Inferring Intent in Virtual Meetings

I have noticed in my practice and in conversations with clients that we seem to have difficulty in inferring intent in virtual meetings compared to in-person ones, which can get us into all sorts of problems, especially in meetings where we are giving or receiving feedback. Curious to understand whether there is research to support this hunch, I reviewed some of the available literature and I wasn't able to find studies that have set out to test this directly (at least not yet), there is enough in the available literature to build a plausible hypothesis.

Written Communication

Here the evidence is strong. In written online communication — email being the most studied — inferring the intent of the sender is harder to do than when we are in-person. It is not impossible, but it requires more deliberate work and more exchanges. When we draft a message, we know our own intent; we cannot easily unknow it, so we project it onto the message. But there is an asymmetry in the information transfer: the sender has rich context; the receiver has only text. This is compounded by the finding that ambiguous online cues get interpreted more negatively than the same ambiguity in person.

Video Communication

Video restores some of the cues — facial expression, vocal tone, and basic gesture — but it introduces its own distortions:

- Cognitive load and fatigue are higher in virtual meetings. In an in-person meeting we treat the room as one group, whereas virtually we treat each participant as a unique group, fragmenting our attention. Checking our own image on screen adds a further layer of diversion.
- We read intent signals through eye contact — interest, warmth, hostility, engagement — but in a virtual meeting gaze is structurally broken. True mutual eye contact is geometrically impossible on video.
- Direct eye contact triggers what is known as self-referential processing. This is where we shift from an outward orientation (attending to the other person) to an inward one (attending to ourselves, to what is means for us). Where eye contact occurs, even if imperfect, this can further increase cognitive load.
- In a virtual setting, any participant could be looking directly at us at any moment, and the geometry makes that ambiguous. That ambient uncertainty may sustain a low-level self-referential processing loop running throughout the meeting, quietly consuming cognitive bandwidth even between moments of direct engagement.

In summary: we read intent through eye contact, but eye contact simultaneously signals that intent-reading is needed and consumes some of the cognitive bandwidth required to do it well — a tension that is amplified in a virtual setting.

Virtual Feedback Meetings

In a one-on-one virtual feedback conversation, there is a further dimension to consider. Feedback is already a high-stakes interpretive challenge in person. The receiver is simultaneously trying to:

- Process the content of what is being said
- Read the sender's emotional disposition toward them
- Infer whether this is a supportive or threatening interaction
- Regulate their own emotional response

It is possible (though the research here is still developing) that the receiver is already running what is called a low-level self-referential processing loop (meaning they are directing everything to themselves) before the feedback even lands, leaving them with less available cognitive bandwidth precisely when they most need it. The content arrives, but the contextual signals that would help them interpret it charitably are either absent or degraded.

That is a significant cognitive load before the medium enters the picture. Layer on the added challenges of being virtual and the medium itself may be structurally creating conditions where participants are less able to read intent and less able to project intent clearly — simultaneously, and for neurological reasons that have nothing to do with effort or skill.

What does this mean in practice?

In a virtual meeting, especially one involving feedback, we need to externalise what would normally be conveyed non-verbally:

- Name your intent at the outset explicitly — *"I want to start by saying this conversation comes from a genuinely supportive place"* — rather than assuming the receiver will infer it
- Check in on how the message is landing more frequently than you would in person, because the normal visual feedback loop is degraded
- Be more deliberate about pacing — the natural rhythm of an in-person conversation carries reassurance; online, that rhythm needs to be consciously managed

What our body and eyes would do automatically in the room, our words have to do online. The intent has not changed, but the delivery channel can no longer be trusted to carry it.