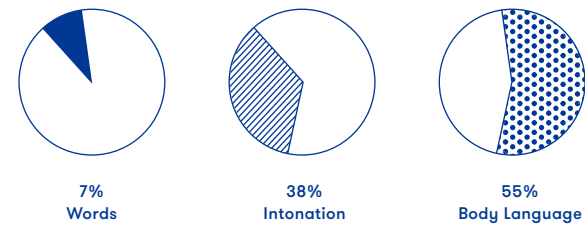


Face —to— Face

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Digital communication is a doozy for miscommunication. Without physical cues, tone is lost, emojis are misconstrued, and body language is non-existent. It’s like tip-toeing across a tightrope while blindfolded—a misstep is imminent, it’s only a matter of when.

When you look at the numbers, it starts to make sense. Research by UCLA psychology professor Albert Mehrabian showed only seven percent of communication is derived from the words themselves, with 38 percent from intonation and 55 percent from facial expressions or body language. A whopping 93 percent of a message is understood through how you convey something, rather than what you’re conveying.

Thankfully, we evolved to solve the problem. Mirror neurons activate when we’re in face-to-face contact. Our brains fire off synapses mirroring the other person’s actions and syncing with their thought processes. Whenever we’re communicating in person, our minds are furiously attempting to connect, to empathize. In essence, mirror neurons are a simulation of someone else’s feelings.

They’re also how we find our trusted tribes. Without them, workplace norms would be impossible to create. Culture, as we know it, would cease to exist. “Mirror neurons absorb culture directly,” explains Patricia Greenfield, a psychologist at UCLA. “Each generation teaches the next by social sharing, imitation and observation.” Building relationships and healthy bonds is, without a doubt, infinitely easier in person.

It minimizes a host of negative behaviors, like lying, which is found to be more prevalent in emails and instant messaging than face-to-face. “The Internet allows people to feel more free...to use deception, at least when meeting new people,” explains Robert S. Feldman and Mattitiyahu Zimbler, two researchers at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, who found that people conversing through email told five times as many lies than those face-to-face.

It’s even more problematic when we know little about the person. Our not-so-trusty brains seek gaps in information, automatically filling them as a defense mechanism. These mental gymnastics breed assumptions, prejudices and discrimination. In the study, *What You Type Isn’t What They Read*, the authors found “the more ambiguous the information, the more likely it is to be shaped by one’s stereotypes or expectancies.” And what mode of communication, other than Morse Code, is more ambiguous than email?

Despite our frenzy of technological advances, face-to-face communication still reigns supreme. Interacting in person boosts trust, compassion, and empathy far more than through digital mediums. It will take a very, very long time of tapping at screens to evolve from our ancestors who gathered together around a communal fire. Until then, let’s practice looking up from our phones and begin making eye contact.