

perpendicular angel design

organizing and simplifying, one illumination at a time

AN EVENT APART DC 2018: NAVIGATING TEAM FRICTION BY LARA HOGAN

Lara Hogan's talk paid dividends within 48 hours of my co-worker and I attending the talk. "Soft skills" are *hard* and any time that you have an opportunity to tune them, you should take it.

(pdf backup)



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Now: [@lara_hogan](#) on navigating team friction!

She currently helps engineering and product organizations get healthy.

Teams of people are amazing! More than the sum of our parts. Humans can interact in so many (good|bad) ways [#AEADC](#)

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It's a privilege to be able to work together with a common goal on something.

Bruce Tuckman carried out research in the theory of group dynamics. Tuckman's stages of group development. A collection of strangers to a united group [#AEADC](#)

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4 stages of team development:

Forming - it's got a name, everyone's exciting

Storming - start to see some friction, some confusion and clashing

Norming - things start to iron out.

Performing - flow state. Effective, communicating well, you're shipping.

It's a cycle![#AEADC](#)

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Any time a new person joins or a manager changes or goals change, you head back to Forming.

Storming is super duper normal. The likelihood of friction is super high. Friction is a common and necessary part of team growth[#AEADC](#)

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If your team is spending a long time in friction and you can't move into something healthier, that's bad for the co-workers, company, and users. It's a distract for you and the people around you.

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Passive-aggressive code reviews

Feign surprise

“Well Actually”

Rewriting their code

Skipping code reviews

User experience degrades [#AEADC](#)

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Why not just wait for a manager to intervene? Often the friction is more subtle than the example and it can take a while for the manager to identify it, investigate it, diagnose it, and correct it

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How to address friction:

1. Brains!
2. Communication
3. Feedback
4. Prevention [#AEADC](#)

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Unlike the Hulk, we don't turn green, grow three sizes, and start throwing cars. But like the Hulk, we can transform into entirely different versions of ourselves. This is not something we should be proud of. But it does happen to all of us. [#AEADC](#)

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Brain chemistry:

The prefrontal cortex directly behind our foreheads is the rational, practical intellectual part of us. Fully engaged when we do complex work.

The amygdala is constantly on the lookout for bad news and makes threat/reward decisions [#AEADC](#)

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Amygdalas do the flight/flight mode that tells your prefrontal cortex to go into sleep mode and takes over. This is Amygdala highjacking or triggering. [#AEADC](#)

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You get tunnel vision. Adrenaline kicks in. You feel like flipping tables or running for the hills. But usually we're not being attacked to a bear, it's usually due to a problem with our 6 core needs that we secure and ensure. [#AEADC](#)

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1. Belonging - need to belong to a group, clan, tribe, community. It's not small when this is being threatened. Being left out causes high level of stress and the same experience as physical pain in the brain [#AEADC](#)

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Evolutionarily, social acceptance has guaranteed us access to physical needs, and more likely to survive [#AEADC](#)

Anything from not being invited to a meeting to not being invited to lunch can cause this [#AEADC](#)

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2. Improvement/progress - progress toward purpose, improving the lives of others, or personal improvement

If your work doesn't feel effective, or furthering career progression, this can feel threatened [#AEADC](#)

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3. Choice - flexibility, autonomy, decision-making.

We want choice, autonomy, flexibility, not micro-managing or no choices [#AEADC](#)

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4. Equality/fairness - access to resources and information, equal reciprocity.

A *perception* of a lack of fairness can cause riots, literally and figuratively [#AEADC](#)

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5. predictability - most people need some balance of predictability and surprises. Resources, time, direction, future challenges.

Things can be so unpredictable that you can't get anything done
Things can be so predictable you lose the motivation to do them [#AEADC](#)

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6. Significance - status, visibility, recognition

Demotions, being assigned useless project, etc. [#AEADC](#)

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Which of these needs are causing your hulk moments? Not all of them are equally important to everyone. For one person it might be predictability. For someone else it might be significance or belonging that's most important. [#AEADC](#)

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Desk moves, for example. The biggest displays of human emotions for something that is otherwise straightforward.

1. Belonging - a representation of how you belong to a group. Will you be distant or absent or left behind? Will you be able to relate to a group the same way [#AEADC](#)

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2. Improvement/progress - if it doesn't feel like it helps you make progress or feels worthless

3. If you don't have full choice and autonomy on your desk move, may be a signal of loss of control

4. May feel unfair - are we the "cool kids"? [#AEADC](#)

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5. Surprise changes can disrupt predictability

6. Significance - maybe there was a status signifier about your desk. Those can change your significance to be threatened#AEADC

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We can't see someone's amygdala. But we are incredibly perceptive, and can see when we've accidentally amygdala hijacked someone

Look at resistance - turn that into data. UX roles do this for users.#AEADC

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Most common responses when a threat is detected:

1. Questioning or doubting
2. Avoid interacting with the issue, act checked out, too busy to show up
3. Fighting - not necessarily physically. Create arguments that go nowhere. Or just not do anything and nope out#AEADC

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4. Bond - looking for people who support their way of thinking.
Verbally processing a lot to make sense of the threat
5. Escape-route - leaving the company or changing roles or finding a new group.

This is all just data on when resistance is happening [#AEADC](#)

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Take a step back. Don't blame, get frustrated, or get judgy. It's tempting but not very helpful. Try not to feel threatened by it yourself. [#AEADC](#)

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Ask open questions. Who/what/when/where/why. When you ask open questions it increases dopamine in the brain. Open questions are a powerful tool in your toolbox. Top negotiators and salespeople spend 2x time asking open questions than less-successful counterparts [#AEADC](#)

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Closed questions are yes/no. There's no way to get deeper with a closed question. But open questions can help you get critique, check your blind spots, and figure out which core needs of theirs aren't being addressed [#AEADC](#)

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“What do you think folks are liking and disliking about [this change] so far?”

“I wanted to get your take on X. What could go wrong? What do you think might be good about it?”

Help them show you what you might be missing [#AEADC](#)

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Spot some resistance -> use open questions -> map to core needs
-> mention it to your manager -> address core needs

Bouncing off your manager can give additional insight or provide help.

You can smooth amygdala highjacking by taking these steps.

[#AEADC](#)

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How you deliver open questions and how you come up with them is really important. You can't brute-force your way into understanding someone if they're still feeling vulnerable. [#AEADC](#)

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Listen. Speak with compassion, kindness, and awareness. Reflect on the dynamics in the room. How will they receive the info. What's at stake for them? Be mindful of the audience. [#AEADC](#)

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Be aware of your tone of voice, body language. You might be sending signals of defensiveness with crossed arms for example. Text is a lossy format.

Be inclusive with your language.

Consider the room's power dynamics. [#AEADC](#)

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Ask yourself, "Is this person in a position to take the action I'm suggesting?"

Make sure what you're going to say will elevate the conversation toward shared results instead of tearing it down. [#AEADC](#)

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Meet transparency with responsibility. Honesty is not constructive if it's cruel.

Expect that everyone comes to work with their best intentions. Practice empathy. What else is going on for this person? Everyone has a ton going on behind the scenes [#AEADC](#)

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Remember you can't see everything that's going on with someone. You can ask open questions to gain empathy, but also you can not-ask personal questions.

Listen to learn. Your goal is understanding, not judgements or expectation. Prepare to be surprised [#AEADC](#)

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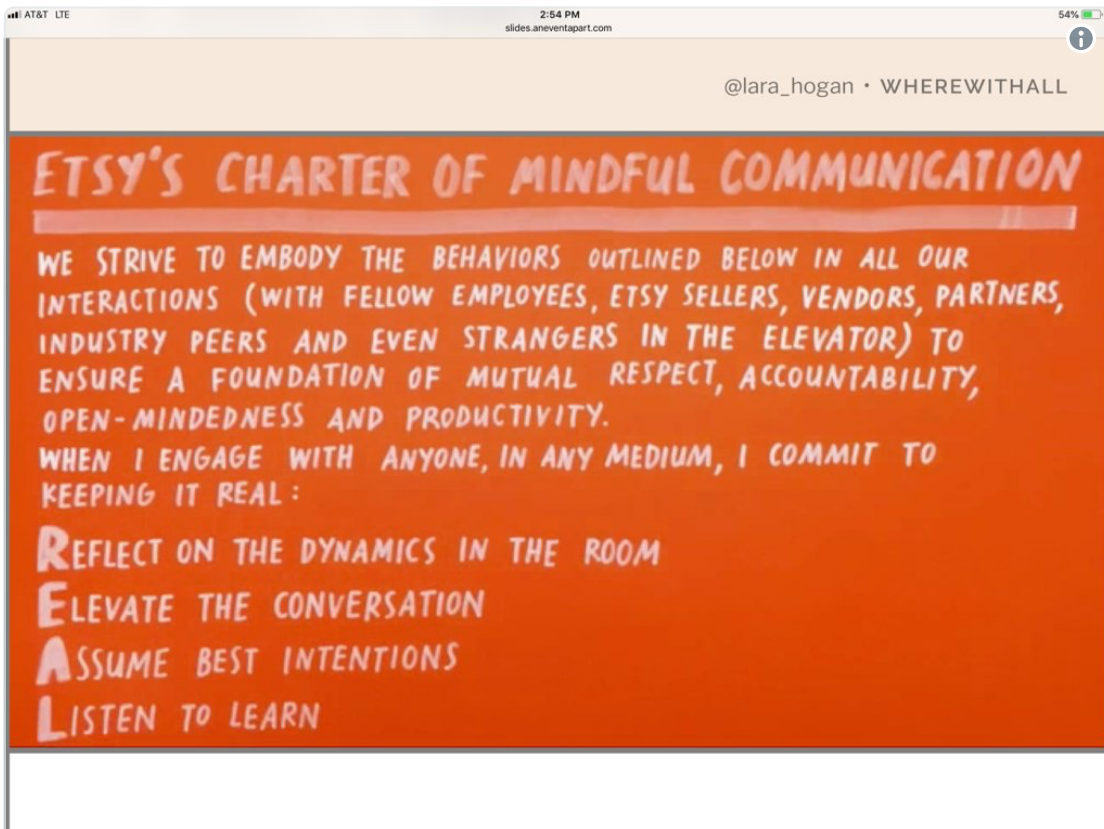
Be willing and excited to have your mind changed. You get to learn and grow!

These goals will help everyone communicate. These are also called “mindful communication”[#AEADC](#)

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Etsy's mindful communication guidelines codify these four goals and help communication overall. [#AEADC](#)

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Use these in code reviews. Give constructive and truly helpful feedback. Being mindful as you deliver it is essentially. You don't want the person on the other end to shut down. [#AEADC](#)

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Sometimes you need to give feedback (or get feedback) without escalating drama.

Humans are bad at giving feedback. We're also really bad at preparing to receive feedback. Most of us are paralyzed by the fear of the awkward conversations [#AEADC](#)

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"Compliment sandwiches" - nonspecific general feedback, specific negative feedback, non specific general feedback.

(Also called "shit sandwiches" where I've worked.) [#AEADC](#)

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Good feedback is specific and actionable. “Good job” is not specific and you can’t take action on it. We crave feedback that helps us grow. What should we keep doing and what should we stop doing?
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Lifelabs uses suits of cards.
Hearts - great and general “you’re good at what you do”
Diamond - “you did a great job at this editing”
Clubs - “this thing sucks”
Spades - “this specific thing needs to change”

Concentrate on diamonds and spades [#AEADC](#)

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If someone gives you hearts or clubs, ask open questions to get more specific feedback you can act on [#AEADC](#)

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It helps to write something out first so you can make it non-triggering and clear. #AEADC

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1. Observations - just the facts. "I noticed you write very short emails"
2. Impact - "Because of that I have to ask more questions to get clarity"
3. Question or request - "Can you include a bit more context so I understand what you need up front?"#AEADC

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if you structure all of your feedback this way, you'll find it's really easy to give successful feedback. People will understand what they need to do and why, no highjacking. #AEADC

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Some people prefer written feedback so they can digest it before talking. Some may want it right away. Some may prefer face to face over written. Ask ahead of time how you like feedback. #AEADC

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Great collaborators will still make mistakes and friction. When you cause friction, it takes 6 seconds for your amygdala to chill out, but it can't break that cycle if you're still in the moment of surprise. Take 6 seconds to chill. [#AEADC](#)

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If you're not able to deescalate your own brain, ask someone to come back so your prefrontal cortex can be the part that receives the feedback [#AEADC](#)

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Bake it into team processes to have 1 on 1 talks or give feedback or learn about what their core needs are. See if you can leverage team-wide processes.

retrospectives allow you to name friction without them being too emotionally charged [#AEADC](#)

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When things are acknowledge with heartfelt authenticity, it tells people to know their needs are acknowledge. People taking responsibility for their own failures are more considered by others to have stronger integrity. [#AEADC](#)

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Have a living document that names your team's expectations and processes. Team charters and docs can name how to be mindful of code reviews or how much time to pair program. Provide a mission statement or North Star. [#AEADC](#)

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Sometimes it can be helpful to document team roles an responsibilities to show the overlapping responsibilities between members of the team. Have honest conversations about where responsibilities fit. Gain shared understanding. And note the edges are fuzzy [#AEADC](#)

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Sketch out what's in the overlap - who's working together to do specific things. If there's conflict and confusion later, you can refer back to it or rewrite it later when you need to, if you write it down.

[#AEADC](#)

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	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>
<i>Commit</i>	Mature and Transparent	Easiest
<i>Don't Commit</i>	Acceptable but Tough	Bad Things

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The absence of trust is the foundation of most team problems.
 What if you disagree with management?
 2x2 chart of disagree or agree / commit or don't commit to write down the effects.

Disagree and commit is the most mature and responsible way to deal with issues. [#AEADC](#)

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You need to be able to put your own reservations on hold to trust your teammates and their core needs to move forward.

You also need to practice ways to help your teammates resolve their core needs [#AEADC](#)

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Going back to [@danmall](#)'s talk, go back to the core needs and say "what else can we do to address your core needs?" [#AEADC](#)

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Bring in leadership or HR if it's necessary. Maybe it's unsafe to give feedback, or you're at the end of your rope

Restate your observations and the impacts of the behavior you've seen. State what's been tried and what could help now.

Be prepared to be surprised. [#AEADC](#)

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Take care of yourself throughout the process. If things are deeply affecting you, take action. These steps won't solve unsafe or unhealthy environments. [#AEADC](#)

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