you a...

Digital native ←-----> Digital adapter

Dhawan provides a helpful breakdown in her book:

<p>Digital native</p> <p>came to age communicating digitally</p> <p><i>You're likely a digital native if you prefer...</i></p>	<p>Digital adapter</p> <p>learned digital communication norms as an adult</p> <p><i>You're likely a digital adapter if you prefer..</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Texting back and forth even when setting up a call or meeting might be easier. - Texting to ask if you can call (instead of just calling). - Texting to tell someone that an email has been sent, rather than just waiting for a reply or cc'ing. - Responding to a phone call with a text or email instead of calling back. - Leaving voicemails unread and unanswered. - Avoiding phone or face-to-face meetings in general. - Being more responsive to social media posts than direct email requests. - Using shorthand like <i>LOL Thx ttyl</i> or <i>kk</i>. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Insisting on a call or meeting in lieu of a text or email. - Not answering texts quickly (e.g. within an hour). - Asking for details from an email to be summarised again, this time verbally. - Using formal language and punctuation, including "signing off" at the end of a text as if it were an email or letter. - Sending overlong emails without hyperlinks or relevant information. - Sending curt text messages that lack context and seem alarming to natives - <i>I'm worried. Call me.</i>



Be a translator

Our *digital body language (DBL)* is the non-verbal cues and signals we send (and interpret) through digital communications: *emails, chats, video calls and any other online interaction*. It's about our word choice, punctuation, response times, emojis.

Great DBL bridges the gap that's created by our lack of physical cues.

It's a learning journey for everyone

The great news? We all learn to communicate digitally after we learn to communicate in person.

**Note: When, how and where we learned digital norms might vary drastically based on our age/generation. Check out [our reflections on generational diversity](#).*

“Today we're all “immigrants” learning a new culture and language, except this time it's in the digital space.” (Dhawan, p.125)

This is a fairly new way of working for most of us. Which means, in some ways, we're building the plane as we fly it. There are no universally agreed rules in how to connect and work digitally. And this can lead to misunderstandings and tensions.

	Face-to-face <i>chats, meetings</i>		Digital <i>emails, video calls, chats</i>
Commute	enter a meeting be going into a space, there's transition time	→	Enter a meeting in 3 mouse-clicks and 0 body movement
Facilitator / Host	office hosts = first focus of collaboration and productivity	→	TV show host = first focus of engagement and entertainment
Comms style	might be high or low context <i>potentially culturally dependent</i>	→	low context
Introductions	Handshake <i>(or hug, a kiss on both cheeks, bow)</i>	→	Email opening and sign-offs Wave on videos
Showing emotion	facial expressions	→	emojis, reactions, gifs, punctuation
Tone	tone, pitch and pace of your voice	→	punctuation, cadence of emails, emojis
Visuals	fully seen by everyone else	→	option to not be seen or only partially viewed
Recognition	eye contact, turning to face someone, verbal agreements, smile, nodding, active listening	→	reactions, chats, thumbs up, all gestures larger than we normally would
Reading the room	visual scans	→	specific check-ins (verbally or using online tools)
Casual connections	informal banter and drop-ins, food breaks, passing in the hallway	→	scheduled meetings, dedicated chats (Teams / Slack / Whatsapp)



Write better emails

Be intentional with every email you write.

Send wisely To:, CC:, BCC:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To = You need to do something, take an action or are directly affected by this information• CC'ed = No action needed, just FYI, no reply necessary• BCC'ed = I want you to see this, but I don't want others to see you've seen this.• Reply All = one time announcements or notifications. <i>Use sparingly!</i>
Nail the subject line	Make it specific with an action word. This is your first email impression, make it count!
Use the MADE model	<p>Don't bury the lead - what do you need from that person? Let them know as early as possible.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">M Message - key purpose for the email - why are you sending this?A Action - clearly outlined, time specific actions (<i>use verbs!</i>)D Detail - relevant context or necessary detail. Bullet points help here.E Examples - specific instance or scenario that clarifies your message
Stop the generic pleasantries	Don't drop the niceties altogether, just personalise them. Change from the generic <i>How are you?</i> to something specific about them, their work or that connects back to your last conversation.
Chunky emails = smooth information	<p>Help your readers with some visual cues:</p> <p><u>Large titles = quicker scan = happier readers</u></p> <p>Bold what's important or to create emphasis. <i>Italics works for this as well.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use bullet points or #s for key points.• Attach or link any documents you reference.
Colour me impressed!	<p>The world isn't black and white -- so who decided our emails had to be?</p> <p>Spice up your emails, add some colour!</p> <p>Every email platform allows coloured fonts. It's a great visual and a good way to chunk information.</p>



Dhawan's 4 Laws of DBL

1. **Value Visibly:** Show your attentiveness, respect and recognition for others
2. **Communicate Carefully:** Choose your words, tone and communication channel thoughtfully
3. **Collaborate Confidently:** Intentional, clear communications
4. **Trust Totally:** Build trust through transparency and consistency

Value Visibly

Value their time, energy, inputs & schedules

- Having thoughtful meetings, with a clear purpose
- Start and end on time
- Dramatically increase your gestures and facial responses so people can see these
- Active listening to the max, no resting B faces here, because we're actively responding!
- Use the chat, reactions and emojis to show your engagement/enthusiasm 👍👏🙌❤️
- Share radical recognition of others
 - *Provide conditional praise - be really clear about what the person did.*
Thanks --> Thanks for your effort on this. I know you put a lot of time in to meet this deadline.
 - *Add appreciation upfront. When asking for help or inviting someone to join a conversation, let them know why.*
We wanted to get your expertise / perspective here because...
- Acknowledge individual differences, make space for them

Communicate Carefully

Continuous effort to be as clear as possible

- People know what to do, when and why
- Put a date or deadline on every request
- Consider your tone, punctuation and channels
- Chunk information, so you aren't sending through a wall of words
- Avoid using ALL CAPS IN MOST SITUATIONS!!!! (*psst...it's really only appropriate with extreme urgency, within your team*).
- Proofread your emails. Is it clear what you want/need from the other person?

Collaborate Confidently

Everyone is included, able to share and free to take supported risks

- Provide an agenda beforehand with clarity on what preparation is needed
- Actively call people into the conversation:
In a moment I'm going to ask [name] and [name] to share their thoughts
- Avoid CC'ing in unnecessary people
- Establish clear roles during the meeting: *facilitator, note-taker, timekeeper*
- Use the chat function in online meetings to ask questions or add thoughts without interrupting
- Establish a channels hierarchy in your teams: *When to call vs text vs Zoom meeting vs email*
- Push decisions forward, but give people more than one a chance to share feedback:
I'm comfortable moving forward with [xyz]. Let's go ahead unless anyone has any objections by noon tomorrow.
- Proactively share progress with people
Quick update: I'm finishing up the report today and will send it over by 3pm.

Trust Totally

Confident everyone is on our side

- Everyone asks for help, the earlier the better
- Trust requires connection, and connections take time. Make time for people to digitally connect. Block it in the calendar
- Be fully engaged and present in the meetings. *Close your emails, silence your phone, etc.*
- Develop, agree and abide by rules of engagement
- Share the chair and the air. Let others lead the meeting or specific agenda items
- Don't micromange, instead share boundaries, scope and perimeters
- Share meeting notes or decisions immediately after the meeting to show transparency
- If someone misses a deadline, assume positive intent
I know this week's been full one – when do you think you'll be able to send the update?

“What is implicit in body language now has to be explicit in our digital body language.” (Dhawan, p.10)



Other DBL tips, tricks and techniques

Nail your timings

In Daniel Pink's latest book, *When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing*, he offers some digital advice:

- 1. Emails sent in the morning are perceived more positively than ones sent later on.** This follows 80% of the world's energy rhythms.
- 2. Job satisfaction goes up or down by how quickly our manager responds to emails.** Shorter response times correlate with higher engagement and vice versa.
- 3. Send a digital follow up 30 - 90 minutes after a verbal conversation.** Even if you can't send the full-follow up and soft touch leaves a great impression. *Great to connect today. I'll send you through the documents we discussed by [xx].*



To emoji or not to emoji

There's no hard or fast rule.

- Internal? Why not - go for it.
- External? Simple ones can't hurt: Avoid too many.

They can help fill in emotional gaps, adding warmth, clarity and tone. People of all ages uses emojis in their personal communications. Note there can be cultural differences in emoji usage:

= agreement **OR**

=

In some Middle Eastern or Northern African cultures the thumbs up is akin to flipping someone the bird.

Call, text, email, meet?

Tips on when to use*:

*team dependent. Set rules as a group

Text / chat	time sensitive short and simple convos
Call	time sensitive / urgent between 7am - 7pm unable to reach via other channels
Email	share timely information allow up to 24-hour response time
Video chat	meetings that benefit from visual interactions schedule in advance

Less is more: Ditch the filler words

It's worth noting, women use more hedging fillers than men. Here are some that often don't add value to the messages:

- *I think...*
- *I'm wondering if...*
- *I just wanted to check..*
- *I feel maybe...*
- *I guess my question is...*
- *It's my feeling that...*
- *In order to...*
- *At this point in time...*
- *We aim to ensure...*
- *[beautifully articulated thought] followed by "Did that make sense?"*

Not to nag you, but...

How to follow up with someone without sounding like a nag:

1. Change the subject line.
Team day follow up → *Final request for feedback on Team day actions.*
2. Avoid passive-aggressive statements.
As per below...As per agreed...
3. Don't copy in new people unless it's a last resort. (*It feels like the adult version of tattling - use wisely*)
4. Try to switch mediums and connect another way.
Would love to hear your thoughts, can I call you tomorrow to discuss this?

Picture Perfect

Cameras on by default. Cameras off is by exception. This should be a standard rule for all of us.

Position yourself thoughtfully:

- ✓ Can see your full face and down to your chest/below shoulders
- ✓ Have space above your head and to each side of you.
- ✓ Looking straight into the camera for a majority of the time

Check your background. Have some colour (you, your clothes or the bathroom). Add some plants - it puts you and your listeners more at ease.

Note: our brains find the blur background incredibly distracting - use it only as a last resort.

Show your engagement. Sit up straight, use hand gestures, nod and smile while listening, add comments into the chat, use your visual and digital reactions. You want others to be able to see your hand gestures.

Punctuation!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

To ellipsis or not to ellipsis....

There's a generational lens on this one.

- Youngers view this as passive aggressive: *hesitation, confusion, apathy*
- Olders view them as a softer stop... *the conversation drifting away...*

I'm exclaiming something!!!!

There's a gender lens here. Research shows:

- *women feel compelled to use exclamation points to come across as friendly, warm and approachable.*
- *men use themway less at work. When they are used, it's more often to signal urgency.*

What was the question???

The more question marks, the more intense the emotion (at least for women).

Check to make sure the ? doesn't add a passive-aggressive tone to your comment.

Use open-ended questions when you want deeper feedback and closed-ended questions for straight forward responses.

OK. Sure. Period.

Like other punctuation marks, the period has shifted in meaning. Now it might signal being cold and blunt.

Your greeting and sign-off

This is your digital handshake. Be authentic and use greetings that you would use in person.

Recognise the formality of the environment, when in doubt - match the other person.

And please, for goodness sake, spell the other person's name correctly!

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Thanks for coming!

From The Training Practice team – Kristen, Hilary, Rachel, James, Oli and Paucha

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Get in touch: 027 222 1498 | office@trainingpractice.co.nz

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