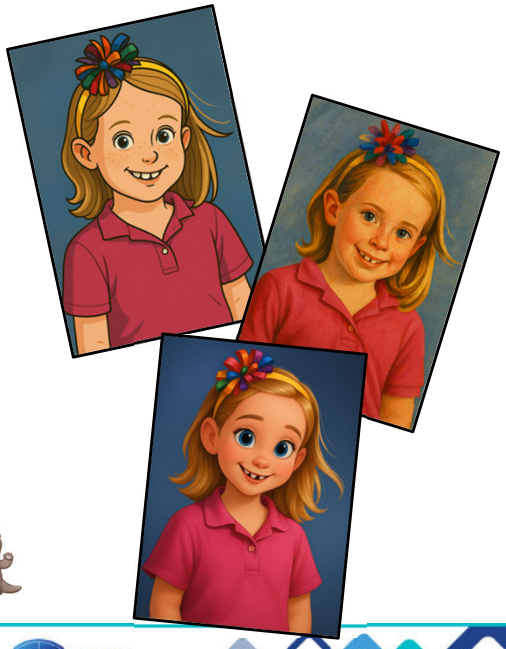
Did They Mean That?! Navigating Communication & Digital Body Language

Elizabeth McDowell, CPA, CIA

Amanda “Jo” Erven, CPA, CIA, CFE

Meet Elizabeth

- 20+ years audit experience + CPA + CIA
- Passionate about internal audit advocacy and changing industry perception of auditors!
- Love walking with fur babies Finn, Clara, and Orion
- Creator of Audie the Internal Otteror!



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Meet Amanda “Jo”

- 20+ years audit experience + CPA + CFE + CIA
- Passionate about bringing students into our profession of internal audit
- Professionally, in my "ERM Era"
- Personally, in my "Basketball Mom Era"

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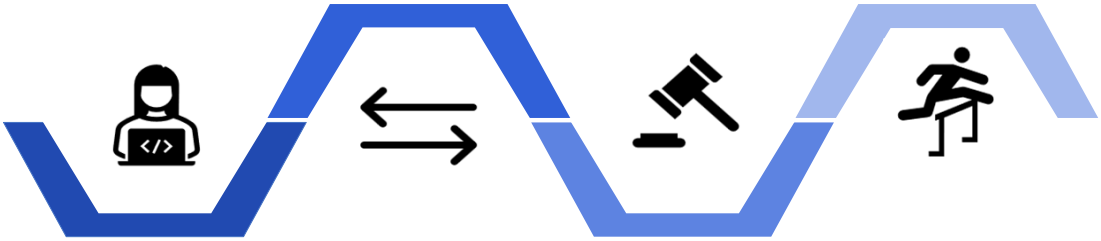
Today's Agenda



Digital Body Language & Signals

From Traditional Body Language to Digital

Four "Laws" of Digital Body Language

Digital Body Language Challenges

Sound Familiar?! Unexpected Video Calls 😳

@loewhaley

Think About:

- What types of digital body language are you seeing exhibited here?
- What anxiety-inducing behaviors are happening?
- What is your reaction to this video?

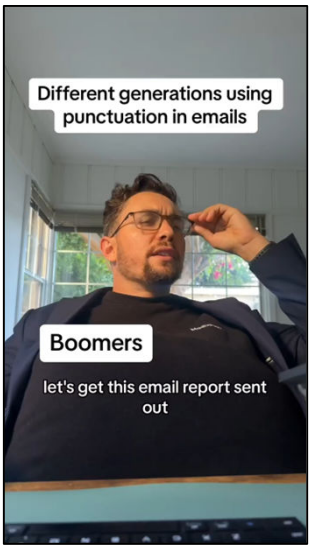
Sound Familiar?! CC'ing Coworkers 😲

@snuge007

Think About:

- What types of digital body language are you seeing exhibited here?
- What passive aggressive behaviors/ wording are shown?
- What is your reaction to this video?

Sound Familiar?! Email Etiquette 😖



@champagnecruz

Think About:

- What types of digital body language are you seeing exhibited here?
- How can generational differences impact how we communicate digitally?
- Do YOU like enthusiastic punctuation and/or emojis?
- What is your reaction to this video?

DIGITAL Body Language? Huh?!

Digital body language is the non-verbal signals of the digital world – what people do (or don't do) in emails, chats, meetings, and collaboration tools.

Written

- Email
- Instant messaging (Teams, Slack, Zoom chat)
- Text messages
- Internal portals or ticketing comments
- Shared document comments (Google Docs, SharePoint)

Verbal/Visual

- Video meetings (Zoom, Teams, Webex)
- Voice messages or recorded walkthroughs
- Screen sharing and demos
- Virtual presentations

Asynchronous

- Task boards (Planner, Trello, Jira)
- Shared dashboards and trackers
- Workflow approvals
- Comment threads and tagging

Digital Body Language Signals

Real world body language translates to different signals when communicating digitally.

- **Priority –** Choice of communication medium
- **Emotion –** Punctuation! And symbols/emojis 😳
- **Respect –** Timing
- **Inclusion –** To, Cc, Bcc, Reply All
- **Identity –** Your digital persona

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Priority – Communication Mode

Choosing the communication medium is essential and depends on context. It can set the tone for the entire communication.

Things to consider:

- How important or urgent is your message? Can it wait?
- To whom are you communicating? How formal/informal is my relationship with the recipient?
- Are you trying to have a quick conversation?
- Does my message have a lot of detail to cover?
- How quickly do I need an answer?

Priority Examples

Newly appointed CEO (Rainbow Brite) of a large organization sends late-night calendar invite to the controller (Strawberry Shortcake) for an early-morning meeting the next day. *Controller panics and worries they are about to be fired.*

Meeting Invitation:

From: Rainbow Brite
To: Strawberry Shortcake
Subject: (no subject – blank)
Time: 8:00 am Friday (the next morning!)

Instead, consider a different mode of communication and provide more context.

Hi Strawberry Shortcake! I was going through emails and realized we're overdue to catch up. Can we meet in the morning at 8am?

Absolutely! Thanks for the heads up!

Success Tips: Priority

- **Don't frequently or suddenly change the channel or mode of communication** unless the issue really is urgent. If you always communicate with someone in person, over email, or by text, and you suddenly call them, they might assume that something bad has happened.
- **Consider how others like to communicate**. Some people have phone-phobia (*hello! Hi, it's me!*) and others hate texting. Learn about others' preferences!
- **Use technology smartly and consider others' needs**. Maybe some people have a physical reason for choosing a communication mode. If you place a video call, turn video on! You never know when a deaf or hard of hearing person (*hello! Hi, it's me again!*) might need to see you speaking.

Emotion – Punctuation!

How we communicate with each other, and subsequently, how we read nonverbal cues and emotion, has changed dramatically since shifting from in-person to digital communication.

- We often try to infuse our texts with tone while also guarding against misinterpretation. (*Sorry → I'm sooooo so SORRY!*)
- Many people add emojis and hashtags to communication to be more relatable (*hello! Hi, it's me AGAIN!* 🥰) , but some people prefer more formal communication tones.
- Even punctuation can significantly impact how something 'reads.'

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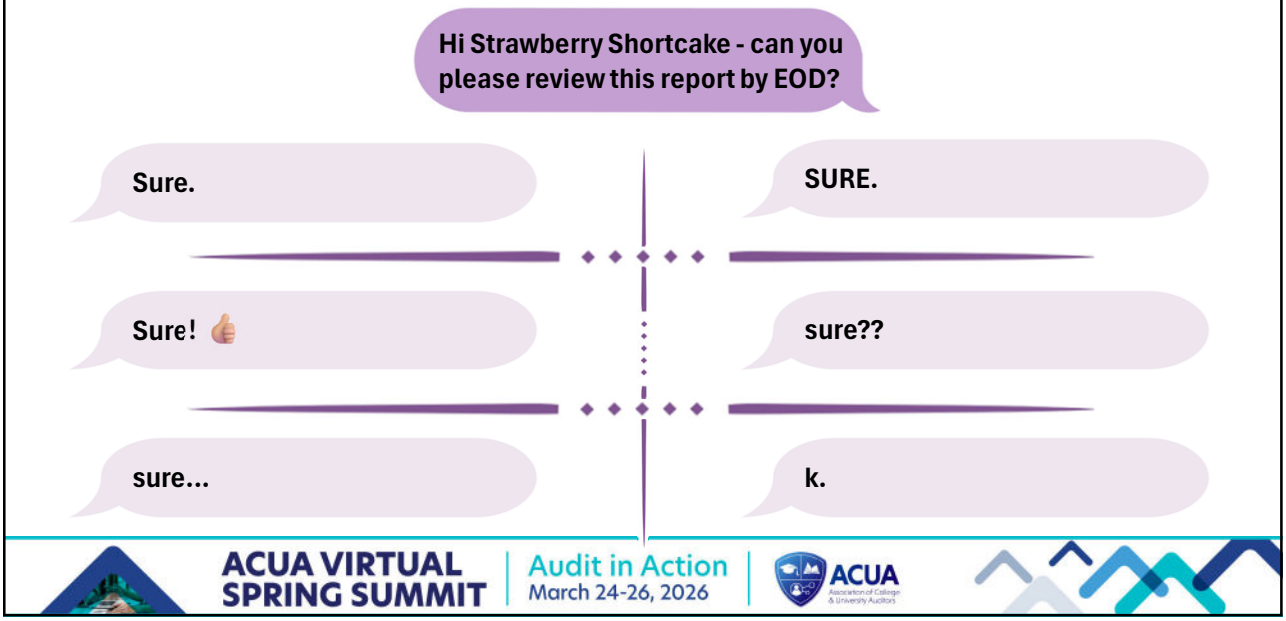
Emotion & Punctuation Example



Let's Talk Exclamation Points!!

Adapted From: *Digital Body Language* by Erica Dhawan

Success Tips: Emotion

- **With exclamation marks, err on the side of minimalism.**
- **Emojis have become an essential communication shortcut and allow us to express ourselves faster, more vividly, and (literally) more colorfully.** Tailor your emojis to your audience and carefully consider the emojis you pick (*will everyone interpret it the way you mean it?*).
- **A single, lonely period can inadvertently convey that you're iffy on something and on-the-fence.** (*"Can you do this?"* → *"Sure."* vs. *"Sure!"*)
- **The ellipsis (…) is the most passive aggressive punctuation mark, so use it cautiously!** It can convey hesitation, confusion, apathy, or incompleteness…

Respect – Timing

Digital conversations are often asynchronous, with the people in the conversation being available and responding at different times.

Things to consider:

- It takes people an average of 90 seconds to respond to a text and an average of 90 minutes to respond to an email.
- People are often uncomfortable with pauses and silences, even with digital communication! Digital silence can make people feel worried, threatened, or ignored (especially if you "leave them on read").
- But most of the time, it's not about you – it's about them and their schedule and availability!

Timing Example – Instant Messaging

Version 1 – Fast Response (*Trust + Momentum*)

9:02 AM – Auditor:
Hey! Quick check – did the vendor contract get signed yesterday?

9:03 AM – Business Partner:
Yep! Signed around 4:30. I'll send you the PDF in a minute.

9:04 AM – Auditor:
Perfect, thank you!

Version 2 – Delayed Response (*Uncertainty Starts*)

9:02 AM – Auditor:
Hey! Quick check – did the vendor contract get signed yesterday?

(No response for 45 minutes)

9:48 AM – Business Partner:
Yes, it was signed.

9:49 AM – Auditor:
Great – could you send the signed copy when you get a chance?

(No response for another 30 minutes)

Version 3 – Long Silence (*Storytelling Kicks In*)

9:02 AM – Auditor:
Hey! Quick check – did the vendor contract get signed yesterday?

(No response for 2.5 hours)

11:36 AM – Auditor (follow-up):
Just checking back – we're finalizing the report this afternoon.

(No response for another hour)

12:47 PM – Business Partner:
Yes.

12:48 PM – Auditor:
Thanks – can you send the signed version?

(No response)

Success Tips: Timing

- **Each communication medium (texts, emails, video calls) comes with its own implicit built-in timer.** *Emails are faster than video calls, and texts are faster than emails.*
- **Consider time of day when responding, especially if you are a leader.** *What message does it send if you're responding to emails at midnight? Could you use the 'timed send' feature?*
- **It's generally considered acceptable to respond to an email within 24 hours and to a text or instant message as soon as possible.** *If you can't respond immediately, send an acknowledgement that you received it and will respond soon.*

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Inclusion – To, Cc, Bcc, Reply All

To / Cc / Bcc choices silently communicate power, pressure, trust, and intent without a single word changing.

Things to consider:

- Cc and Bcc use is tricky! Cc can make others feel like you're angling to get 'credit' or to escalate a matter. Bcc feels like you're inviting someone to spy on a conversation.
- Ask yourself: will the Cc or Bcc recipient know what you expect them to do and why they are being copied?
- ***A non-threatening way to use Bcc*** – if you need to remove someone from a conversation, you can reply and add "Moving {person} to Bcc" so that they don't continue to receive emails.
- **Don't reply all unless it's truly necessary** – especially if it's a big group of recipients

Inclusion Example: CC'ing the Boss too Soon!

CC'ing someone's boss before giving them a chance to respond can unintentionally escalate the issue. In this email, Strawberry Shortcake felt 'called out' publicly to her boss before having an opportunity to provide an explanation.

From: Rainbow Brite (Internal Audit)
To: Strawberry Shortcake (AP Manager)
CC: Twilight Sparkle (CFO)
Subject: Missing Vendor Approval – Urgent

Hi Strawberry,

We're reviewing Q2 disbursements and cannot locate documented approval for three vendor payments processed in May. Can you explain why these approvals are missing?

Thanks,

Rainbow Brite

Reaching out directly before escalating helps preserve collaboration and psychological safety. In this email, Strawberry Shortcake felt trusted to provide context and respond before leadership was included.

From: Rainbow Brite (Internal Audit)
To: Strawberry Shortcake (AP Manager)
Subject: Clarification on Vendor Approvals

Hi Strawberry,

We're reviewing Q2 disbursements and couldn't locate documented approval for three vendor payments processed in May. Could you please help us understand where those approvals are stored?

Thanks,

Rainbow Brite

Success Tips: Inclusion

- **Be intentional about ownership.** Put the action owner in the To line and use CC for visibility – not pressure. *Avoid multiple "To" recipients unless responsibility is shared.*
- **Escalate thoughtfully and transparently.** Give someone a chance to respond before adding leadership. *If you escalate, explain why.*
- **Use BCC carefully.** Consider the trust impact if others later learn who was included. *Transparency often builds stronger collaboration.*
- **Pause before hitting Reply All.** Does everyone truly need this response? *Solve the issue – don't broadcast it.*
- **Use delay-send when needed.** Many email systems allow you to schedule or briefly delay messages – giving you time to reconsider tone, recipients, or timing.

Your Digital Persona

Before anyone meets you, they experience your digital footprint. Your name, email address, profile photo, and search results shape assumptions about your professionalism, credibility, and trustworthiness.

Things to consider:

- What does your name display communicate about formality or approachability?
- Does your email address signal credibility or feel outdated?
- What impression does your profile photo create?
- If someone Googles you, what shows up first?
- Does your online presence align with how you want to be perceived at work?

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Example: The Unintentional Digital Impression

Jordan joins a cross-functional audit project. The team has never met Jordan in person and relies on his online presence to form first impressions before working together.

LinkedIn Online Persona:

Name: Jordy Smith

Email: jordyrocks88@yahoo.com

Updated: *Last updated 4 years ago*

Profile photo: A cropped vacation picture with sunglasses

Jordan joins the same cross-functional audit project. Before meetings begin, his updated and professional digital presence helps establish credibility and trust with the team.

Name: Jordan Smith

Email: jordan.smith@company.com

Updated: *Recently updated and active*

Profile photo: Professional headshot with neutral background and clear lighting

Success Tips: Your Online Persona

- **Use a consistent, professional version of your name across platforms so colleagues immediately recognize you and understand how you prefer to be addressed.**
- **Choose an email address that reflects credibility and clarity (*ideally company-branded)* and avoid outdated or overly casual handles.**
- **Select a current, high-quality profile photo with clear lighting and a neutral background that aligns with your professional role.**
- **Regularly review and update your LinkedIn and search results to ensure your online presence reflects your current role, expertise, and career direction.**
- **Periodically Google yourself to see what others see first, and update or strengthen your online presence so it accurately reflects your experience and expertise.**

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From Traditional Body Language to Digital

Traditional Body Language	Digital Body Language
• Head tilted to one side, signaling that someone is listening attentively	• "Liking" a text or an email; praising another person's input in an email
• Pausing for a few seconds to indicate thinking about what's just been said	• Take extra time to respond to a text or email, indicating respect for what was said
• Smiling!	• Use exclamation points and emojis! 🤗 😊
• Nodding – this makes us seem interested and approachable	• Using a thumbs up in a Zoom or Teams meeting; responding to texts promptly

So You Want to Convey (Digitally)....

Trust

- Use language that is direct with clear subject lines
- End emails with a friendly gesture (such as: Text me if you need anything! Hope this helps.)
- Don't bcc people without warning
- Mirror the sender's use of emoji's and/or informal punctuation

Engagement

- Prioritize timely responses
- Send responses that answer all questions or statements in the previous message
- Send a simple "got it!" or "received" or "heard" if the message doesn't warrant a response (or use the 'react' buttons in Outlook)
- Don't use the mute button as a license to multitask on video calls
- Use positive emojis or reactions like smileys 😊 or thumbs up 👍🏽

So You Want to Convey (Digitally)....

Excitement

- Use exclamation points! and Capitalization!
- Send multiple messages in a row without first receiving a response (such as in Teams, Slack, etc.)
- Use positive emojis such as thumbs up, smileys, and high fives (especially in Zoom/Teams calls!)

Urgency

- Opt for a phone call or meeting over a digital message
- Flag emails as important
- Use @ in emails to direct specific people to tasks
- Use TLDR (Too Long Didn't Read) at the beginning of your email

The Rise of Digital Body Language

What is implicit in physical body language must now be explicit in our digital body language. Following these four "laws" can help!

- **Value visibly: Make appreciation, recognition, and effort explicit in digital spaces.** *In the absence of hallway thank-you's and nods of acknowledgment, visible appreciation builds morale and reinforces contribution.*
- **Communicate Carefully: Be deliberate about tone, clarity, and completeness in written communication.** *Without facial expressions or vocal cues, precision and context prevent misunderstanding.*
- **Collaborate Confidently: Contribute clearly, set expectations, and show ownership in digital environments.** *Strong collaboration requires proactive participation rather than passive observation.*
- **Trust Totally: Create psychological safety by being transparent, consistent, and reliable in digital interactions.** *Trust grows when communication aligns with action and intent is clear.*

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Value Visibly

When separated by screens, how do we make the invisible visible? Do people you work with feel valued by you?

- **Don't 'no-show' to meetings.** Showing up consistently communicates respect and reliability. When you miss meetings without explanation, it signals that the discussion (and the people in it) are not a priority.
- **Don't cancel at the last minute.** Last-minute cancellations create friction and suggest poor planning or shifting priorities. If changes are unavoidable, acknowledge the inconvenience and offer a clear next step.
- **Proofread emails before sending them.** Careful writing shows thoughtfulness and attention to detail. Sloppy or rushed messages can unintentionally communicate indifference or lack of care.
- **Don't multitask during a Zoom call** (*people can tell!*). Visible distraction sends a powerful signal that others do not have your full attention. Focused presence — even virtually — builds trust and engagement.

Showing Active Listening when Digital

In digital conversations, listening isn't assumed — it must be demonstrated. Active listening requires visible signals of attention, understanding, and follow-through.

- **Respond promptly** – even if just to acknowledge and set expectations
- **Address all key points**, not just the easiest one
- **Move complex topics to a call** when nuance may be lost in writing
- **Stay visibly present** – muted does not mean multitasking
- **Ask thoughtful follow-up questions** that build on what was shared
- **Summarize decisions and next steps** to confirm alignment

Meet Smarter, not Harder!

Meetings are one of the strongest signals of respect in a digital workplace. When designed intentionally, they communicate clarity, focus, and value for everyone's time.

Things to consider:

- **Clarify purpose and roles.** Make sure attendees know why they're there, what input is needed, and whether leadership is attending for decision or visibility.
- **Keep meetings focused and right-sized.** Schedule only the time needed and invite contributors — not observers.
- **Respect time boundaries.** Start and end on time to demonstrate professionalism and respect.
- **Prepare with intention.** Share a clear agenda in advance and regularly review recurring meetings to ensure they still add value.

Communicate Carefully

Communicating carefully means getting to the point while still considering context, medium, and audience.

- **Communicating carefully means being clear and direct** while intentionally considering context, medium, and audience.
- **Communicate proactively to reduce misunderstandings.** Ongoing clarity minimizes confusion and prevents unnecessary rework.
- **Be mindful of nonverbal cues – in writing and verbally.** The same words can land very differently depending on tone, punctuation, or emojis.
  - I loved that movie! 🤗
  - I loved that movie. 🙄
- **Send clear signals that keep people informed and aligned.** Alignment doesn't require agreement, but it does require clarity.

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‘Pause Before You Hit Send’ Checklist!

Our fast-moving and impatient culture means that we don’t always review what we have written before we hit send. Take a breath and slow down!

- ✓ Who needs to be included on this message?
- ✓ What action or response do I want after this is read?
- ✓ Does the recipient have enough context to understand and act?
- ✓ Is my tone appropriate for the situation and audience?
- ✓ Is this the right time to send it?
- ✓ Is this the best channel — or would a call or meeting be more effective?
- ✓ Would I be comfortable if this message were forwarded or shared? If not, what should change?

Write It So They Care

Clear writing isn’t about saying more – it’s about making it easy for the recipient to understand, act, and move forward.

- **Be explicit about who is responsible, what is needed, and when it’s due** so expectations are clear and accountability is built into the message.
- **State clearly whether your message is an FYI, a decision request, or a call to action** so the recipient immediately understands how to respond.
- **Write focused subject lines and begin with a brief summary** before adding details to help readers grasp the main point quickly. *I like **TLDR!***
- **Structure messages for readability using headings, bullet points, white space, or visuals** to make key information easy to scan.
- **Offer specific options, deadlines, or next steps rather than open-ended questions** to drive clarity and forward momentum.

Collaborating Confidently

Strong collaboration isn't about speed or control – it's about building trust, sharing ownership, and creating space for thoughtful contribution and sound decision-making.

- **Take thoughtful risks and trust colleagues to support well-reasoned decisions,** even when outcomes are not perfectly certain.
- **Encourage responsiveness while recognizing that not every message requires an immediate reply.**
- **Push back on unrealistic or reaction-driven deadlines that compromise quality and strain relationships.**
- **Reduce chronic cancellations and last-minute changes that disrupt focus and erode reliability.**
- **Practice patience in digital interactions, choosing measured responses over impulsive reactions.**

Have a Strong Digital Executive Presence!

Executive presence doesn't disappear in digital environments – it simply shows up differently. How you write, respond, and show up online shapes how others perceive your credibility and leadership.

- **Set clear deadlines and expectations, removing ambiguity about priorities and accountability.**
- **Communicate with structure and brevity so your message is easy to follow and act on.**
- **Model professionalism in your virtual presence, including environment, focus, and tone.**
- **Establish and uphold team communication norms collaboratively and consistently.**
- **Facilitate discussions with intention – invite diverse input while guiding the group toward decisions.**

Trust Totally

Trusting totally is what happens when we combine Valuing Visibly, Communicating Carefully, and Collaborating Confidently in practice.

- **This becomes difficult when leaders say the right things but fail to model them consistently.**
- **Foster a culture grounded in positivity, accountability, and mutual respect –** not shaming, intimidation, or distrust.
- **Model the behaviors you expect to see in your team;** consistency builds credibility.
- **Create psychological safety so people feel comfortable speaking up, asking questions, and sharing concerns.**
- **Allow yourself to show appropriate vulnerability –** transparency builds trust and human connection.

What Does Trusting Totally Actually Look Like?

A trust-based work culture is one where people feel safe, respected, and confident that intent will be interpreted generously rather than suspiciously.

✓	A surprise meeting invite doesn't trigger anxiety.
✓	Team members at every level feel safe speaking up.
✓	Diverse perspectives are welcomed — interruptions are rare.
✓	Disrespectful behavior is addressed quickly and consistently.
✓	Digital communication norms are clear and consistently followed.
✓	Silence or delayed responses aren't immediately interpreted negatively.
✓	Muted cameras or pauses are met with trust, not suspicion.

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Anxiety-Inducing Digital Body Language

Extreme brevity doesn't give recipients enough feedback to make an informed decision and can convey that the recipient doesn't warrant the time needed to respond thoughtfully.

Need to talk. Pls set up a mtg.

No problem! What is this regarding?

Can discuss when we meet.

Thx.

Passive aggressiveness can sound courteous but can fuel bad feelings between co-workers – we're still expressing our irritation but just wrapping it up in politesse.

From: Audie the Internal Otteror
To: Elizabeth McDowell
CC: Elizabeth's Manager *(not cc'ed before)*
Subject: Re: Meeting Agenda

Email: **As per my previous email**, please provide the meeting agenda as soon as possible. **Going forward please respond promptly.**

Anxiety-Inducing Digital Body Language

Slow responses can show up as delayed emails, texts, and even ghosting behavior. If you had the conversation in person, it would be like receiving the silent treatment.

Ghosting takes this to a new level, where texts, calls, or emails go unanswered. It's unprofessional and can create uncertainty and anxiety for the other party.

Overly-formal (even just slightly!) digital body language can be perceived as an unspoken power play. It can also make you seem unfriendly or standoffish, which can put you at odds with others.

From: Audie the Internal Otteror
To: Elizabeth McDowell
Subject: Payroll Audit Report
Email:
Dear Elizabeth,
Please provide the draft audit report by 5pm. I will be reviewing it at 8am tomorrow. Thank you.
Sincerely,
Mr. Otteror

Responding to Confusing Digital Body Language

- **Extreme Brevity**
  - Ask clarifying questions or more details
  - Change the communication channel
- **Passive Aggressiveness**
  - Don't respond to messages or emails when you're angry or frustrated – give yourself a day
  - Stay in a place of reason and assume good intent

Responding to Confusing Digital Body Language

- **Slow Responses**
  - Don't jump to conclusions and remember that people have a lot on their plates
  - Change the communication channel when you follow-up
- **Extreme Formality**
  - If it's a new relationship, follow the formality level of the person who has more 'power' or 'status'
  - If it's a longtime relationship with a tone change, ask yourself why or check in with the other person

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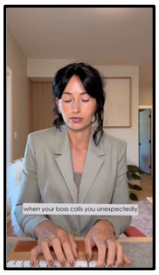
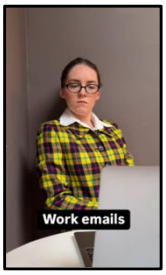
Circling Back and Lessons Learned!



- Lack of context invites negative assumptions.
- Brief framing could have reduced anxiety and built trust.
- The unexpected timing shaped emotion before words were spoken.
- Psychological safety changes how uncertainty is interpreted.



- Digital tone escalates quickly without clarity.
- Communicate clearly and not passively-aggressive.
- Changing the channel could have de-escalated faster than continued emails.
- All of the extra people do not need to be cc'ed on this tense exchange!

- Communication norms vary across generations.
- Consider the best communication method and what resonates with your team members.
- Review your digital communication before sending!

Additional Reading & Citations

- ***A New Kind of Diversity: Making the Different Generations on Your Team a Competitive Advantage*** by Tim Elmore and John C. Maxwell
- ***What Every Body Is Saying: An Ex-FBI Agent's Guide to Speed-Reading People*** by Joe Navarro and Marvin Karlins
- ***Talk to Me: How to Ask Better Questions, Get Better Answers, and Interview Anyone Like a Pro*** by Dean Nelson
- ***Digital Body Language*** by Erica Dhawan

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Stay in Touch!

Amanda "Jo"

Jo@AuditConsultingEducation.com

www.AuditConsultingEducation.com

Elizabeth

Elizabeth@auditforward.com

www.AuditForward.com

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