

Individuals and Interactions

An Agile Guide



Ken Howard and Barry Rogers

Praise for *Individuals and Interactions*

“In my opinion, this is *the* handbook for Agile teams. I have been wishing for this book since we implemented Agile several years ago. In many Agile process books, the team aspect of Agile has been glossed over in favor of the technical aspects; this book is a welcome change.”

—Sarah Edrie, Director of Quality Engineering, Harvard Business School

“Cloud Computing, Distributed Architecture, Test Driven Development...these are simple to master compared to building an agile, efficient, and top-performing team. The path from skilled developer/tester to successful manager, team leader, and beyond is now more easily attainable with the insights, knowledge, and guidance provided by Ken Howard and Barry Rogers in *Individuals and Interactions: An Agile Guide*.”

—R.L. Bogetti, www.RLBogetti.com, Lead System Designer,
Baxter Healthcare

“This book provides fantastic insight on how individuals act and relate as a team. Ken and Barry give great examples and exercises to help the reader understand behaviors of each individual and use this knowledge to perform better as a team.”

—Lisa Shoop, Director Product Development, Sabre-Holdings

“*Individuals and Interactions* is a masterfully crafted must-read for anyone who is serious about understanding and applying the human-centered values of Agile development. It is like Patrick Lencioni meets the Poppendiecks to write ‘Agile through the Looking-Glass.’ Here the ‘Looking-Glass’ is the powerful DISC framework, and we see it used to enable different kind of TDD (Team-Driven Development) through the use of stories, examples, models, and guidance.”

—Brad Appleton, Agile coach/consultant in a Fortune 100 telecom company; coauthor of *Software Configuration Management Patterns*

“This book is essential reading for any engineering team that’s serious about Agile development. Its chapters on team dynamics and development lay the foundation for learning all of the factors that enable a team to transform itself into an Agile success story.”

—Bernard Farrell, Consultant Software Engineer at EMC Corporation

Solution A may be disputed by those who imposed an unstated constraint that the pizza can only have three lines. Solution B may be disputed by those required themselves to use only straight lines. In Solution C, each slice has three lines. Most listeners probably inferred that the pizza must have three lines, but the statement could be interpreted as each slice has three lines.

The point of this tricky little exercise isn't about fooling people; it's about how even the most straightforward sounding instruction could be interpreted differently by members of a group. When people assume the message was clear, and they impose their own constraints, waste and mistakes can happen.

Body Language

A lot has also been written about body language. Without saying a word, your stance alone can speak volumes. Often, it's likely that you are not thinking about or feeling what your body is saying that causes others to misread you.

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Othello sensed an uneasiness in the demeanor of his wife Desdemona, which he interpreted as evidence that she had been unfaithful to him. In actuality, Desdemona had been faithful to Othello, and her uneasiness was due to fear that Othello wouldn't believe her. Othello's misinterpretation of Desdemona's nonverbal cues lead to his murdering her.

There is a lot of popular interest in interpretation of nonverbal communication. Television shows such as "Lie to Me" and "Psych" depict characters with acute awareness of nonverbal clues that most people overlook.

Dr. Maureen Sullivan from the University of San Francisco tested 13,000 individuals to assess their ability to detect deception by others. Of the 13,000 people, only 31 could consistently detect deception by others.

Although accurate reading of nonverbal clues is not something everyone can do, most people do tend to interpret nonverbal communication by others, whether it is an accurate interpretation or not. This leads to perceptions that could be wrong.

The focus of this section of the book is therefore not about how to interpret others' nonverbal cues. Rather, it is how to better manage your own body language to avoid misinterpretation by others. This is called body language self-awareness.

The definitive body language signal is folded arms (as shown in Figure 4.3). When talking to someone whose arms are folded, the popular interpretation is that the arm folder is rejecting or disagreeing with what is being said. In reality, the person could be cold. Perhaps the person is more comfortable with folded arms. It's not necessarily an indicator of rejection. Unfortunately, actual intent is irrelevant.



Figure 4.3 *Body language self-awareness*

When Fred is talking to Mary, and Mary's arms are folded, it's possible (and even highly probable) that Fred will interpret Mary's folded arms as rejection of his ideas. The typical observer will look at this situation from Fred's point of view: "What is Mary telling me?" Let's try

looking at it from the other direction—Mary’s point of view: “Fred is talking to me. I want to fold my arms, but if I do, Fred may think I’m disagreeing with him. It would really be so much more comfortable to fold my arms, but I’m just not going to.”

Mary’s self-awareness of her body language demonstrated empathy toward Fred. Whether or not Mary agreed with what Fred was saying, her conscientious decision to avoid telegraphing negativity offered Fred more freedom to express his thoughts.

The key message here is not that Mary has to agree with Fred. Rather, Mary is empathetic to Fred’s desire to express his ideas freely. The empathetic Mary is more likeable than the (presumed) rejecting Mary, which offers an opportunity for Mary and Fred to have a richer, more engaging interaction on the subject they’re discussing.

Your nonverbal cues may be unconsciously sending a message to others. The characters in Figure 4.4 show an exaggerated expression of nonverbal “shouting.” Without uttering a word, these characters (from left to right) clearly depict arrogance, confidence, and disapproval. See Figure 4.5 for common interpretations of body language.



Figure 4.4 *Nonverbal cues*

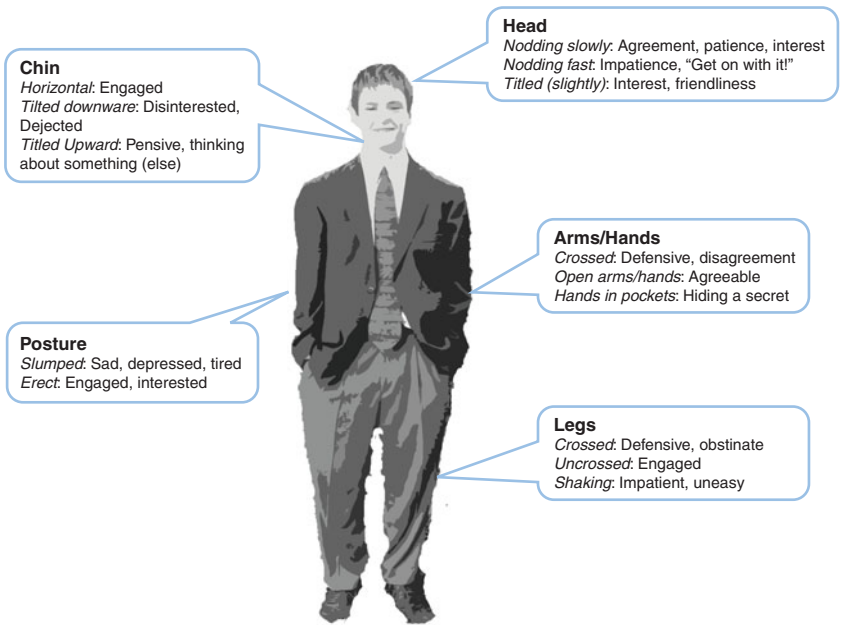


Figure 4.5 *Common interpretations of body language*

Cultural Awareness

Nonverbal communication is not necessarily a universal language. The thumbs-up gesture is often used in the United States to indicate agreement and affirmation. The same gesture in Italy means the number one, yet in American Sign Language it means the number 10; and thumbs up in many Middle Eastern countries is considered an obscene, insulting gesture.

Thumbs up is a fairly overt gesture. More subtle is a gentle rocking of the head from side to side, which in many cultures means disagreement. However, the side-to-side gesture in India is seen as a sign of agreement. Misinterpreting this nonverbal cue can often confuse westerners visiting India.

Reflecting Body Language

Echoing the body language of a person you interact with can be interpreted as empathetic. For example, if you talk to someone who leans forward with uncrossed legs and open arms, if you reflect the same pose, you are sending the message: “I am engaged in this interaction, and you have my attention.”

Be prudent when reflecting, though. It could backfire and be interpreted as mocking. It’s also not helpful to reflect a pose that has negative elements. For example, when talking to someone who leans back with arms crossed behind the head, it would be counterproductive to reflect the same negative pose. Instead, you might succeed in drawing the other person more fully into the conversation by leaning forward and engaging eye contact.

Small Talk

Conversations often stray from project-related topics. This is inevitable with even the most focused, driven members of a project team. Discussing the weather, yesterday’s football game, or the price of tea in China may seem to be a waste of time at work. However, this “small talk” can contribute to the communication dynamics of members of the project team.

In the 2009 movie “The Invention of Lying,” characters live in a world in which all thoughts are freely expressed with complete openness and honesty. Nobody tells lies, and nobody withholds information. This leads to unexpected conversations with everyone blurting out what they actually think. These conversations are unlikely in real life, not because all people are liars, but rather because most people tend to withhold thoughts or disguise sensitive and personal interactions with those that are nondescript. This

“language” of topics that are mundane and noncontroversial is referred to as small talk.

Most people have a love/hate relationship with small talk. Consider the following interaction. Dave Developer is reluctantly attending the mandatory project kick-off event in the company cafeteria. All members of the project team will be there, along with business executives who will be funding the project (and beneficiaries of the software created by the project).

Barbara Business-Stakeholder had been looking forward to the get-together all week. She was excited about meeting and chatting with all members of the project team. Barbara enjoys things like this—Barbara’s favorite part of her job is talking with people.

Dave, on the other hand, was stressed about the whole thing. What was the point of the social event anyway? A bunch of people standing around jibber-jabbering about meaningless dribble. Dave would go because it was expected, but he was not happy about wasting time talking about things that will not advance the progress of the project.

Table 4.1 presents a snippet of a conversation between Dave and Barbara as they meet. The first column indicates what was said (the small talk), and the second column shows what the speaker actually meant (a literal translation of the small talk).