

Louder Than Words: The Hidden Power of Nonverbal Communication in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

It is estimated that people communicate at least as much nonverbally (i.e., without words) as they do verbally. It is important for leaders to understand the meanings of nonverbal cues from organization members in the workplace. In this article, I examine the four kinds of nonverbal communication: kinesics, proxemics, paralanguage, and chronemics.

We communicate as many messages nonverbally as we do verbally. Nonverbal communication – the way we stand, the distance we maintain from another person, the way we walk, the way we fold our arms and wrinkle our brow, our eye contact, being late for a meeting – conveys messages to others. However, we need not perform an act for nonverbal communication to occur. We communicate by our manner of dress and appearance, the automobile we drive, and the office we occupy.

Nonverbal communication comes in many forms. The four kinds of nonverbal communication are kinesics, proxemics, paralanguage, and chronemics (Hickson, 2010). They are important topics for leaders attempting to understand the meanings of nonverbal signals from organization members.

Kinesics

Kinesics is the study of body movements, including posture (Bowden, 2011; Furnham, 2011; Walters (2011). Body movements or kinesics include gestures, facial expressions, eye behavior, touching, and any other movement of the limbs and body. Body shape, physique, posture, height, weight, hair, and skin color are the physical characteristics associated with kinesics.

Gestures reveal how people are feeling. People tend to gesture more when they are enthusiastic, excited, and energized. People tend to gesture less when they are demoralized, nervous, or concerned about the impression they are making. Hand

gestures, such as frequent movements to express approval and palms spread outward to indicate perplexity, provide meaningful hints to communication.

Facial expressions convey a wealth of information. The particular look on a person's face and movements of the person's head provide reliable cues as to approval, disapproval, or disbelief. When people begin to experience an emotion, their facial muscles are triggered. The six universal expressions that most cultures recognize are happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust. Smiling, for example, typically represents warmth, happiness, or friendship, whereas frowning conveys dissatisfaction or anger. However, smiling can be real or false, interpreted by differences in the strength and length of the smile, the openness of the eyes, and the symmetry of expression.

Eye contact is a strong nonverbal cue that serves four functions in communication (Hickson, 2010). First, eye contact regulates the flow of communication by signaling the beginning and end of conversation. Second, eye contact facilitates and monitors feedback, because it reflects interest and attention. Third, eye contact conveys emotion. Fourth, eye contact relates to the type of relationship between communicators. One can gauge liking and interest by the frequency and duration of time spent looking. Eye and face contact displays one's willingness to listen and acknowledgement of the other person's worth. Eye contact does not indicate truthfulness, as some people believe. It does show interest in the other person's point of view. Prolonged and intense eye contact usually indicate feelings of hostility, defensiveness, or romantic interest. Lack of interest may be indicated through contractions of the pupils or wandering eyes.

Touching is a powerful vehicle for conveying such emotions as warmth, comfort, agreement, approval, reassurance, and physical attraction. Generally, the amount and frequency of touching demonstrate closeness, familiarity, and degree of liking. A lot of touching usually indicates strong liking for another person. It should be noted that men and women interpret touching differently. Concerns about sexual harassment and sexism have greatly limited the use of touching in the workplace (Greenwood, 2010).

Posture is another widely used cue as to a person's attitude. Leaning toward another person suggests a favorable attitude toward the message one is trying to communicate. Leaning backward communicates the opposite. Standing erect is generally interpreted as an indicator of self-confidence, while slouching conveys the opposite. Posture and other nonverbal cues can also affect the impressions we make on others. Interviewers, for example, tend to respond more favorably to job applicants whose nonverbal cues, such as eye contact and erect posture, are positive than to those who display negative nonverbal cues, such as looking down or slouching (Davis, 2011).

Another nonverbal cue is mode of dress. Much of what we say about ourselves to others comes from the way we dress. Despite the general trend toward casual clothing in the workplace, higher-status people tend to dress more formally than lower-ranking organization members. For example, suppose you joined a new organization and on your first day, you entered a room full of employees. How would you know which person was the leader? Increasingly, people who specialize in recruiting top executives are coming to the conclusion that the old adage "clothes make the man or woman" is a particularly good nonverbal cue as to who is in charge. Somehow, the leader is the person who always seems to wear the best tailored suit that flatters his or her physique, or the nicest shirt or blouse, or the shiniest shoes, and the best-looking briefcase. Top executives, such as

Donald Trump (2011), admits that he learned the hard way the importance of wearing the right clothes. The payoff is that when you look like a leader, people will often treat you like one and so over time this increases your chances of promotion and success (Navarro, 2011).

Proxemics

Proxemics is the way people perceive and use space, including seating arrangements, physical space, and conversational distance (personal space) (Hall, 1983; Harrigan, 2009). For example, how close do you stand to someone in normal conversation?

Edward Hall (1992), an anthropologist, suggests that in the United States there are definable *personal space zones*.

1. *Intimate Zone (0 to 2 Feet)*. To be this close, we must have an intimate association with the other person or be socially domineering.
2. *Personal Zone (2 to 4 Feet)*. Within this zone, we should be fairly well acquainted with the other individual.
3. *Social Zone (4 to 12 Feet)*. In this zone, we are at least minimally acquainted with the other person and have a definite purpose for seeking to communicate. Most behavior in the business world occurs in this zone.
4. *Public Zone (Beyond 12 Feet)*. When people are more than 12 feet away, we treat them as if they did not exist. We may look at others from this distance, provided our gaze does not develop into a stare.

Related to the notion of personal space zones is the concept of physical space. For example, employees of higher status have better offices (more spacious, finer carpets and furniture, and more windows) than do employees of lower status. Furthermore, the offices of higher-status employees are better protected than those of lower-status employees. Top executive areas are typically sealed off from intruders by several doors, assistants, and secretaries. Moreover, the higher the employee's status, the easier they find it to invade the physical space of lower-status employees. A superior typically feels free to walk right in on subordinates, whereas subordinates are more cautious and ask permission or make an appointment before visiting a superior.

Seating arrangements is another aspect of proxemics. You can seat people in certain positions according to your purpose in communication. To encourage cooperation, you should seat the other person beside you, facing the same direction. To facilitate direct and open communication, seat the other person at right angles from you. This allows for more honest disclosure. When taking a competitive position with someone, seat the person directly across from you. Furthermore, high-ranking people assert their higher status by sitting at the head of rectangular tables, a position that has become associated with importance. It also enables high-ranking organization members to maintain eye contact with those over whom they are responsible.

Paralanguage

Paralanguage consists of variations in speech, such as voice quality, volume, tempo, pitch, nonfluencies (for example, uh, um, ah), laughing, yawning, and the like (Jacobi, 2009; Young, 2008). People make attributions about the sender by deciphering paralanguage cues. Aspects of speech such as pitch, volume, voice quality, and speech rate may communicate confidence, nervousness, anger, or enthusiasm. Intelligence is often judged by how people speak.

Chronemics

Chronemics is concerned with the use of time, such as being late or early, keeping others waiting, and other relationships between time and status (Hickson, 2010). For example, being late for a meeting may convey any number of different messages including carelessness, lack of involvement, and lack of ambition. Yet, at the same time, the late arrival of high-status persons reaffirms their superiority relative to subordinates. Their tardiness symbolizes power or having a busy schedule.

Conclusion

Despite the implications of the information about nonverbal communication, be aware that many nonverbal messages are ambiguous. For example, a smile usually indicates agreement and warmth, but it can also indicate nervousness, contempt, deceit, fear, compliance, resignation – even, on occasion, anger. Nevertheless, nonverbal messages are a rich source of information. Your own nonverbal behavior can be useful in responding to others, making stronger connections with others, and conveying certain impressions about yourself.

As you read this material ask yourself, “What can I do to present myself more favorably to those around me in the workplace?” Specifically, what can I do nonverbally to cultivate the impression that I have the qualities to be a good leader?” There are several things you can do nonverbally that will enhance your leadership image. People who are self confident speak and write with assurance. They also project their leadership image through various nonverbal cues. Following are some suggestions (see Table 1).

Table 1

Nonverbal Behaviors to Enhance Your Leadership Image

Maintain eye contact and smile at those with whom you speak.
 Nod your head to indicate that you are listening when someone is speaking to you.
 Use hand gestures in a relaxed, nonmechanical manner.
 Stand and sit erect. Do not slouch.
 Do not cower when confronted. Stand up straight.
 Be neat, well groomed, and wear clean, well-tailored clothes.

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