

Skill of Interpreting Non-verbal Communication: Relevance in Technical and Business Education

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ABSTRACT: Non-verbal communication is the sort of communication through wordless series of messages. This takes place with the use of other means such as appearance, postures, gestures, voice etc. Non-verbal communication can play a crucial role in technical and business education. It is not only what one says in the classroom or workplace that is important, but it is also how one says it that can make the difference to students or the clients. Nonverbal messages are an essential component of communication in the teaching and learning process of any learner. The present paper attempts to discuss the increasing significance of non-verbal communication and its practice. How our conscious and unconscious body actions transmit unending chain of messages betraying us every moment in spite of being us more aware about our movements, what interpretations can be drawn from these messages and how one can adapt an assertive body language for the professional grooming in this highly competitive and globalized era. Acquiring the art of interpreting non-verbal communication can help not only the teachers in their teaching process but it can be very supportive for students and the budding professionals in learning process, interviews and subsequently business situations.

KEY WORDS: Assertive body language, Aphorism, Paralanguage, Proxemics, Chronemics, Copycat,

INTRODUCTION

In current competitive-cum-increasingly globalized-business set-up, the significance of effective and dynamic communication, no doubt, seems obvious. Sometimes, verbal communication becomes so bewildering that key aspect of successful communication left with us, is non-verbal communication. Believing in the importance of non-verbal communication is not a new concept at all. 'Not to watch a person's mouth but his fists' was once a celebrated aphorism of Martin Luther, the 16th century protestant reformer. The term nonverbal communication has acquired wide acceptance towards the end of the 20th century. Attempts have been made to discover the meaning and scope of non-verbal communication, although it is not always fully clear what it means. Non-verbal communication has, virtually, limitless characteristics since it includes all the possible ways, excluding the use of words, which transmit the message. It can refer to communication through personal appearance, touch or smell, different facial expressions or features of speech such as tone, stress, loudness etc.

SCOPE OF NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Before discussing how to interpret the non-verbal communication, let's define what non-verbal communication is. Non-verbal communication is consisted of:

A. POSTURE/PHYSICAL APPEARANCE — Appearance messages are generally the first nonverbal messages received and are used to derive judgments about people based on how they look, what they wear, and their level of attractiveness, among other things. Physical attractiveness impacts how people perceive others as similar to themselves and is used to evaluate credibility and general attractiveness.

B. GESTURES & POSTURE — Gestures and postures are frequent and uninterrupted conscious and subconscious movements of the body that reflect individual's thought processes and regulate his communication. For body language to be interpreted as positive and genuine, it is necessity that it appears to be natural one. It helps in communicating a message of self-confidence, awareness and enthusiasm.

C. FACIAL EXPRESSIONS — The most key non-verbal channel for expressing attitudes and emotions to other people is the face. Researchers attempted categorization of facial expressions which express emotions and they typically agree on six such: happiness, surprise, fear, sadness, anger, disgust/ contempt.

D. TIME (CHRONEMICS) — The way someone talks about or uses time can communicate much nonverbal information about him or her. People may also have differing psychological time orientations influencing how they think about and perceive time in their casual lives. They may be more *past-oriented*, using the past to shape the present, or *future-oriented*, working towards brighter tomorrow. They can also be *present-oriented*, living mostly for today. Culture plays a role in deciding time orientation, so it is important to be aware of these differences and their prospective impact on communication.

E. VOICE MODULATION (PARALANGUAGE) —Intonation, voice quality and vocal emphasis are included among vocal cues for they enhance verbal meaning. These cues reveal an emotional state, attitudes towards others, social class and origin. Individuals can exercise dominance with a loud voice and indicate submission by using a lower, softer pitch. While communicating verbally, it is vital to ensure that the paralanguage aligns with the verbal messages it accompanies.

F. TERRITORY AND PERSONAL SPACE (PROXEMICS) — Personal space means the space an individual maintains around him or herself, while territory is a larger area an individual controls that provides privacy (for instance, an office or a specific chair in the conference room). Invading another's territory causes that person discomfort and the desire to defend his or her space (by turning away or creating a barrier, for example). Culture can influence the way individuals use space.

OBSERVING HOW NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION CONVEYS MESSAGES

When cave-dwellers discovered how to decipher grunts and to create vocabulary to convey their message, their lives became a lot more complex. Before verbal communication was invented, they depended upon their bodies to communicate their messages. Their simple brains informed their faces, torsos, and limbs. They instinctively knew that the fear, surprise, love, hunger, and annoyance were different attitudes requiring different gestures. Emotions were less complex then and so were the gestures. In fact, speech is a relatively later advancement to the communication process and is mainly used to pass information, including facts and data. Body language or non-Verbal communication, on the other hand, has been around forever since times immemorial. Without relying on the spoken word for confirmation, the body's movements convey feelings, attitudes and thoughts. Like it or not, our body language, or non-verbal behavior, says more about us, our attitudes, moods and emotions, than we may want to reveal thereby.

DECODING THE MESSAGE WITHIN THE INITIAL FEW SECONDS

One can predict within the first few seconds of meeting someone how the other person is feeling about himself or about them. It happens due to the expression on his/her face and the way he/she moves his/her body. Whether he/she knows it or not, they are transmitting messages through their gestures and actions. If one walks into a room of strangers and from their stance, movements and expressions one can receive a number of messages about their feelings, moods, attitudes and emotions. Look at the teenage girl standing in the premises of the college. From her slouching shoulders, her lowered head and the way her hands fidget over her stomach, one with enough exposure to body language, can tell that this little wallflower is lacking in self-confidence.

Another student in the same premises is standing in a group of friends. She throws her head back as she laughs, her hands and arms move freely and openly and her feet are planted firmly, width apart. This student is projecting an image of self-confidence and *joie de vivre* that draws people to her.

How we position our head, shoulders, torso, arms, hands, legs and feet and how our eyes, mouth, fingers, and toes move, tell an observer more about our state of being, including our attitude, emotions, thoughts, and feelings, than any words we can say in actual.

MESSAGES ARE TRANSMITTED UNCONSCIOUSLY

Although we are enough capable of selecting gestures and actions to convey a particular message, our body also sends out signals without our consciousness. Dilated or contracted eye pupils and the unconscious movements of hands and feet are examples of signals that reveal an inner emotion that the person signaling, may prefer to conceal. For example, if it is noticed that the pupils of someone's eyes are dilated, it would be correct in assuming that whatever he's looking at is giving him pleasure. If the pupils are contracted the opposite is true. These individual signals can be easily overlooked or misidentified if they're taken out of their social context or if they're not identified as part of a cluster of gestures involving other parts of the body.

REMEMBER BEFORE INTERPRETING THE NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

The author of *What Every Body is Saying*, Joe Navarro, outlines 10 points crucial to guide the interpretation of Body Language. As one reads on these, keep the following in mind:

1) OBSERVE THE ENVIRONMENT: Researchers liken careful observation of body language than careful listening in a conversation. Both are equally important.

2) OBSERVE BODY LANGUAGE IN CONTEXT: The better one understands when someone uses body language is just as important as how they use it- body language can be situational.

3) LEARN TO RECOGNIZE AND DECODE USE OF BODY LANGUAGE THAT ARE UNIVERSAL: The more universal cues one can recognize and accurately interpret, the more sensitive one will be to all non-verbal cues and his/her interpretation will be more accurate.

4) LEARN TO RECOGNIZE BODY LANGUAGE THAT IS COMMON AND UNIQUE TO ONE INDIVIDUAL: Learn the quirks and ticks of the students and partners in order to best be able to use their overall body language as cues.

5) ATTEMPT TO ESTABLISH BASELINES: If we are aware of the "normal" body language of a person, we will be better able to interpret their emotions. If someone usually uses his hands frequently while speaking, we'll be alert to changes in emotion when they stop using the hands.

6) WATCH FOR BODY LANGUAGE CLUSTERS: Accuracy of interpreting body language will be greatly improved when we monitor multiple uses. We should not just look at someone's eyes but we must look at their mouth, their gestures, etc. and note parallels and incongruent behavior.

7) LOOK FOR SUDDEN CHANGES IN BEHAVIOR: Sudden changes indicate that someone is processing information or adapting or responding to a changing situation. This will allow us to prepare for the subsequent changes in body language and recognize new thoughts.

8) LEARN TO DETECT FALSE OR MISLEADING SIGNALS: It requires many hours of training to accomplish this, but only when we are aware of what a nonverbal cue does not mean, we can learn what it does.

9) KNOW HOW TO DISTINGUISH COMFORT AND DISCOMFORT: This will assist in interpreting all other emotions.

10) BE SUBTLE: People respond differently when they know they are being studied. We should not throw off our interpretations by throwing off the person we are watching.

DIRECTIONS TO COMMUNICATE POSITIVE ATTITUDE WITH NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION:

Studying and interpreting the non-verbal communication of others through the cues listed above will certainly be helpful to the learners in becoming more aware of its use. In addition, following these tips will ensure efficient and accurate nonverbal communication of the learner.

1) PRACTICING TOWARDS PERFECTION: If one is preparing for a presentation or a speech, the easiest preparation could be to practice in front of a mirror or someone of your friends. By doing such, the learner will be able catch otherwise subconscious body language as it happens and prevent it from occurring during your actual presentation or speech.

2) BALANCED EYE CONTACT: Best-selling author of "Never Eat Alone: And Other Secrets to Success, One Relationship at a Time," Keith Ferrazzi, recommended that maintaining a good balance of eye contact by holding focus 80-90 percent of the time. Any more than that, he says, is leering while any less than that is likely to illustrate disinterest.

3) ESTABLISHING ONESELF: Instead of entering rooms with smiles, which can make the speaker look unprofessional and diminish his/her credibility, establish a presence in the room first. Then, smile genuinely and naturally or not at all—a forced smile is transparent.

4) FINDING YOUR FOOTING: Plant the feet about six to eight inches apart with one slightly in front of the other and stand tall with stomach in, chest out and shoulders back. This will not only convey confidence and approachability but also create self-confidence by the sense of being rooted, grounded or balanced.

5) USING HANDS TO EXTEND VOICE: Like smiles, gestures are most effective when they occur organically. Motion with your palms up, use motions to demonstrate or elaborate what you are telling, don't point or touch your face or neck. Remember that excessive use of gestures can be distracting.

6) ENGAGEMENT IN CONVERSATION: Let others know that you are listening by nodding or tilting your head on occasion and make sure your feet are pointed towards them. Don't cross your arms or put your hands on your hips, and if you are wearing a watch don't look at while you are talking to others.

7) RESPECTING THE BUBBLE: For most North Americans, a comfortable distance between people in casual and personal conversation is about 12 to 36 inches and four-and-a-half to five feet in professional conversation. Also be mindful that intimate, protective, aggressive or confidential conversations often take place in the "intimate zone"—the six-12 inch range.

8) ASKING QUESTIONS: If someone is expressing body language that is inconsistent with their verbal message, ask them to clarify. Be prepared for others to do the same to you.

9) COPYING CAT: Many body language experts, like Ferrazzi, recommend mirroring the gestures of the person with whom you are speaking "By adjusting your behavior to mirror the person you are talking to, he will automatically experience more comfort," says Ferrazzi. "It shows that you're particularly sensitive to other people's emotional temperament."

10) KNOWING THAT NOTHING IS CERTAIN: Apart from this, there is much analysis of body language available and it is as twice as many interpretations generally discussed. So, these should be viewed as guides, not definitive conclusions. A person's overall behavior and the context of conversations can be weightier than a single gesture seen in isolation. And of course, accept that no matter what you do, someone somewhere will be offended by your body language.

Non-verbal communication is the extension of thought. It has been used for centuries—predating common language between cultures. It's an important part of effective communication—both in getting our own message across and in determining the messages of others. Non-verbal communication is how we know when someone is listening, it shows we know someone likes us or finds us boring, it's how we know someone is being honest or feeling an emotion, it's how we know someone is reacting to what's being said. Knowledge is power and the eyes have it—take the time and effort to become familiar with others' exhibitions of body language, especially in the global context, and to become familiar with your own.

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