

Nonverbal Communication

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION can complement, contradict, or accentuate vocal communication. Verbal language conveys thoughts. Meanwhile, nonverbal language conveys emotions. Nonverbal communication uses gestures, facial expressions, posture, body language, and other non-audible signals to send and receive wordless messages.



Objectives:



1. Describe elements of physical nonverbal communication.
2. List and explain elements of paralanguage.
3. Identify guidelines for using nonverbal behaviors during presentations.

Key Terms:



emphasis

hand gestures

inflection

nonverbal

communication (NVC)

orientation

paralanguage

pauses

posture

proximity

volume

Physical Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is the act of conveying meaningful interpersonal messages through channels that are independent of words. Studies have shown that most messages are transmitted by nonverbal and paralanguage communication. Nonverbal communication behaviors are innate and learned. Therefore, people convey nonverbal communication behaviors subconsciously and consciously. Also, nonverbal meanings vary based on cultural context. For example, the “O.K.” hand gesture has a positive and affirming meaning in the United States, but it has a derogatory and insulting meaning in the United Kingdom.

BODY LANGUAGE

Body language is nonverbal communication via posture, gestures, eye movements, facial expressions, head and foot movements, and personal space. Your body position or posture

sends wordless messages that convey emotions and moods. Proximity, orientation, posture, and hand gestures affect nonverbal communication.

- ◆ **Proximity** is how close a person's body is positioned to another person.
- ◆ **Orientation** is the direction or angle of a person's body in relation to another person's body.
- ◆ **Posture** is the "shape" (e.g., erect, slumped, crouched, bent, languid, and fluid) a body takes at any given moment.
- ◆ **Hand gestures** are the activity of the hands while communicating. Some examples of expressive hand gesturing are wringing, shaking, clapping, encouraging, halting, and pointing. "Hello" and "good-bye" are nonverbal greetings expressed by waving. Exposed palms show openness to communicate, saying that nothing is being concealed.



FIGURE 1. The open palm of the man speaking is a gesture of openness, showing he has nothing to conceal.

Eye Contact

Eye contact and movement are other forms of nonverbal communication. Eye contact is the amount of time a person looks, or does not look, directly into another person's eyes. Looking directly into a person's eyes can send a message of sincerity; winking can express jest; and rolling one's eyes may show disrespect or disbelief.



Facial Expressions

Facial expressions (e.g., smile, frown, wink, cry, and wrinkling of one's nose) are nonverbal messages conveyed by a person's eyebrows, forehead, mouth, eyes, and nose. For instance, a raised eyebrow is considered a submissive greeting. Happiness, disappointment, sadness, and surprise are some easily recognized facial expressions.



FIGURE 2. Facial expressions can reveal a wide range of emotions.

Paralanguage

Paralanguage is the nonverbal use of your voice to communicate inflection, emphasis, and volume.

- ◆ **Inflection** is the change of pitch or tone that adds an emotional dimension to a statement.
- ◆ **Emphasis** is stress placed on particular words to affect the meaning of a sentence.
- ◆ **Volume** is how loudly or softly words are spoken.

Pauses and sounds are elements of paralanguage. **Pauses** are moments of silence in a dialogue or presentation. Non-lingual sounds give hints about the sender's message. A sigh can convey exhaustion, fatigue, exasperation, frustration, or relief. However, a sigh may convey impatience based on the context in which it is uttered.

Nonverbal Communication in Presentations

Effective presenters communicate significant and valuable messages using verbal and nonverbal communication. Presenters must be aware of nonverbal communication during a presentation to avoid giving mixed messages, such as by speaking confidently but acting apprehensively. The nonverbal communication of effective presenters can help convey an impression of leadership and confidence. Some nonverbal communication techniques to be mindful of during presentations include proximity, orientation, and motion.

- ◆ **Proximity**—Nonverbal respect is shown by not entering the 2- to 3-foot intimate space around a person.
- ◆ **Orientation**—Facing the audience most of the time is recommended. The presenter must avoid power struggles with audience members. To defuse an escalating confrontation, it may be best to stand at an angle to the agitated person rather than facing the individual directly. A presenter always faces the person who asks a question and avoids folding arms or turning his or her back after a question is asked, so as to not convey a defensive reaction or rejection toward the speaker.
- ◆ **Motion**—It may appear more intimate to lean slightly toward an audience or an individual rather than remaining totally erect. A presenter should stand in one place initially. As the speaker and audience loosen up, moving around a bit can be relaxing. But excessive movement may convey restlessness or nervousness. On the other hand, standing too rigidly or in too stationary a position may communicate that the speaker is intimidated.
- ◆ **Legs**—Sitting with legs crossed can seem to create a barrier between the presenter and the audience. Floor or leg “wagging” when seated is also unacceptable for presenters.

POSTURE

The speaker's posture sends wordless messages. The best speaking posture is to sit or stand tall with slightly flexed knees, the rib cage pulled up, shoulders squared, and the head held up. The speaker should feel relaxed, but a presenter should not slouch, slump, or sit or stand too rigidly. Being relaxed conveys the message of being in control and not feeling anxious.

HAND GESTURES

Hand gestures should be smooth. They should not compete for attention with what the speaker is saying. Letting hands hang to one's side or rest on a table or podium is good. Excessive hand movement can communicate nervousness, jitters, and a sense of uneasiness. However, some studies state that occasional broad, sweeping hand gestures convey leadership power.

Wringing the hands or clenching fists are unacceptable gestures that convey negative emotions. Pointing fingers directly at people, especially in a defensive mode when rebuking an objection, is not advisable. Picking or biting hands conveys nervousness. If a speaker places his or her hands in a "steeple" or in a "thinker" position, it tends to convey the message that the speaker is thoughtful or is considering options.



BROADENING AWARENESS...

AMAZING ASPECTS: Gesture Interpretations

Human communications are complex. Just as verbal language is unique to a region or culture, so is body language.

- A smile is interpreted the same worldwide. But spitting is another matter. In North America and Europe, spitting is an expression of contempt. However, among the Masai of Kenya, spitting is an affectionate gesture.
- In North America, making eye contact is a sign of trust. In Japan, eye contact is brief, only long enough to acknowledge a person. Then the appropriate eye level for the duration of the conversation is on the person's neck.
- In the United States, a thumb pointed up indicates approval. The opposite, a thumb down, shows disapproval. In Australia, Iran, and some other Muslim countries, pointing the thumb is considered vulgar.
- The American "O.K." sign, touching the tip of your thumb to the tip of your index finger, signifies approval. In Japan, it is a gesture that means money. In southern France, the "O.K." sign indicates something is worthless.
- Shaking your head from side to side in America means "no," but nodding it up and down signals "yes." In Bulgaria, from side to side means "yes," and up and down means "no."

EYE CONTACT

Adequate eye contact should be maintained. However, it is important for the speaker not to stare. Typically, 5 to 7 seconds of concentrated eye contact is considered the comfortable maximum. The presenter needs to look into the eyes of the audience to enhance communication; staring at the mouths or sides of faces conveys distraction. When faced with a situation that requires extended eye contact, as when listening to a long question, the presenter may focus on one point of the person's eyebrow rather than focusing on the eye, as this may be more comfortable and is perceived as maintaining eye contact.

When speaking to a large audience, it is best to avoid excessive scanning, as if trying to look at each person individually. This conveys a message of nervousness. Instead, a sweeping approach is preferred. If good eye contact with people in the front is maintained, people in the back will feel as if the speaker is looking at the entire audience as a single group of people. Of course, the presenter looks at people when they ask questions and when the speaker answers questions.

FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

Facial expressions are a major form of nonverbal body language. The speaker will want to keep a neutral facial expression, smiling at times to emphasize points and maintain listener interest. The presenter's genuine emotions are better reflected through a relaxed face. You will not want to convey negative emotions by frowning or furrowing your eyebrow. As the speaker you must stay alert, not conveying boredom through yawning or closing your eyes.

PARALANGUAGE GUIDELINES

In presentations and general conversations, paralinguage includes voice inflection, emphasis, and volume.

- ◆ Inflection—The speaker needs to maintain a steady tone of voice, avoid using sarcastic inflection, and avoid ending sentences with a higher pitch as if turning a statement into a question.
- ◆ Emphasis—Prior to the presentation, the speaker should select which concepts or facts from the message should be emphasized. Then the speaker should orally practice the message using proper emphasis and tones.



FIGURE 3. A professional-looking man delivers a speech using facial expressions and sincerity. Holding note cards is an acceptable practice, but it will limit his freedom to use hand gestures.

- ◆ Volume—In a presentation, the speaker should speak slightly louder than normal to ensure that the entire audience can hear. Speaking too softly may convey uncertainty.

PAUSES AND OTHER SOUNDS

The speaker should pause occasionally, using silence to signal a move from one topic or concept to another. Using a pause in conjunction with thoughtful hand gestures helps convey the process of thinking. Avoid sighing, groaning, or any other sounds that may convey negative emotions or a loss of control. Also avoid verbal filler pauses as “aaa” or “ummm.”

Summary:



Nonverbal communication conveys information without the use of words. Body language is nonverbal communication via posture, gestures, eye movements, facial expressions, head and foot movements, and personal space.

Paralanguage is the nonverbal use of your voice to communicate inflection, emphasis, and volume. The nonverbal communication of effective presenters can help convey an impression of leadership and confidence. Some nonverbal communication techniques to be mindful of during presentations include proximity, orientation, and motion. The speaker’s posture sends wordless messages. Typically, the best speaking posture is to sit or stand tall with slightly flexed knees, the rib cage pulled up, shoulders squared, and the head held up.

Hand gestures should be smooth. They should not compete for attention with what the speaker is saying. The presenter needs to look into the eyes of the audience to enhance communication, and the presenter’s genuine emotions are better reflected through a relaxed face. Studies have shown that most messages are transmitted by nonverbal and paralanguage communication.

Checking Your Knowledge:



1. In what ways does your body express nonverbal communication?
2. Explain how proximity, orientation, and posture affect nonverbal communication.
3. What are three ways in which your voice communicates with paralanguage?
4. What facial expressions affect nonverbal communication?
5. How can pauses be effective and obstructive in your presentation?

Expanding Your Knowledge:



Being an effective speaker requires verbal and nonverbal communication skills. To achieve success as a good presenter, you need to practice speaking and using effective nonverbal skills. Choose one of your favorite books or short stories to read aloud in front of a mirror or with a friend. Use body language and other forms of nonverbal communication to interpret the author's message. Good verbal and nonverbal communication skills will help you in school, socially, and professionally.

Web Links:



Nonverbal Communication

<http://www.spring.org.uk/2007/05/busting-myth-93-of-communication-is.php>

Nonverbal Communication Tips

http://www.lifescrypt.com/soul/self/growth/nonverbal_communication_tips_that_get_your_point_across.aspx?gclid=CJeu5_Gl6bMCFcU-Mgod5DYA1Q&trans=1&du=1&ef_id=Stivzko-KSYAAEcho2wAAADA:20121125043702:s

Speaking Without Words

https://www.rpi.edu/dept/advising/american_culture/social_skills/nonverbal_communication/reading_exercise.htm

Nonverbal Communication

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122426675804545129.html>

Communication Modes

<http://www2.andrews.edu/~tidwell/bsad560/NonVerbal.html>