



Distributed Is Different

Part 3: Distributed Challenges & Counsels

Distributed Is Different

All of the topics in this guide have one core idea in common: Because of the lower default levels of interaction, distributed work can be uncomfortable if we're not deliberate in our behaviors.

- We can feel stressed out thinking that we're missing out on things going on outside of our perception, or that we're being left out of things.
- We can feel more isolated by the extra barrier to contact that text chat, video conferencing, or audio chat create.

This guide section focuses on how to improve your distributed experience and reduce these anxieties and discomforts.

Watch for this icon as we talk about the **challenges** that you'll encounter as a distributed worker: there are **mountains** to climb.



We'll also talk through **counsels** for how to overcome challenges: there is **gear** in here to help you on your climb!





#1

Being Your Best Boss

Working in a distributed environment is liberating!

- You **get** to set your own schedule and work pace!
- You **get** to arrange your space and time to fit your own needs!
- You **get** to decide when to take breaks and decompress!
- You **get** to give yourself regular, meaningful feedback about your work and impact!

But it comes with a flip-side:

- You **have** to set your own schedule and work pace.
- You **have** to arrange your space and time to fit your own needs.
- You **have** to decide when to take breaks and decompress.
- You **have** to give yourself regular, meaningful feedback about your work and impact.

Challenge: You have to be the boss of you.



Let's talk about decision fatigue.

The fewer decisions we **get** to make, the less engaged and less free we feel.

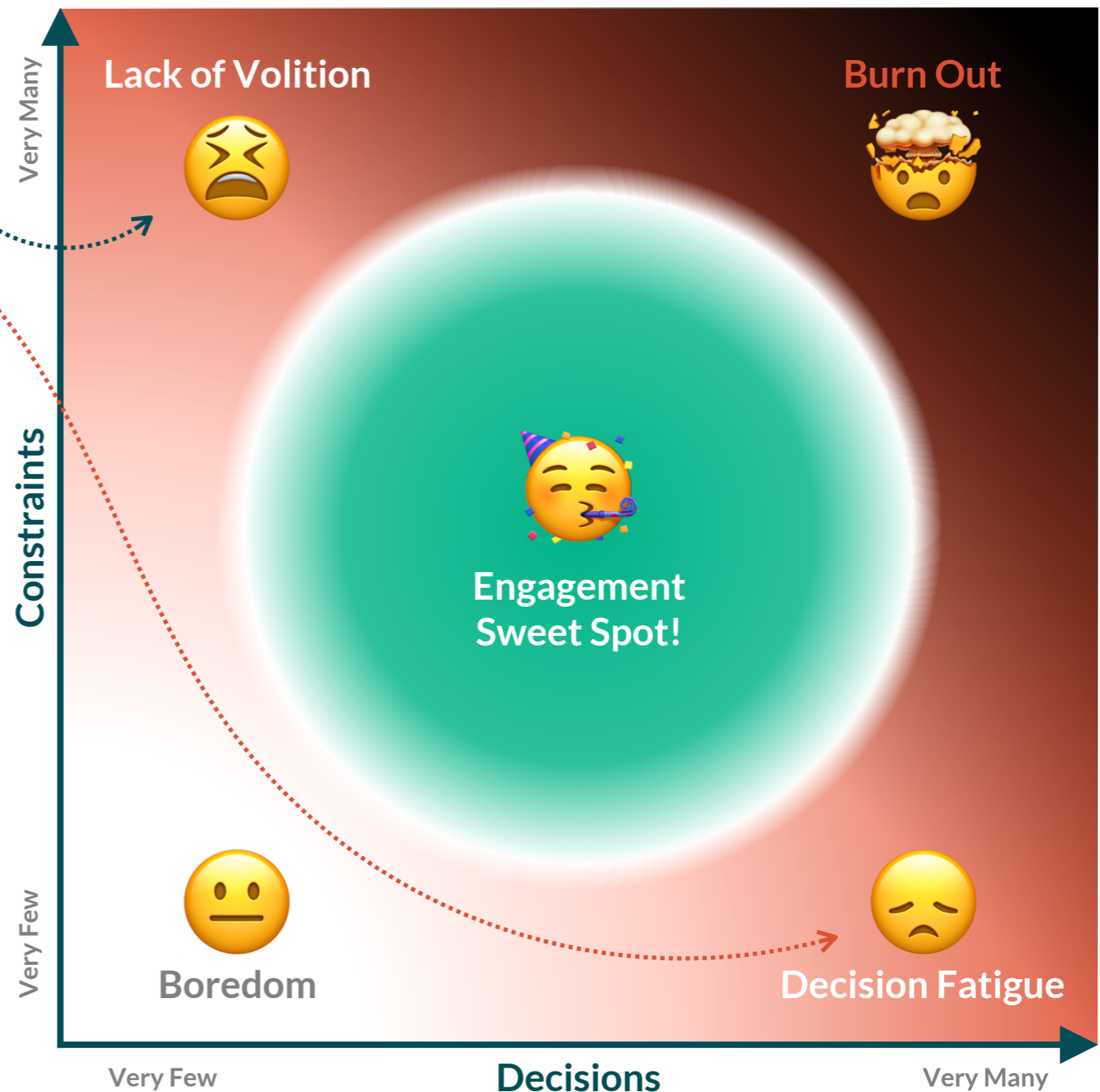
The more decisions we **have** to make, the more worn down we feel by the focus of choosing.

Finding your **sweet spot** between **get-to** and **have-to** takes conscious effort, feedback, and practice.

Making choices consumes caloric energy, and is often called **decision fatigue** or **ego depletion**: you spend tangible energy in comparing and choosing!

Different types of work cause different levels of fatigue: the more a particular task feels like either a time to concentrate heavily or to maintain self-control, the more fatigue you build.

This fatigue cost differs person to person: things that feel easy to you might cost others more, and vice versa.



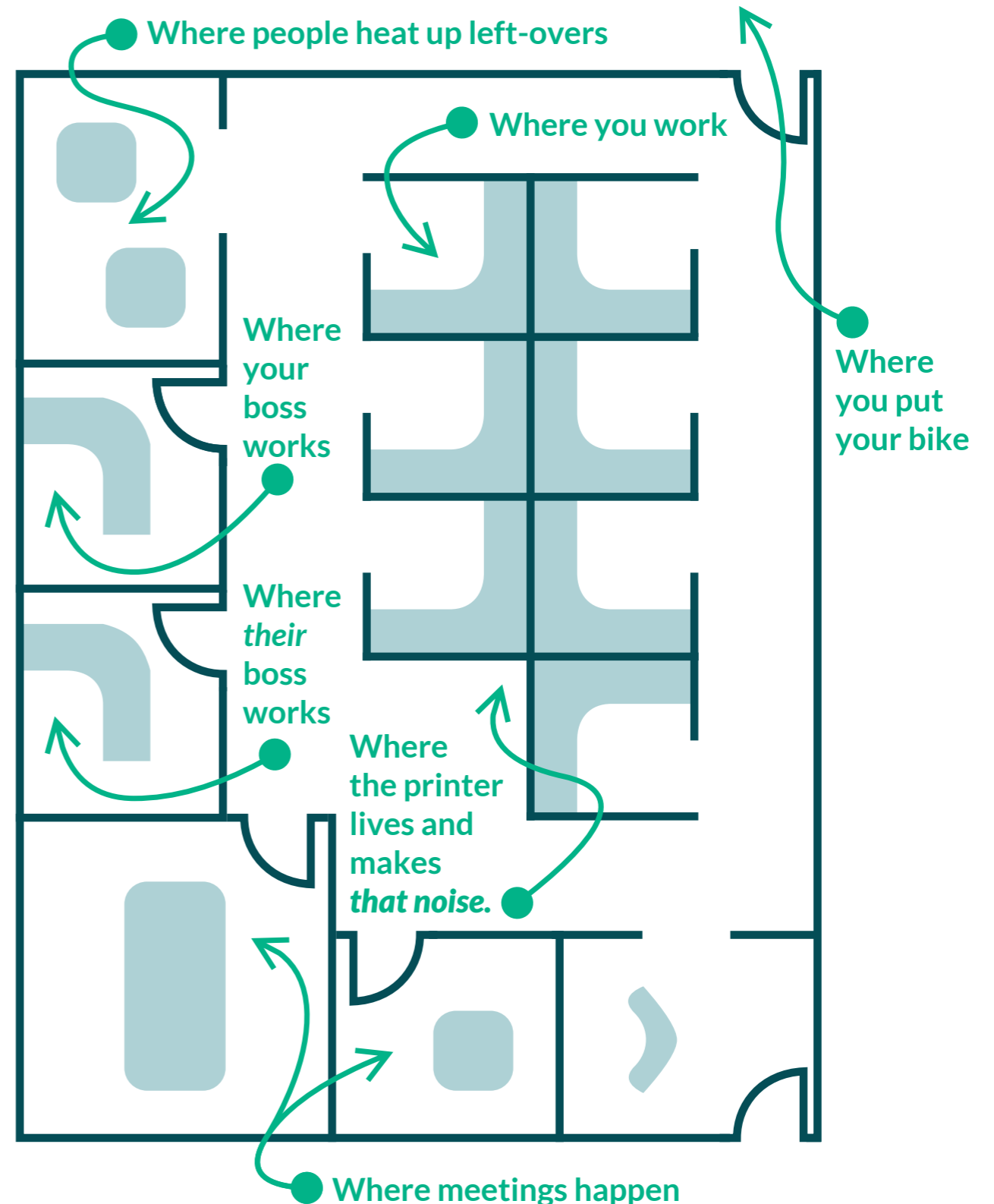
Missing automatic constraints

In-person work spaces come with a bunch of **default** constraints, like:

- Where meetings happen
- How eye contact works
- Noise levels you are exposed to
- Moving around physical spaces
- Coordination of breaks/meals
- Who you sit or work near

Distributed work spaces don't have these constraints automatically, and **a lack of constraints can feel chaotic**. Without these default constraints, you have to make decisions about the above things for yourself.

Not making decisions about things like this ahead of time is making the decision to constantly make ad-hoc decisions.





Counsel: Be a great boss to you

3.1

- Plan your work, then work your plan.
You will have to change your plan, but starting with one is better than having none. Plans need to be **flexible** enough to leave you choices, but **constrained** enough to limit your decision fatigue.
- Monitor your decision fatigue levels.
Everyone has a different engagement **sweet-spot**, and everyone has different comfort levels. Be deliberate about the things you opt in to, and practice being comfortable opting *out* of things, too.
- Spend and save your energy deliberately.
Be aware that **decision fatigue** is tied directly to caloric energy reserves. You will have a hard time making good decisions if you have missed a meal! Showing **self-control** comes from the same energy reservoir: you will not make good decisions after being your “on-camera self” for an extended period of time.
- Prioritize regular low-intensity time.
Decision fatigue is **additive**: make breaks in the flow of your work to do things that recharge you. Everyone is different; find what feels like time where you don’t have to “steer” things, and make time to do them, especially between big chunks of focus time.
- Evolve your own unique work-life balance.
Your balance is **unique to you**. Ask for feedback from your team lead, mentors, and peers. Explore what works best for you – it’s an **experiment**, not a law: practice. Have empathy for others about this: their balance will be different than yours!



#2

Constancy vs Heroics

We search for signals in noise.

Humans love patterns: they save us time and energy! But we'll waste lots of both trying to find them in random noise, if that's all that we have to work with.

We take reassurance in the background constancy of people around us – but distributed environments are “low contact” and are more sensitive to chaos than in-person environments.

con·stan·cy

noun

1. the quality of **being unchanging or unwavering**, as in purpose, love, or loyalty; firmness of mind; faithfulness.
2. Uniformity or regularity, as in qualities or conditions; **invariableness**.

The unpredictable wears us out:

- Concentrating is hard when everything is a **unique** snowflake.
- Heroic, super-human actions feel important in chaotic situations, but they are **chaotic** by definition.
- Your **reactions** to your own chaos can become part of your coworkers' chaos, to which they have to react.
- Chaotic environments mean more decisions & reactions are required, increasing our **decision fatigue**.

Challenge: Chaos causes reaction ripples



Reaction ripples

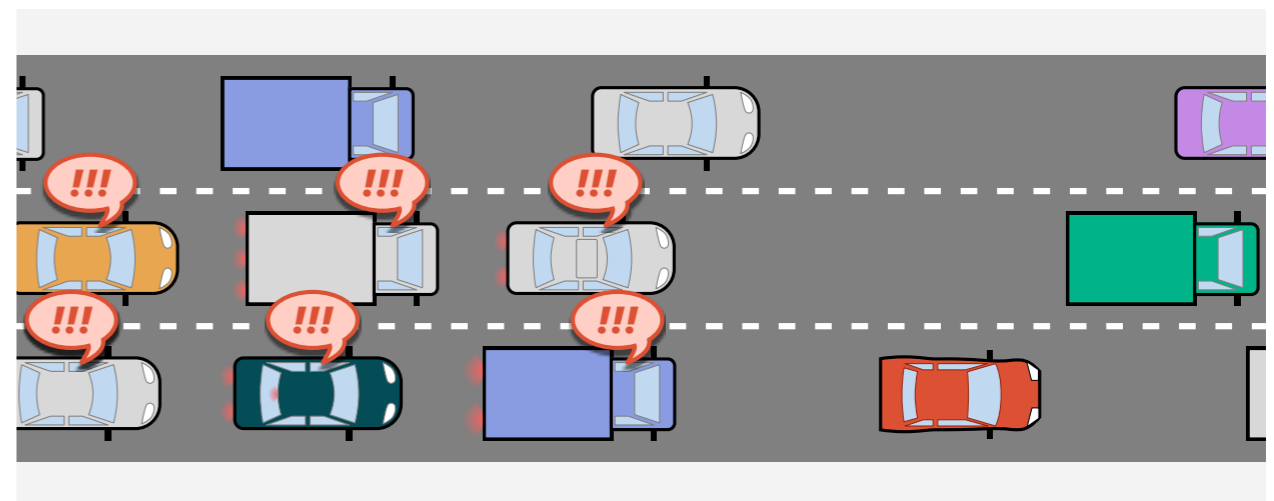
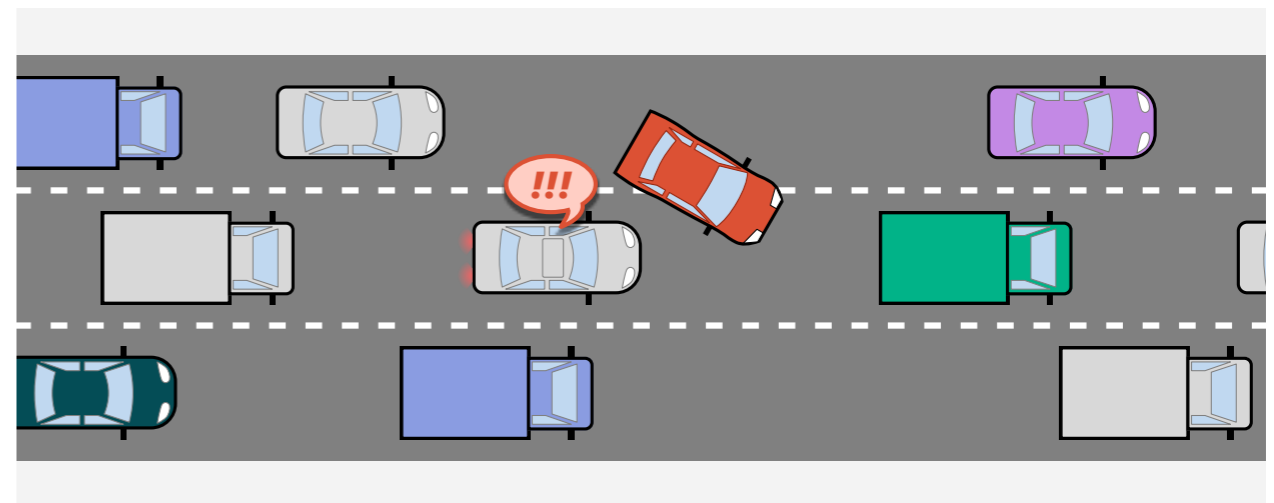
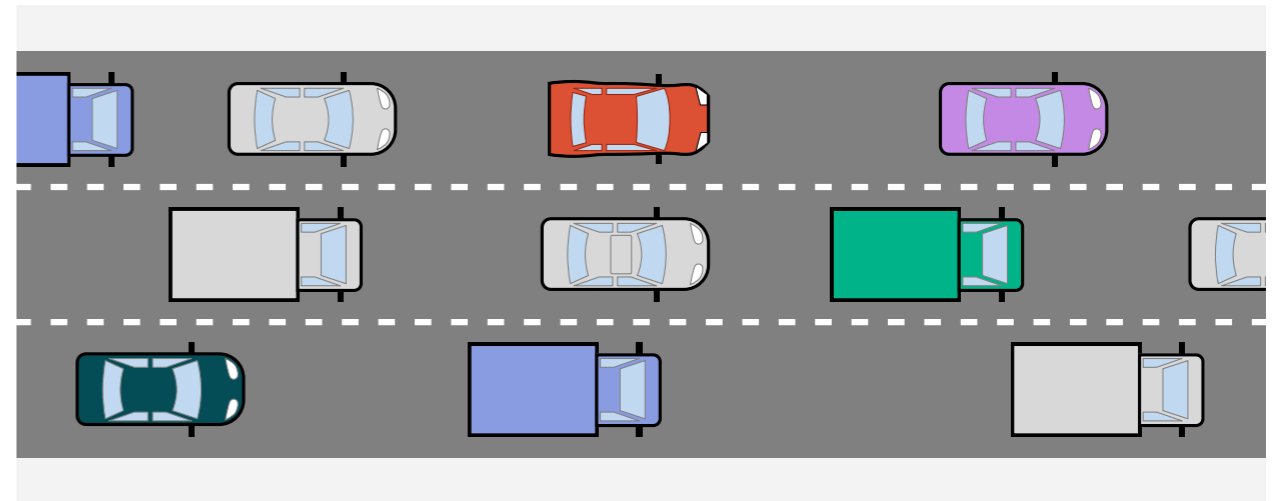
Traffic jams are caused by “reaction ripples”: small, twitchy actions at the head of the flow of cars ripples and grows through people reacting to those actions. This can be counteracted with concentration, but even that is limited by how much we can focus on at once.

Increasing chaos means more chance of drivers needing to make their own twitchy reactions, leading to more and often bigger ripples.

Unlike traffic, in a distributed work environment we can't always see each others' cars. It often can feel like driving in traffic, in the dark, with our headlights off.

Here's a contrived scenario:

- You want to check in with someone about something.
- You open up a direct message to them, and type a few quick questions.
- Their notifications go off a few times.
- *But:* they're in a meeting.
- You've divided their attention.
- They write an answer using half their attention.
- You don't get what you need.
- Their meeting suffers from their lack of focus.
- No one leaves happy.





Counsel: Embody constancy & consistency

3.2

- Diminish the sources of chaos around you.
- Be predictable, even if you do less than usual.
- Be dependable, even if you move more slowly.
- Make mundane contact with people around you.
- Put on your cape deliberately; save it as a last resort.

Remember that the goal here is to be **predictable in the “dark”**.

One huge way to diminish sources of chaos is to build work-intake processes that make that intake feel mundane: request forms and other tools that allow people to ask for help without interrupting other work. Don't forget that getting status on a pending request is also a work request!

Being predictable and dependable have a lot to do with optimizing for endurance: we should think like long-distance **walkers**, not sprinters or super-star athletes.

Mundane contact is important for healthy relationships with other coworkers: it's hard when the only time you hear from someone is when they need your help. If you make regular contact before things become urgent, you **build stronger awareness** for what “normal procedure” looks like for them, and for you.

If possible, **find the boring solution** to a problem, and work to make it consistently available to others who encounter the problem. Be sure to build a way to allow escalation, though: there should be a “superhero signal” – some way for people to ask for urgent or emergency help. In those times, your cape will be indispensable. In all the other times, it means a lot to the people around you that you're a very capable reporter at the *Daily Planet*.



#3

Explicit vs Implicit

Things are hidden by default.

In distributed environments, we have to make an effort to prevent surprises by being explicit and consistent.

These environments lack the self-correcting, incidental exposure of in-person environments: there's no "peripheral vision" to alert you to something unexpected happening. Without that awareness, implicit behaviors can have bigger and bigger impacts over time and normalization of deviance takes deliberate action to stop.

For instance, something that can be done by anybody is often done by nobody – it's easy to assume that someone else is doing those things when you can't see what everyone else is doing with their time.

It takes practice to be deliberate in our communications: to first notice assumptions and inference, then discuss those implicit things to turn them into explicit understanding.

Implicit behavior has impacts:

- Assumption and **inference** can cultivate misunderstanding.
- Lack of incidental exposure can leave misunderstandings **unchecked** and uncorrected.
- Accountability becomes **intangible** in response to indirect interactions.
- Things get **lost in the noise** of our work, and also in the silence of constrained interactions.

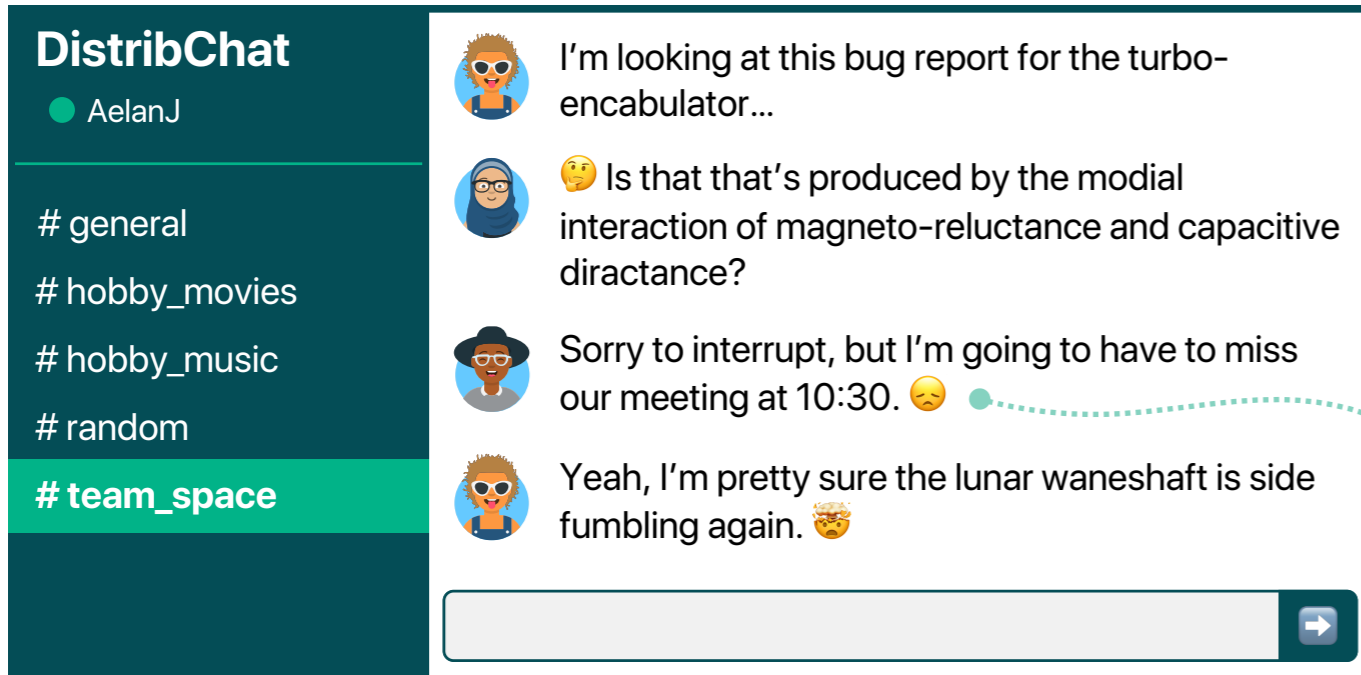
Challenge: Implicit behavior incurs bigger costs



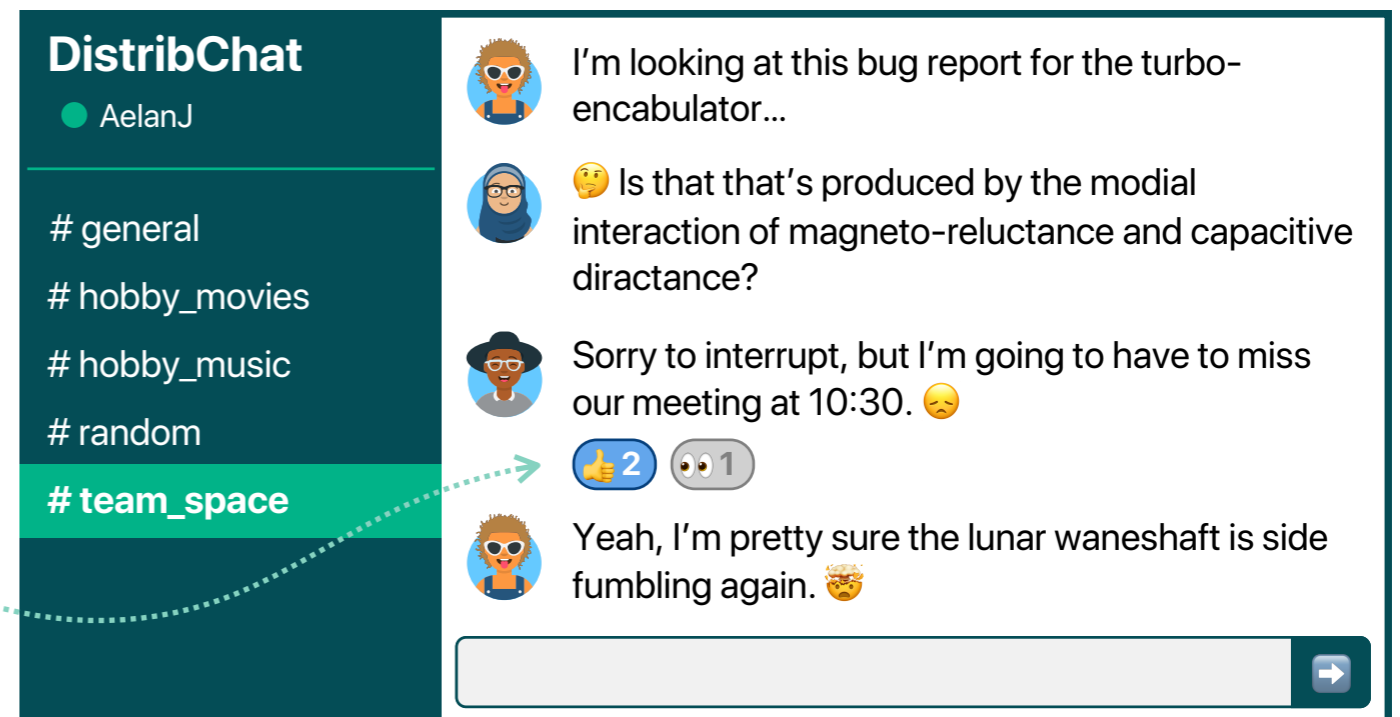
For example: reading things!

Reading is an invisible, implicit behavior; explicitly acknowledging that you are reading or have read something is vastly different to your coworkers.

Even small explicit reactions can mean a world of difference to how written interactions feel to us.



A little explicit acknowledgement that you've read someone's message will make a big difference to them.



3.3 Explicit vs Implicit

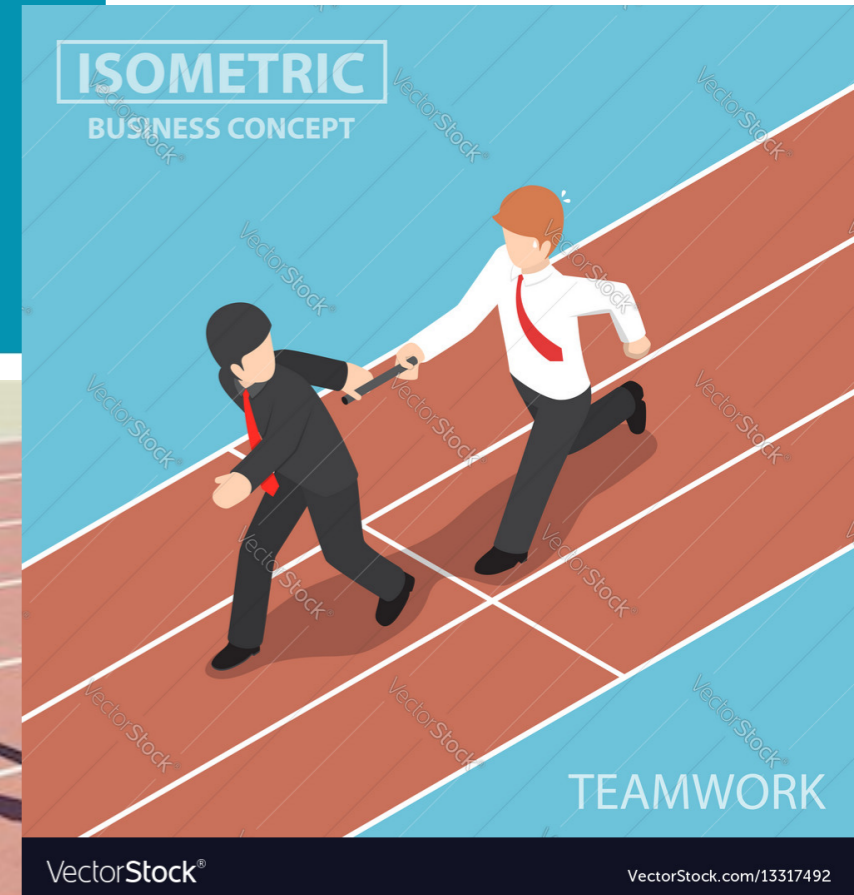
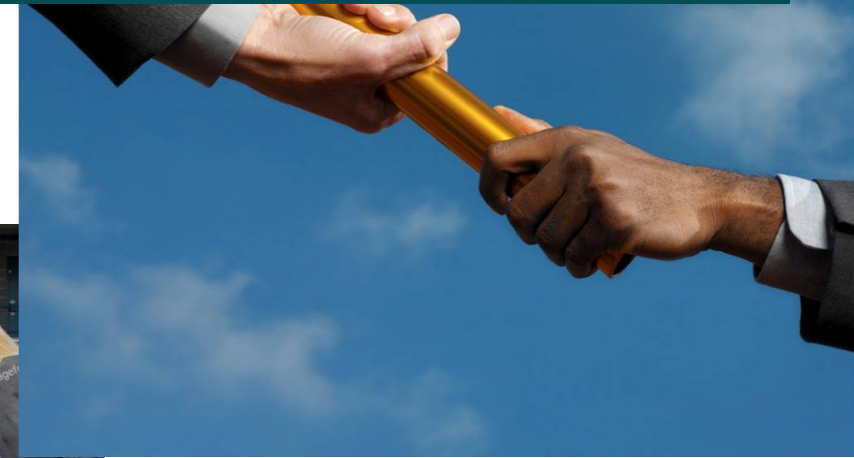
Obligatory Baton Stock Photos

There's a gazillion of these horrible stock photos of business people passing batons to each other.

It's a very, very tired visual.

But there's a reason why these are *everywhere*: the moment of hand-off is a common point of focus in organizations, because it's the most common moment for things to come apart.

Because of distributed environments' more common use of asynchronous interactions, hand-offs can become implicit by default. Implicit hand-offs tend to fall apart readily and catastrophically!





Counsel: Be explicit

3.3

- Don't let asynchronous mean ambiguous.

Just because the communication channel between you and your coworkers aren't always synchronous, doesn't mean that they aren't counting on you to **follow through**. Before you head off into some asynchronous work, take the time to call out who is doing what, and when you plan to check in with each other next.
- Say things that might seem redundant or obvious.

Most of the time the things you think everyone else is thinking, they really *are* thinking. But in the few times where they *aren't* thinking what you're thinking, things go much worse much more quickly in a distributed environment. Because there isn't the incidental contact that helps you notice **faulty assumptions**, it's worth it to say the things you think are obvious, just in case.
- Be a patient listener when people tell you redundant or obvious things.

The above means you're going to hear a fair amount of things that seem obvious: the people around you are trying to practice catching faulty assumptions before they cause trouble. Your patience will go a long way to **help them feel safe** in keeping everyone on the same page.
- Follow up, check in, and double-check more than you think you need to.

Because of the lower level of contact, plans in a distributed environment can have a **habit of drifting** further than you think they will, compared to your in-person experience. More frequent contact and follow-up is the best way to reduce that drift.



#4

Being A Beginner

Being a beginner can feel harder.

In-person environments have implicit feedback loops around our learning progression that aren't automatically present in distributed environments, like:

- Seeing people reading and studying things, or
- Overhearing questions being asked and answered.

Without these small signals, being a beginner can feel lonely and risky because learning can feel like “invisible work”.

Invisible work is anything that turns the “progress bar” of work into a single checkbox: work that feels like you aren't doing anything until you do the last part of it.

In between the start and the finish line, you are doing work that feels hard to show, or building understanding that it can feel hard to quantify. For example, no one feels proud saying: *“I know where about half of the stuff is in our wiki!”*

Invisible work might be:

- Assignments that feel like others are just **waiting** for you to get done, like setting up your computer.
- Tasks that produce **intangible** results, like reading documents.
- Work that feels like none of it is done until **all of it** is done, like publishing a blog post.
- Trial runs or **experiments**, all of which feel like failures until you reach the first success.

Challenge: Being a beginner can feel invisible



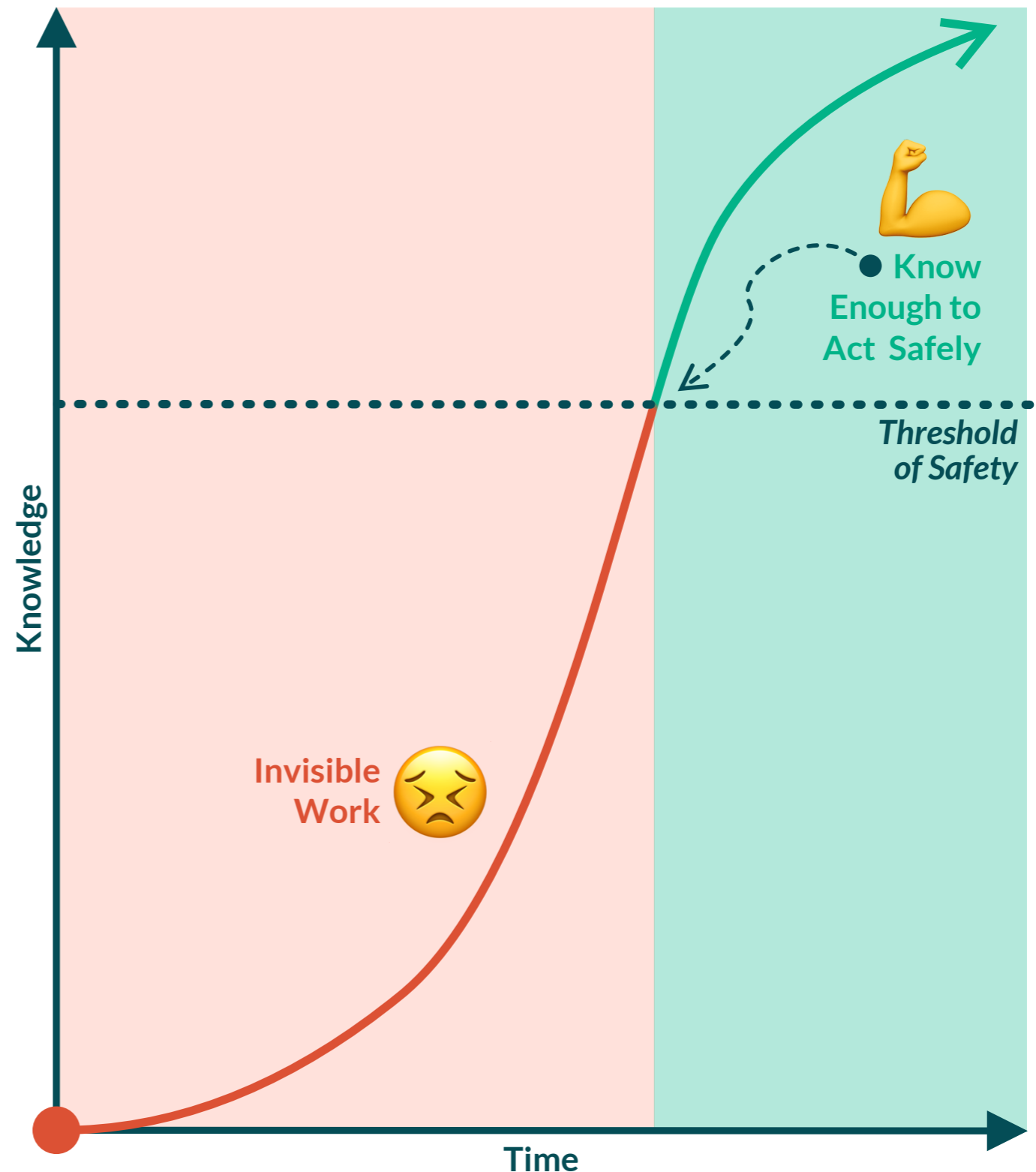
Learning curves & invisible work

As beginners, we have to spend time learning things: gathering knowledge through our learning curve.

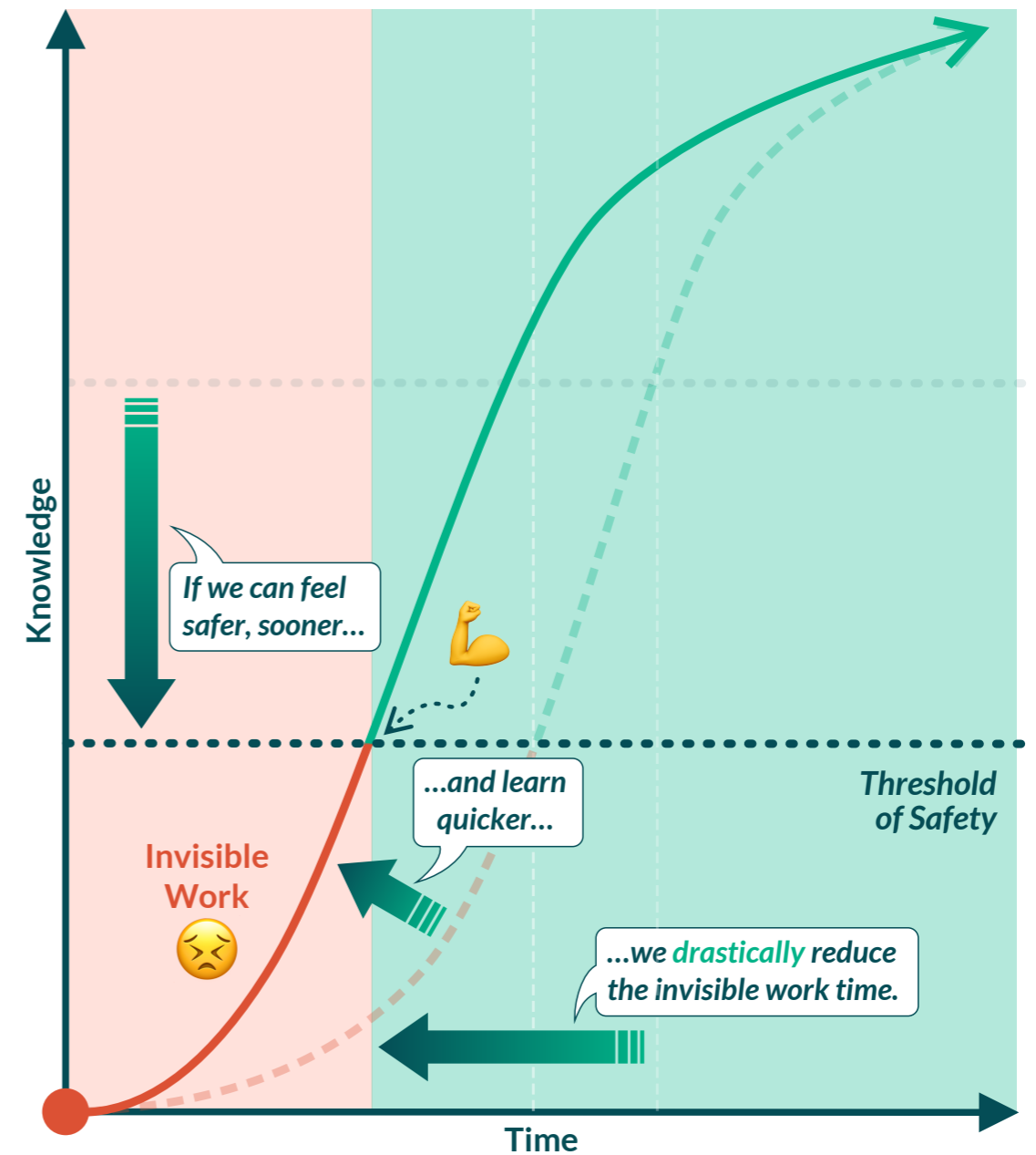
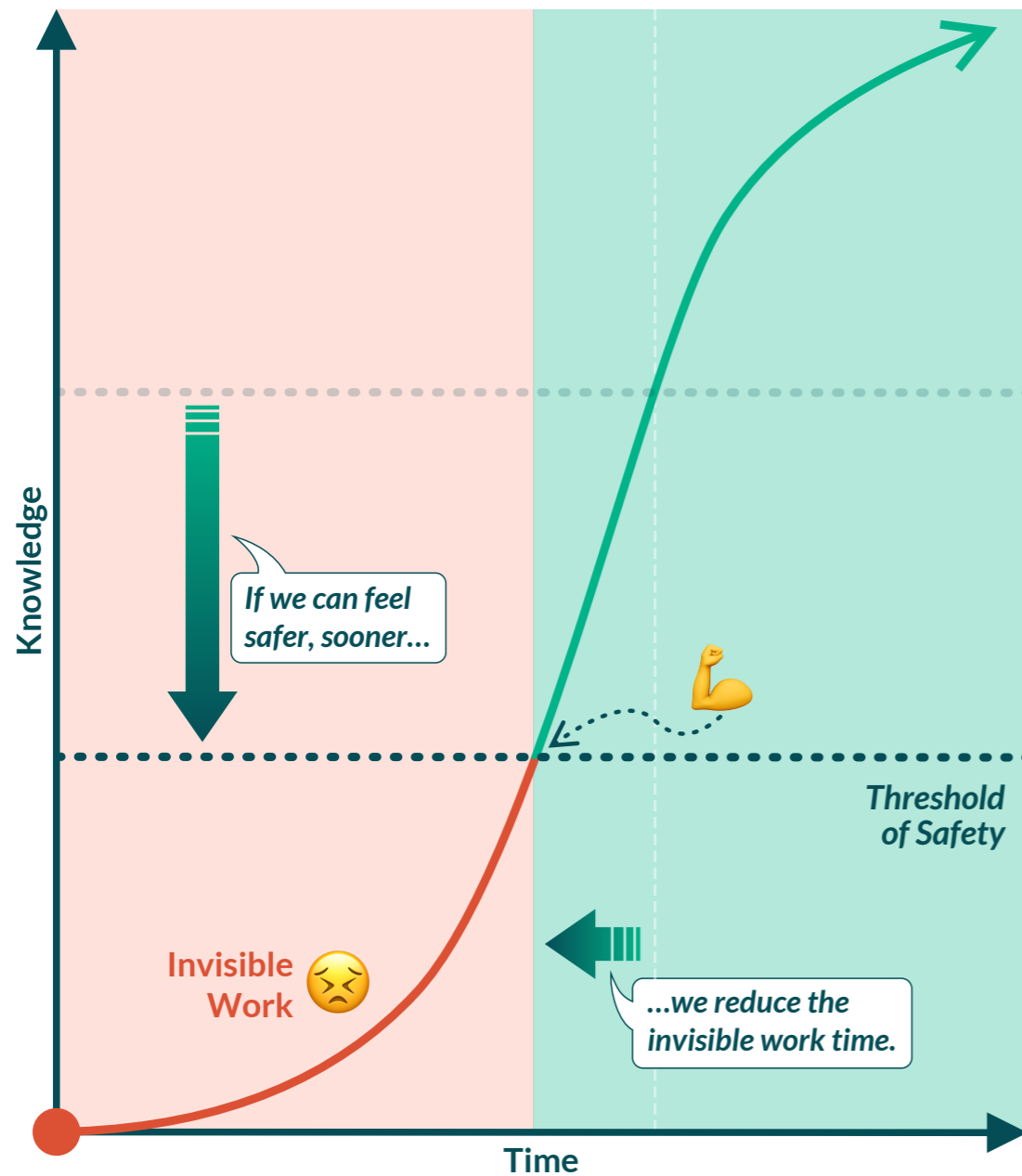
We all have a **threshold of safety** in our minds that we need to cross before we feel safe acting on our knowledge in front of other people. We keep building our knowledge until we reach the point where we cross the line and **know enough to act safely**.

But all that learning can **feel invisible**. There are few external indicators of all the knowledge we've accumulated before we take the first action that the people around us can observe.

It feels worse as more time goes by before we feel safe enough to act: we start to feel worried that we're not meeting the expectations of others, or that we're holding our team back by taking time to learn before we act.



3.4 Being A Beginner



We can lower the threshold of safety and feel safer, sooner by using survivable failures like prototypes, rough draft documents, or small experiments.

We can increase our rate of learning by letting people know we're beginners, asking for help, and finding other beginners whose learnings we can lean on.

Make your learning visible!

Alongside feeling safer, sooner and learning quick, we can prevent the time before we feel safe acting from feeling invisible: **share your progress with others!**

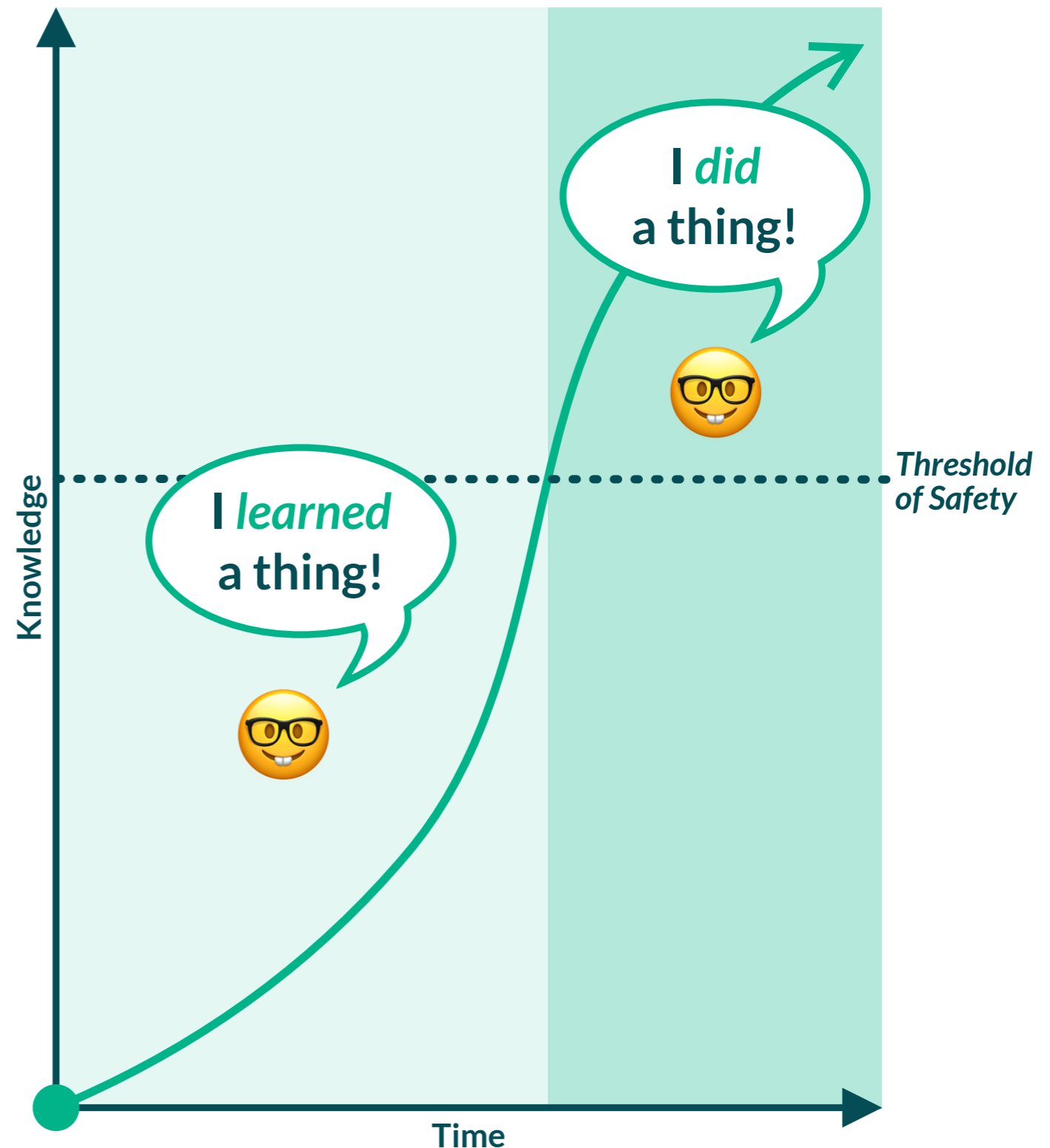
Sharing might mean something small like posting a message in a team text-chat, or something bigger like writing a blog post. No matter what you choose, it's important to take the time to broadcast learning.

Not only does sharing your progress prevent that invisible feeling, it helps the rest of us who are beginners too, because **being a beginner is universal.**

Right now, all of the people around you are beginners at *something*. Even people who we all would consider masters at their work are constantly finding things they don't know, and learning – that's how they attain and *maintain* their mastery.

You're a beginner at something, too. After you learn about it and practice it, you'll be a beginner at something else: it's part of how we grow and learn to always be a beginner, to always be learning.

Learn at your own pace and act when you feel safe, but don't let your learning be invisible.





Counsel: Broadcast your beginner-ness

3.4

- Find ways to feel safer, sooner.
 - Feel confident that the people around you expect you to take time to learn.
 - Share your progress: it prevents that feeling of “invisible work”.
 - Help everyone feel the worth of their work: put learning on the roadmap, ask about it!
- The threshold of safety goes up when we sense that there is more at stake; use tools like draft versions, proofs-of-concept, or other experiments that **lower the risk** involved. Not only will that allow you to find **better solutions** in the long term, you will also feel like you can act sooner because your learning-curve will cross the safety threshold sooner.
- No one expects you to know everything at the outset. Your team is not only ready for you to **take the time** you need to learn and grow, they are also hoping you won't rush through that learning and end up with partial understanding when they might need it most. If you feel pressure to “be done” with your learning, talk to your team lead – they are ready to help you find your balance.
- As you go about your learning, watch for tasks that seem like they produce **all-or-nothing results**. Things where you don't have anything to show until everything is done can create that “invisible work” feeling. Find a way to **break them down** into smaller efforts that have interim results, or if they can't be broken down, find milestones that you can **broadcast** when you cross them.
- Just like your team wants you to take the time to learn, you can be that team for them in return: **talk about learning**, make it an *official* thing that your team does, **plan for it** in your capacity planning, and **ask about progress often**. Almost everyone on your team will be learning something at any given moment – give them regular opportunities to tell everyone about it!



#5

Building Artifacts

Artifacts can become afterthoughts.

Because distributed interactions are mostly through text chat and video conferencing, it can feel like everything is done when those interactions end. Our questions get answered, or our problems get solved, and it's easy to move on without thinking about why we initiated the interaction to begin with.

Everyone being readily available for synchronous interaction can make other knowledge sources seem unimportant in the moment.

But: Synchronous interactions leave very few artifacts to reference easily after the fact, and we have to keep engaging in those interactions to access the knowledge they provide.

This also makes for a very challenging environment for new people to join: learning things on their own time and at their own pace can feel overwhelming and disheartening because of those missing artifacts! The knowledge they need is locked up in the minds of people who have participated in those synchronous interactions.

The convenient synchrony trap:

- Many colleagues are often more than happy to be readily available to help via a **synchronous** chat.
- The pleasure of that synchronous **convenience** can make us forget the costs of synchronous interactions.
- Others who need the same help have to engage the same channel, levy the same synchronous costs, and thereby learn the **same habits**.

Challenge: Lasting artifacts are easy to skip





Counsel: Build & share lasting artifacts

3.5

- **Good:** When you use synchronous interactions, take notes during them.

The simple **habit of taking notes** – either written on paper or typed on your computer – does two things: first, it means you have an artifact to reference afterwards; second, it focuses interactions. You are less likely to lose your train of thought, forget questions that occur to you as you go along, or miss follow-up items.
- **Better:** Post a text-chat message with a summary of your notes afterward.

After your synchronous interaction ends, remember that the interaction is not finished: go back to where you started the discussion that led to the synchronous interaction and post a “**for the record**” message with a short summary from your notes. That leaves a searchable trail of keywords for other people to follow and learn from: they can see your question/discussion, and then see the answer/result.
- **Betterer:** Build a document and put a link to that in text-chat instead, with keywords for future searchers.

Even better than just posting a summary is to build the habit of turning your **notes into shared materials** for others. Build or find a document about the topic, and put your notes and any other details in that document. Then use the **document link** in your “for the record” follow-up message, so that the richer, broader context is available to future people with similar needs.
- **Best:** Find the start of the question/conversation, and fix the need at the source.

Some of the conversations grow out of questions that we can prevent from needing to be asked. This requires careful thinking around why you didn’t know the thing you needed to know, and **tracing the question upstream**. The reward for this work is that you can make the knowledge you needed feel more automatic to other learners, rather than them having to retrace your footsteps.



Distributed Challenge & Counsels

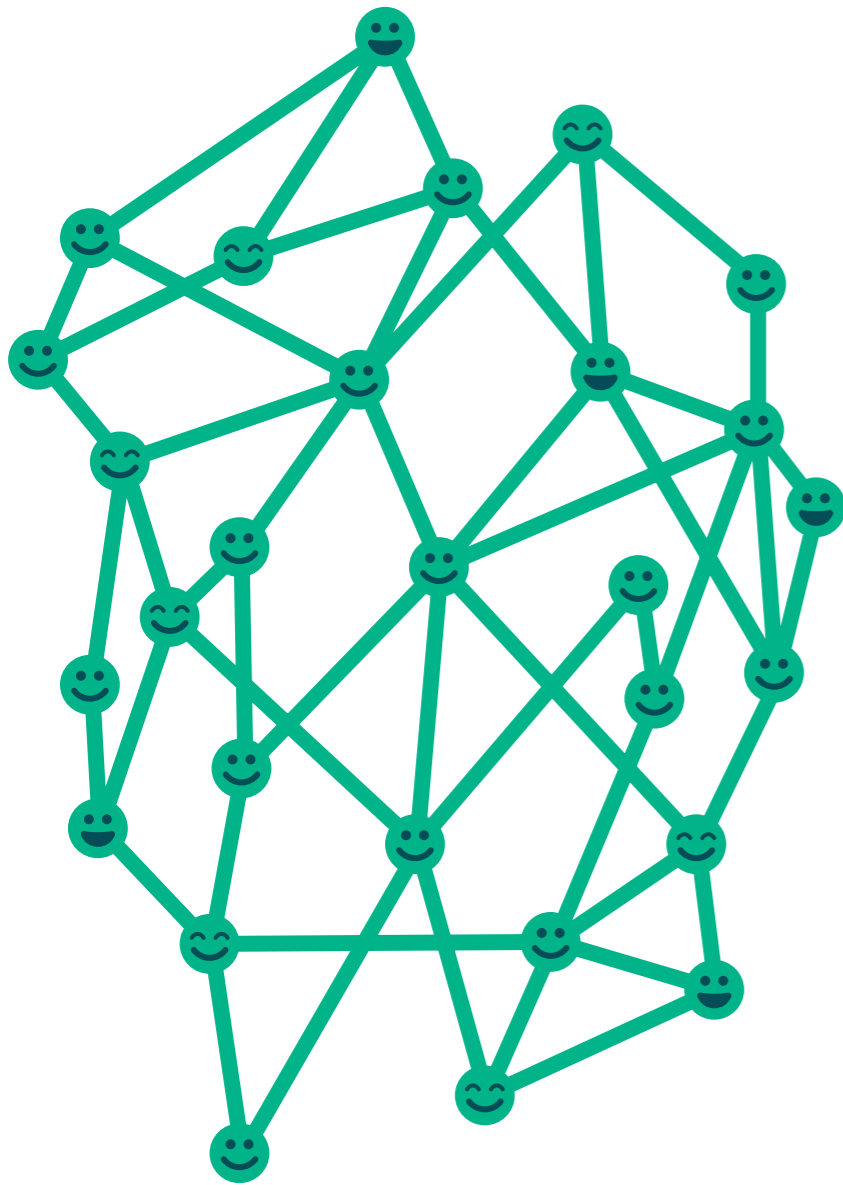
Summary

In-person environments are high contact & visible-by-default:

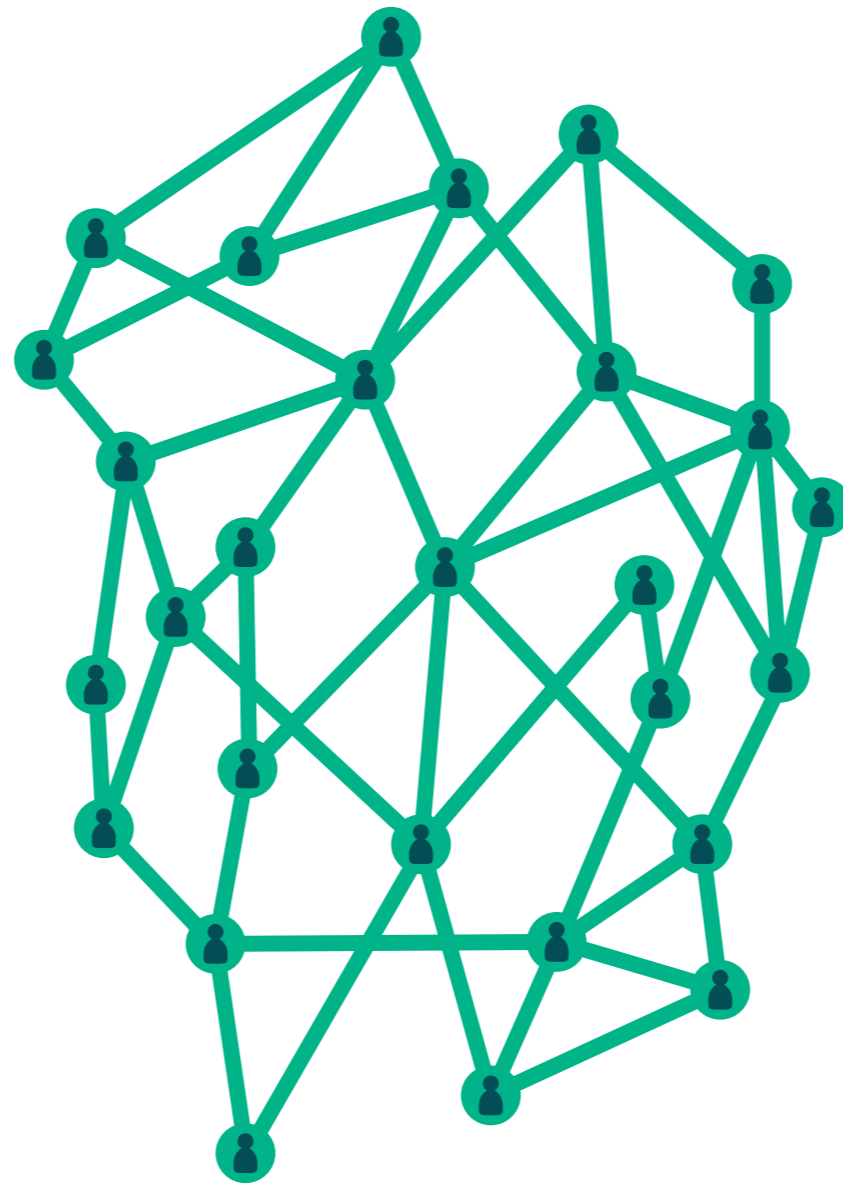
- **Incidental contact levels are high.**
There are a lot of water-cooler moments and serendipity, you bump into people often, and interactions happen easily and automatically.
- **Peripheral stimulus is constant.**
You overhear other conversations, see people gathering out of the corner of your eye and wander over, catch the aroma of someone taking a food or coffee break.
- **Your environment configuration is stable but varied.**
Your sensory background varies: you have different spaces for different activities like meeting rooms, break rooms, parking lots, and cubicles. At the same time, the arrangement of that background is stable day to day. The combination of these two things is important for how our brains process short-term memories into long-term memories: our episodic memory means that we “bookmark” things based on transitions in physical spaces.

Distributed environments are low contact & hidden-by-default:

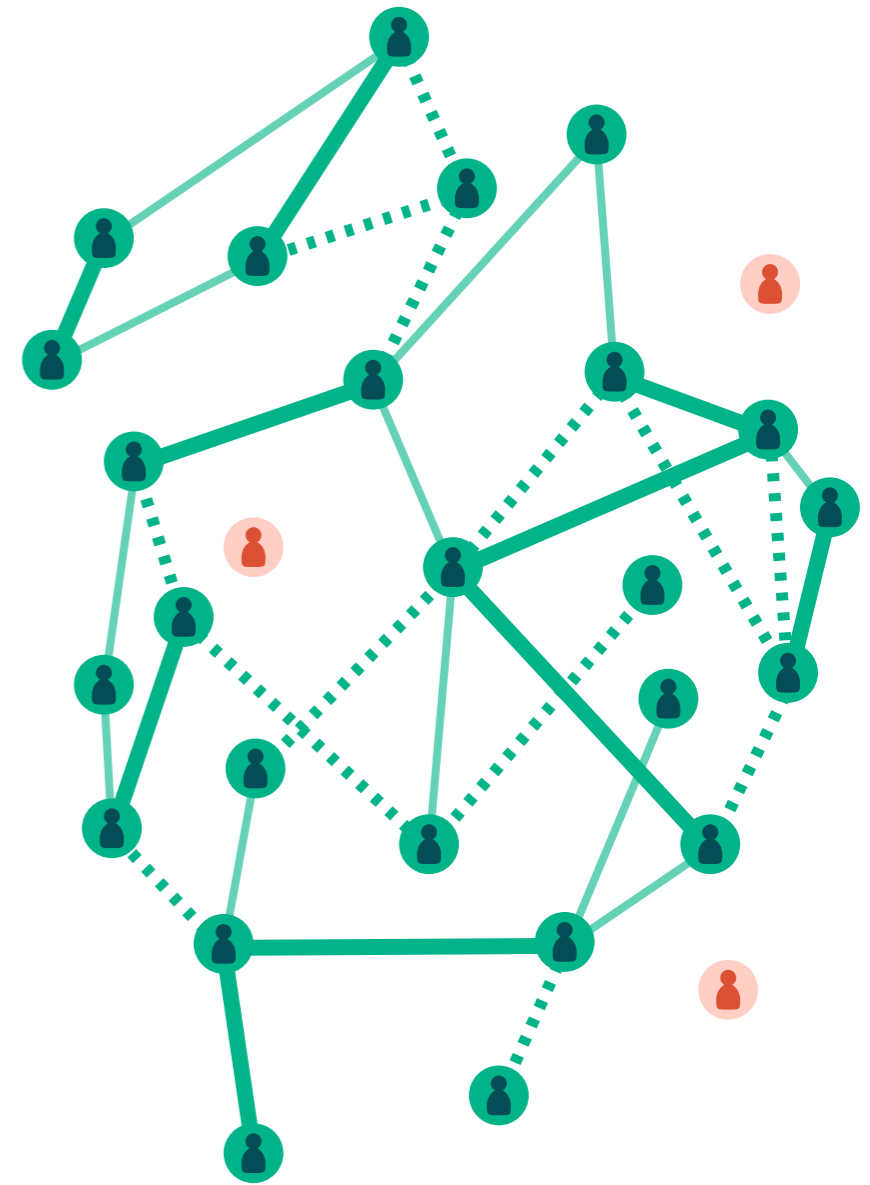
- **Interactions take effort to start.**
There is no physically shared space in which random encounters & serendipity can happen.
- **Things change beyond your perception & awareness.**
This leads to isolation and object-permanence anxiety because we have no signals by which to predict changes we can't observe.
- **Your environment can feel both stagnant & over-stimulating.**
Your interactions happen in overlapping spaces: meetings, working alone, thinking, taking a break. The lack of varied environment can feel stagnant, but at the same time the lack of physical transitions leave you no “bookmark” opportunities in your memory processing: you just keep absorbing new things without ever feeling like you get a chance to “save” them and start a new page.



Distributed work can mean that we're all **equally engaged**, with no center to feel distanced from and **no fringes** to fear.



But without constant attention to the counsels we've called out in this part of the guide, you will lose contact with others.



Pretty soon it will start to feel like there is **nothing but fringes**, given that distributed work has a tendency to happen in the **dark**.

The most important habit that underlies all of the counsels in this guide, and will help you handle all the differences in the emotional landscape of a distributed environment is to:

Be Present.

- **Over communicate;** not just as a producer of information, but as a *consumer, too!* Talk and listen proactively, not passively; ask questions and offer answers or suggestions.
- **Focus on one thing at a time.** In low-contact spaces, your split attention is felt more keenly by the people around you because there is so little information in the communication medium to begin with.
- **Make time to do nothing.** Your distributed space doesn't have the "psychological airlocks" that in-person spaces have: there's no short walk back to your desk in which to center yourself and take a breath. *Take breaks.*
- **Remember that people are unique.** Without shared spaces to help keep us aware of each others' individuality, we start to forget how different things are in other peoples' heads.
- **Listen to your own mental rhythms.** Be aware of your decision fatigue, watch your constraint level, listen to your thoughts: you will know when you need a break, a change of scenery, or even just a stretch.
- **Reach out and interact.** Your distributed work environment requires your active participation. Being present means taking the initiative to make regular contact with the people around you, involve them, learn about them, and grow.