

# MISUNDERSTOOD

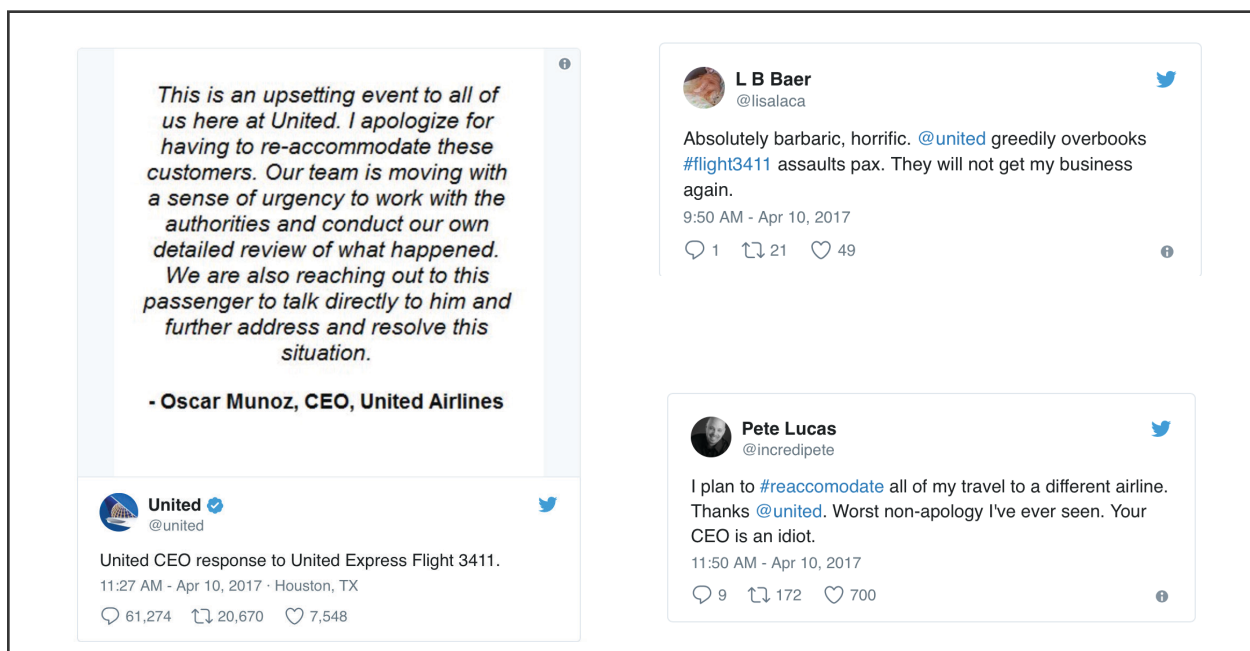
## Solving Digital Miscommunication at Work

By Erica Dhawan, CEO of Cotential

# Digital Miscommunication is Frequent and Expensive

As passengers boarded flight 3411 to Louisville, United Airlines staff began seeking people who would volunteer to get bumped off of the overbooked plane. With no volunteers, staff were forced to randomly select passengers. This moment was to turn into the infamous viral video of a paying passenger being forcibly dragged off the aircraft. United sent an initial lukewarm tweet apologizing for the overbooking, and more than six hours later, CEO Oscar Munoz tweeted his own apology.

Technically, Munoz did the right thing by responding. Yet, his words rang hollow—it was poorly-timed corporate speak and deeply lacking in empathy. The resulting tweetstorm of anger spread rapidly, creating a \$1 billion dollar drop in United's value.



The emptiness of Munoz's response comes from what I call "**Digital Body Language**," the (sometimes confusing) subtext of digital conversations. Most people have different expectations about whether to send a text instead of an email, how long you can wait before messaging back, or how to craft a digital apology without seeming lazy or insincere. In today's digital age, the multiplicity of communication styles means more opportunities for misunderstanding, frustration or confusion. A majority of our workplace communication is already via a screen, which means you already have a Digital Body Language style. But what signals are you sending? Your word choice, response time to a text, and even your email signature creates an impression that can make or break relationships.

Consider the following story:

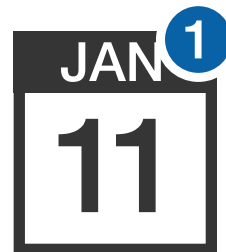
As a new manager in a large organization, Adriel needed information about a particularly difficult client. She sent a late-night calendar invitation to the account manager, Brian, for early the next morning: “New Event: 15 minute meeting, 8 AM, Friday.” Brian arrived at his scheduled time, tense and anxious. Once their discussion began, she could see the relief in his body language. She asked what had changed. “When I got the invite last night, I couldn’t sleep. I thought I was getting fired.” How she sent her message was more important than she realized: her timing had implied urgency and her lack of context had created confusion.

**New Event: 15 Minute Meeting**

8 a.m. Friday

*From: adriel@doe.com*

*To: brian@doe.com*



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How many times have you had a similar instant reaction to an email or text--“I knew they didn’t like me!” or “I am not going to stand for this!” What if you were misreading their digital body language? Or, worse, what if they were misunderstanding yours?

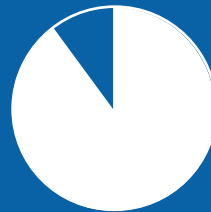
**We think we have communication down, but we don’t.** The past three decades have been some of the most momentous in the history of communication. Collaboration now happens faster and at a much larger scale. We send over 205 billion emails, every single day. And that’s just email. The sheer volume of communication provides us with innumerable opportunities to send the wrong signal. In the age of viral sharing and shaming, our mistakes can be broadcast to audiences well beyond our original intentions.

The result is anxiety, confusion, and the constant threat of being misunderstood. The culture has shifted, yet we expect the same rules to apply. Our poorly timed tweets, careless emails, and vague texts are unfortunately all too common and we aren’t even aware of the impact they have on our colleagues and even our own success.

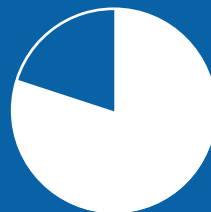
The good thing is, there are frameworks to help understand the problem and teach us how to upgrade our digital body language.

Research led by Karen Sobel-Lojeski has shown that the virtual distance of teams can result in unintended and unwanted effects.

## The Adverse Effects of Modern Communication



**90%**  
decline in innovative  
behavior



**80%**  
decline in trust



**75%**  
decline in role and  
goal clarity



**50%**  
decline in organizational  
commitment and  
satisfaction

Dr. Karen Sobel-Lojeski. (2015, April 08). The subtle ways our screens are pushing us apart. [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2015/04/the-subtle-ways-our-screens-are-pushing-us-apart>

## Old Signal, New Channel

Technology has given us exponentially more ways to connect, but our use of them is still primitive. We haven't fully modified our communication styles to account for the fact that our bodies are now disconnected from our speech. Here's how we try to squeeze our analog ways into digital channels:

### **We don't talk the talk, we write the talk**

Non-verbal cues make up nearly three quarters of how we understand each other in person. Yet our screens filter those cues out, making us less human and more like computers. To make up for it, our language has become more informal. So that emoji, the LOL "textese," or typing that "so so soooo SORRY!!!!!!" is how we infuse our text with tone and guard against misinterpretation.

### **Brevity creates confusion**

The pressure to communicate quickly and often makes us take shortcuts and leave out context. Without the full message, people fill the void with confusion and insecurity. Brevity might help us avoid direct conversation, but it also causes interpretation anxiety. Vague texts ("We should talk."), monosyllabic responses ("Hiii! How you've been?!" "Fine.") or leaving out words all together (responding to a long email with "??") leaves your message open to misunderstanding.

### **All communication channels are not equal**

Our access to so many ways to communicate makes it difficult to focus our attention. It's one reason texts are more popular than phone calls: a text doesn't demand the other person take time out at the exact moment it's received. Using multiple mediums indicates urgency. If you immediately email, text, and call someone to point out an irrelevant typo, that's not urgent, that's annoying.

### **Timing is everything**

When talking in person we can't avoid responding and it's very clear when a conversation is over. Digital channels allow us to disappear. We have more control over when and how we respond, but it's not fun if we're the one waiting to hear back. Respond to your employee's urgent text for help 5 hours too late could leave them feeling angry and assuming that you don't care.

### **More people, less trust**

Our connections are no longer limited by geographical distance. We know more people, but many of these relationships are superficial. Depth of relationship underlies each of the above communication shifts. Familiarity can fill in the void of digital body language. You are more forgiving of a late night work text from your long time colleague than you would be of a text from the new guy.

### **Distance doesn't affect performance**

Physical distance is not the main challenge to communication, especially when workers in the same office send mixed signals in their emails, chat messages, and conference calls. When well-managed, a fully remote team can actually outperform a co-located team. The most essential task is to reduce your team's "affinity distance" - the cultural differences and communication styles of members, whether their contributions are acknowledged, their past familiarity with each other, and their sense of ownership of project outcomes. These factors have the most impact on collaboration and performance.

As the disruption persists, we will continue to experience new forms of misunderstanding. The solution is not in new technologies. (Although, no doubt, developers will keep trying.) Instead, the solution is in understanding the new rules of engagement; in building a communication skill set that reflects the demands of our digital workplace.

## 5 Strategies to Improve Your Digital Body Language



**Don't Let Your Title Make You Careless:** It's likely that the more senior you are, the fewer words you use to communicate. Such brevity can mean your team wastes time attempting to interpret your messages. (And then misinterprets them anyway.) Don't assume that others understand your cues and shorthand. Spend the time to communicate with the intention of being ultra clear, no matter the medium.



**Choose Your Digital Volume:** Do you follow up on a task by email, text *and* phone? Abusing those access points can be a form of digital dominance. The medium you choose creates different demands on the time of the receiver. Using all of them for the same message is ineffective (as well as annoying). Choose wisely.



**Establish Communication Norms:** Digital communication is worth the extra effort to get right, so talk about it. When beginning new working relationships, make your preferences clear early on. And ask about theirs. Many teams create email acronyms like Four Hour Response (4HR) and No Need to Respond (NNTR) that bring predictability and certainty to virtual conversation.



**See Opportunity in Anonymity:** The anonymity of screens creates new opportunities, making space for others less inclined to speak out in groups to share their voices. Text-based communication places less importance on interpersonal skills and physical appearance, offering an effective way to share power and decision-making. Research shows introverted individuals and those with deep cultural accents are less inhibited in online than offline interactions. On the flip side, watch out for *virtual unconscious bias*, where punctuation, grammar and word choice might affect perceptions in both subtle and profound ways.



**Create Intentional Space for Celebration:** Old school birthday cakes are still important! Creating virtual spaces and rituals for celebrations and socializing can spark relationships and lay the foundation for future collaboration. One company I met with celebrated new talent by creating a personal emoji for each employee who had been there for six months. Find your own unique way to create team spaces for social connection.

## About the Author

**Erica Dhawan** is the world's leading authority on Connectional Intelligence and the Founder & CEO of Cotential.

Through speaking, training and consulting, she teaches business leaders innovative strategies that increase value for clients, deliver results and ensure future global competitiveness.

She is the co-author of the bestselling book *Get Big Things Done: The Power of Connectional Intelligence*. Erica was named by Thinkers50 RADAR as one of the emerging management thinkers most likely to shape the future of business.



Erica speaks on global stages ranging from the World Economic Forum at Davos to companies such as Fedex, Pepsico, and McGraw Hill Financial. Erica writes for Harvard Business Review, Forbes, Fast Company and the Huffington Post.

Erica also has served as a board member to Deloitte's Inclusion External Advisory Council and Lufthansa Innovation Hub. Previously, she worked at Lehman Brothers and Barclays Capital. She has a MPA from Harvard University, a MBA from MIT Sloan, and a BS in Economics from The Wharton School.

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