



Eight Minutes, Not Eight Hours



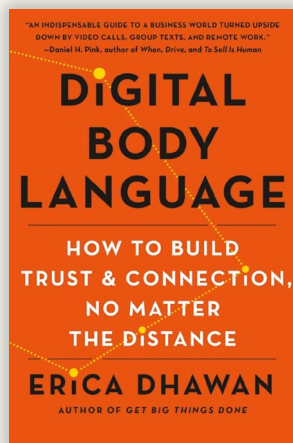
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Digital Body Language

How to Build Trust and Connection, No Matter the Distance

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The rise of the digital workplace has created new communication challenges, and as a culture, we have struggled to adapt, leading to misunderstanding and confusion. Erica Dhawan – one of Global Guru’s “Top 20 Leading Management Professionals” and a collaborative communication expert – describes the “signals and cues” that are the digital version of body language. Her book, **Digital Body Language**, trains leaders on how to use these skills and share them with their teams. The strategies outlined help leaders, team members, and employees learn to read people better in a virtual world and deepen understanding and connection with their own communications.

Key Quote

“How can we re-establish genuine trust and connection, no matter the distance? By creating a nuts-and-bolts rulebook for clear communications in the modern digital world” (p. xviii). — **Erica Dhawan**

KEY POINTS

Digital Elements of Style. “Today, roughly 70 percent of all communication among teams is virtual” (p. 6). In the modern world, where digital and written communication has replaced in-person modes, misunderstandings can abound. But there are digital versions of the nonverbal cues we would give if we were meeting in person. The timing of how speedily we respond, how brief we are, how and if we use punctuation and emojis, and more can encourage understanding and connection or confusion and stress.

The Four Laws of Digital Language. To meet the challenge, Dhawan proposes four broad goals or laws and discusses how to implement them. These are “Value Visibly,” “Communicate Carefully,” “Collaborate Confidently,” and “Trust Totally” (pp. 12-17).

Digital Body Language Across Difference. As you master these laws, remain mindful of differences and biases, between genders, generations, and cultures. There are certain burdens we pick up and habits we own which can lead to frustration and misunderstanding. Understanding these in yourself and others is key to effective connection across differences.

Key Concepts:

WHAT IS DIGITAL BODY LANGUAGE?

Virtual forms of communication like “texts, emails, instant messages, and video calls” make up the lion’s share of all workplace communication (p. 6). “Contemporary communication relies more than ever on how we say something rather than on what we say” (p. 5).

The way we build connections has changed. “The loss of nonverbal body cues is one of the most overlooked reasons why employees feel so disengaged from others” (p. 7). And we become more disconnected the faster we move. It is harder to decipher social cues in a virtual world, which leads to “organizational dysfunction” (p. 8).

Along with these challenges, each person has a different set of “expectations and instincts” regarding what form of communication is appropriate.

TRUST AND POWER

Sixty to 80 percent of our in-person communication is made up of “nonverbal cues.” In the digital world, it becomes harder to interpret people and to identify “power play behaviors” (pp. 8, 23).

One must adapt each interaction by being mindful of the power levels at play and the trust between the two individuals. Is there a large power and trust gap here? (p. 27).

For example, the “speed” of response is one nonverbal power play. We tend to respond quickly to people in power and less quickly to those with less power – and we receive this nonverbal message from others, ourselves.


Determine where you fall on Dhawan’s four-quadrant grid referencing the trust and power in your work relationship, then make a point of communicating in a way that signals what you need to signal.

Quadrant A = more power, less trust. If you fall in this quadrant, “show others why they are appreciated” using simple messages like, “Thank you for your message” or “I can’t look at this now but I’ll get back to you” (p. 26).

Quadrant B = more power, more “well-developed trust.” Be sure to not assume others understand your expectations and don’t “overuse brevity” (p. 26).

Quadrant C = less power, “low levels of trust.” “Prioritize quick, thoughtful responses to tasks and don’t be afraid to ask for clarity” (p. 26).

Quadrant D = less power but a “very trusting relationship.” Be careful that you do not “drop your guard and let your messages and work get sloppy” (p. 26).



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Say What You Mean, Mean What You Say

The “online disinhibition effect” gives people a false sense of security where they can hide behind their screens and communicate in ways they wouldn’t in person. This phenomenon breeds distrust, dishonesty, and disconnection often leading to resentment (pp. 27-28).

Consider your words carefully and whether or not you are creating “digital anxiety” for people receiving your communications. Dhawan encourages people to ask themselves these four questions:

“Is my message clear?”

“Is there another way (or two or three ways) that the recipient might interpret my message?”

“If my message is confusing, is there another medium and style I could use to convey it more clearly?”

“If I have more power, am I intentionally terse, vague, or rushed?” (p. 30).

Anxiety-Provoking Digital Body Language

Being brief might communicate that you’re important but it can be detrimental to the work that needs to be completed (p. 31). Without proper digital feedback between senior leadership and employees, work can’t be completed correctly (p. 32). By asking clarifying questions, asking for more details, or changing the form of communication you are using – from either email or direct message to phone – you can decipher confusing messages (p. 34).

Passive aggressiveness can cause unnecessary interpersonal issues, making it harder to interpret shorter messages. There is often a delicate balance between polite, short messages and messages that come across as passive-aggressive. If you’re frustrated it’s better to wait to send a message until you’re calmer. Showing empathy and encouragement can go a long way toward building trust between leaders, team members, and employees (p. 31-39).

Degrees of formality shift from person to person. A good rule of thumb is, if the relationship is new, one should “follow the formality level of the person who has more power” (p. 45). However, increased formality in certain situations can feel like a power play (p. 42). Asking for clarification can go a long way in “help[ing] you build trust and connection, no matter the distance” (p. 45).

WHAT ARE YOU REALLY SAYING?

“Digital body language may be fundamentally casual, but casual isn’t the same as careless” (p. 47).

Determine your choice of medium by its level of priority.

You can show emotion with punctuation.

You can communicate respect by timing communication appropriately.

Use to, **cc**, **bcc**, and **reply all** to communicate inclusion.

Make sure that your identity shows up in the digital workplace (pp. 47-48).



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THE FOUR LAWS OF DIGITAL BODY LANGUAGE

1. Value Visibly

“Value visibly” is about being “attentive and aware of others” while also communicating appreciation and understanding. This leads “to greater levels of respect and trust” (p. 12).

Over 50 percent of all employees report feeling that they are not receiving the “respect they need or want from their leaders” (p. 85). This is indicative of a communication gap between how we give and receive respect (p. 85).

It’s important to select a communication style or medium based on each employee’s “personality style” and to be “proactive about explicitly showing you understand their desires and value their participation” (p. 87) “A lot of our speed, and our anxiety around speed, is artificial, which ends up costing us accuracy, clarity, and respect” (p. 92).

Proofread your written communications. It communicates respect and thoughtfulness (p. 94).

2. Communicate Carefully

Communicating carefully ensures that all communications are intentionally created to reduce the risk of “misunderstanding and misinterpretation.” Careful communications lead to “alignment” (p. 14).

An example of an avoidable miscommunication is when a team isn’t able to determine if the project was successful or not because “they never agreed on the metrics of success” (p. 15).

A lack of clarity and detail is why almost 80 percent of projects fail. Fifty-six percent of “strategic projects fail as a result of poor communication” (p. 106). “Most [executives] settle for speed over clarity,” resulting in miscommunication and misunderstanding (p. 111). When assigning email tasks, each message should include a Who, a clear What, and a clear When (p. 114).

Tailor communication to the recipient, audience, and context (p. 112). The digital voice and visual impact must be considered in each communication depending on the relationship, trust, and power dynamics at play (p. 113).

Timing and medium should be considered in messaging. It is important to choose the communication medium that is right for the message, and complex messages should be timed appropriately (pp. 118, 120).

3. Collaborate Confidently

Successful collaboration occurs when we clearly state what our needs are, being mindful to communicate “when and why we need something” (p. 129).

With this goal as a guide, individuals are allowed the “freedom” to take calculated risks while maintaining the trust that other employees and team members will support their decisions (p. 16).

Leaders who have “a strong executive presence are present, calculated, and careful. Online, this means double-checking all your written digital communications and treating virtual meetings as if you were there in person” (p. 141). As a leader, proofreading is a sign of respect. You should double-check all written digital communications and “treat virtual meetings as if you were there in person” (p. 141).

This law fosters positive relationships and commitments among team members (p. 142).



The “Black Lives Matter (BLM)” movement is an example of complex contagion, gaining legitimacy only in 2015, even though the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter had been in use since about 2012.



4. Trust Totally

Total trust only occurs after the other three laws are in place. It means that there is organizational faith and that people are encouraged to be honest and dedicated (p. 17).

Create a space where team members can feel psychologically safe (p. 151). “Criticize the action instead of the person while giving your team your unwavering support” (p. 151). Vulnerability is an important quality in a leader. Giving team members space to “speak up, ask questions, and embrace the discomfort of uncertainty” (p. 152).

Deal with management issues swiftly. If someone is underperforming and the situation can not be remedied, it is better to be decisive than seem uncommitted to improving the business (p. 150).

Each team member is an important part of making “trust totally” a fundamental part of the work environment (p. 153).

Trusting totally creates an environment where there are “high levels of organizational faith,” where people are honest, remain committed to their word, and deliver results based on what they have committed to, creating growth” (p.157).

DIGITAL BODY LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

Across Different Genders

Research shows that there are differences in the way men and women are expected to communicate. Depending on the gender of the sender, the same email could be interpreted in a number of different ways (p. 166).

Dhawan includes lists designed to help both genders assess their unconscious habits and biases about gender and communication. And remember that people don't necessarily completely and neatly fall into one communication “box.”

By being aware of our fears and choosing not to project our fears onto others, we can build trusted relationships across genders (p. 162).

For example, many women feel pressure to communicate warmth to avoid what Dhawan calls “assertiveness backlash” from others. For those women, she urges communications that include forthright “direct requests” as well as warmth (perhaps using a warm greeting or signature). For men who are perceived as sending “flat, toneless messages,” Dhawan suggests they add an exclamation mark or an emoji from time to time, and to add something like “Thanks” to their closing (p. 174).

Across Different Generations

Digital natives (those who grew up with technology) and digital adapters (those who started using technology as adults) have different preferred methods of communication.

For example, a digital native who gives you his or her phone number is permitting you to communicate via text. They prefer phone calls to be scheduled ahead of time rather than come from out of the blue. They also find in-person meetings frustrating and a barrier to speed and efficiency (pp. 192-196).

It is important to reach out to team members to find out how they like to be communicated with and to tailor norms and expectations to the communication styles of your team (p. 197).

Although emojis are not always appropriate, they are an excellent way to convey emotion and meaning concisely (pp. 200-201).

Across Different Cultures

The cultures we live in and how we were raised impact how we choose to communicate (p. 204).

In high-context cultures that rely heavily on nonverbal cues, such as “countries in the Mediterranean, Central Europe, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia,” communication must observe “social and hierarchical boundaries” (p. 205).

In high-context cultures, you should include every detail of the business discussion and cc a manager before sending their report a work request (p. 208).

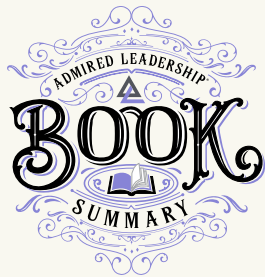
In low-context cultures, such as most of the English-speaking Western world, emails and texts are seen as sufficient relationship-building tools (p. 205).

In low-context cultures, you want to be direct and to the point (p. 208). “Silence is often a huge stumbling block to successful cross-cultural communication” (p. 209).

Whether we like it or not, we “all create unconscious biases and expectations about one another long before we meet face-to-face” (p. 211).

A good rule of thumb is to err on the side of formality during an initial email exchange.

Dhawan, E. (2023). **Digital Body Language:**
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