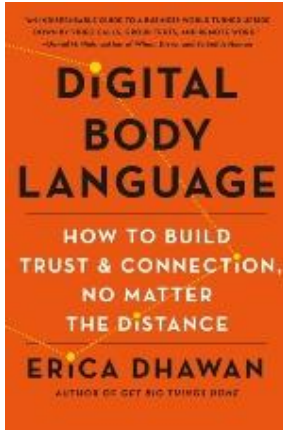# PM WORLD BOOK REVIEW

Book Title: ***Digital Body Language: How to Build Trust and Connection, No Matter the Distance*** [1]

Author: **Erica Dhawan**

Publisher: St. Martin's Press

List Price: $28.99

Format: hard cover, digital audiobook, eBook, 288 pages

Publication Date: May 2021   ISBN: 9781250246523

Reviewer: **Aina Aliieva, PMP**   Review Date: May 2021

Does your digital communication speak in the same way as your body language?

As mass immunization campaigns increase the likelihood of returning to a pre-COVID world, some aspects of work and socializing have been altered, perhaps permanently. The new norm for example, is working remotely. Even when health guidelines indicate it is safe to return to the office, it is likely that hiring workers and the assignment and completion of working tasks will still continue to be performed remotely. It was difficult to adjust to this structure, but now that it has been established, it will be difficult to revert back.

When it comes to effective communication, projecting and reading one's body language is both necessary and challenging. It is a learned skill that required ample concentration even when we had the opportunity to see one another every day. During COVID, the transition to partially or fully remote groups of people working together meant this became a far more challenging task. This lack of visual and tactile cues due to purely digital communication has created misunderstandings and frustration in abundance for many.

Given that non-verbal communication is essential, and given the projected lack of opportunity to do so in a post-COVID world, how do we as managers adapt? How do we ensure that our teams can still communicate effectively with one another despite this handicap?

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Book Title: Digital Body Language
Authors: Erica Dhawan
Reviewer: Aina Aliieva

Why is there so much misunderstanding at work? How to keep my teams feeling connected to each other and to people on other teams? Why does it seem infinitely harder to foster trust, engagement, and the confidence to take risks? And HOW DO WE SHOW APPRECIATION NOWADAYS?

These were among the questions that Erica Dhawan raised in her new book, *Digital Body Language.* In one interview, Erica said, "We're all immigrants to digital body language, and we need a rulebook for how to understand this new language." And I cannot agree more with that observation.

I have always been confident in my ability to understand the intentions and feelings of others, even when reading written communication by them that is ambiguous. Even so, Erica helped me understand that in digital communication, understanding is a two-way street. Even if I understand my colleague, it is equally necessary that my colleague understands me, otherwise the value of our interaction has been negated. For instance, I strive to demonstrate that I respect and value my colleagues' time. Therefore, I use words such as "I would just like to follow up on the data report. Sorry for bothering you again; I understand how busy you are and appreciate all of your help, but I'd like to get it by this evening, so I'll have some time to prepare for the presentation tomorrow."

These words are similar to what Erica uses in her day to day communications, and I expect such cordial phrases are the norm in most professional settings, meant to convey benign intentions such as "I value your time and help, I apologize for distracting you from your other duties and creating additional pressure from a deadline."

Despite these standard phrases however, Erica provides a real example from her professional life wherein such could be misinterpreted and result in a negative outcome. She once wrote a similar message to her colleague, and in response, she received an angry email saying, "I would recommend that you never send an email starting with reminding someone that they are really busy." I was startled when I read this! Where I intended to convey an empathetic tone, the recipient interpreted it as condescension. In retrospect, Erica concluded that the gap in power between her and that colleague was high and the trust between them was low, which catalyzed this disastrous misunderstanding. These misunderstandings are the result of resorting to text based communication in the absence of body language.

My conclusion from Erica's example is to first assess the level of trust and rapport I have with the recipient and choose my words accordingly. In the absence of body language where I can convey a warm, empathetic tone, rapport and trust will stand in where the recipient gives me the benefit of the doubt that I am trying to be empathetic rather than condescending. For effective team communication, I need to build trust as soon as possible. That is my main takeaway from *Digital Body Language.*

Erica recommends to habitually assume good intentions, create virtual 'water-cooler' moments and to show your vulnerabilities. I also recommend applying the advice to imitate the digital language of your recipient. For example, if this person uses emojis,

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use at least a smiley face on occasion or if the person prefers a more formal style, reduce the level of your emojis and exclamations accordingly.

My favourite quote by Erica is "*by "respect" I'm not talking about niceties or apologies. Respect means that others feel appropriately valued, included, or acknowledged. Respect means proofreading your email before sending it. Respect means honouring other people's time and schedules and not cancelling meetings at the last second or delaying 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.*"

True, it was hard enough to communicate effectively pre-COVID when we still saw one another in the office. Now more then ever therefore, in our Zoom, email and messaging app-laden professional world, we need to prioritize the development of trust, rapport, empathy, and positivity. This will help us avoid misunderstandings in the absence of body language, and will maintain the peace and harmony that is required in an increasingly digital workplace. There is no turning back the clock; there is only the way forward.

For more about this book, go to: https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781250246523

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About the Reviewer

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Aina Alive (Aliieva) has 10+ years working in Project Management and in an Agile environment. She has managed and consulted on Technical, Construction, Telecom, Retail and Engineering projects. Aina is a Transformation Leader, Coach & Mentor. She helps individuals, teams and organizations in their transformation journey. Aina is passionate about productivity, creating a positive work environment and building Dream teams.

Aina has a Masters's degree in electrical engineering and an MBA in technology. She holds PMP and PMI-ACP certificates. Aina is a proud member of PMI CWCC (Canadian West Coast Chapter), PMIT (Toronto Chapter), PMI Ukraine Chapter and UAE PMI. She is also a Program Manager, Disciplined Agile in PMI CWCC and DA Ambassador in PMIT.

Aina is an experienced public speaker and coach. In her free time, Aina participates in different mentorship programs, speaks at webinars and interviews people for her blog. She can be contacted at https://www.linkedin.com/in/aina-aliieva/