Nonverbal Communication

Another important element of the communication process is nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication is interpersonal communication through nonlinguistic means. In the verbal communication process, the verbal and nonverbal messages need to be consistent with one another, when they contradict with one another, the nonverbal message typically expresses true feelings more accurately than does the verbal element.

The nonverbal element of the communication process is comprised of several factors including appearance, facial expressions, eye contrast, gestures, touch, posture, voice, silence, time, and space.

Non-verbal communication is everything except your words.

Appearance

Appearance is one aspect of nonverbal communication that has important implications for both written and verbal communication.

In verbal communication one’s physical appearance affects the message. Elements such as clothing, hairstyle, overall cleanliness, jewelry, cosmetics, body size, and body shape transmit messages. A person’s physical appearance can affect the impression others receive of his/her credibility, honesty, trustworthiness, competence, judgment or status.

Facial Expressions

One’s facial area (eyes, eye brows, forehead, mouth, and chin) is more capable of communicating nonverbally than any other part of the human body. The face sends messages about one’s happiness, sadness, anger, frustration, disgust, fear, or surprise. In fact, we generally do not have to ask people if they are happy or sad – their faces reveal their present emotional state.

Eye contact

While eyes play an important role in communicating emotions, eye contact is used in quite a different way in the communication process. Establishing and/or maintaining eye contact signals that a person desires to communicate – that the communication channel is open. Eye contact can also be used to signal a person’s desire to be included in a
conversation, as well as to make another person somewhat uncomfortable by putting him/her under stress.

Breaking eye contact also sends several signals. Among these are the telling of an untruthful statement, an uncomfortableness with the communication topic or situation, a desire for the communication encounter to end, or an acknowledgement of status difference between the sender and the receiver.

Direct eye contact is a compliment to most people and builds trust. But be aware of the customs of people from other countries. It may be a sign of disrespect.

Eye contact is one of the most important aspects of dealing with others, especially people we've just met. Maintaining good eye contact shows respect and interest in what they have to say.

Eyes can tell you a lot about someone, so watch eye movements when you ask someone a question. It is usual that if someone goes de-focused or looks up, they are going into a memory or into imagination. If they look down and to the right, they are going into a feeling. If their eyes move to the right or left, they are often talking to themselves or listening very carefully. It's useful to pick up eye clues, because it can help you know where another person is going in his thinking!

Eyebrow muscle draws the eyebrows down and toward the center of the face if someone is annoyed. If someone is empathetic and caring during dialogue the eyebrows will not show the annoyed facial grimace.

**Gestures**

The use of gestures in the verbal communication process can also add meaning to the message that the sender is transmitting. While some gestures (clenched fist, foot stomping) indicate anger, others can indicate nervousness (foot tapping, finger tapping). Head nodding indicates agreement while head shaking indicates disagreement. Head nodding also signals the receiver’s desire for the sender to continue talking. Keeping one’s arms closed tends to signal uncomfortableness while open arms tend to reveal openness and acceptance.

The thumbs-up gesture is a positive sign in most of the world, but in some cultures it considered a rude gesture.

Gestures do not have universal meaning in all cultures. For example, an “A-OK” gesture (circle made with the thumb and forefinger) is considered by Latin Americans to be a sign of contempt.

The V-shaped hand gesture with the index finger and middle finger may mean victory or peace in the United States, but in some countries it could be interpreted as an obscene gesture.
Shaking your head up-and-down means "yes" in the United States and left-to-right means "no." In some parts of the world the meanings are just the opposite.

**Touching**
This involves the use of touch to impart meaning as in a handshake, a pat on the back, an arm around the shoulder, a kiss, or a hug.

Touch can communicate many different things, such as affection, playfulness, hostility, decisiveness, solidarity, assurance and urgency, to name just a few. There are four universally recognized aspects of touching, all of which communicate varying emotions and intentions. The first is the **professional touch**, used, for example, by businesspeople, between a professor and his/her students and two people meeting for the first time. The second is the **social/polite touch**, used by acquaintances who wish to convey friendly but slightly detached appreciation and affection. The third is the **friendly touch**, which could be used by close friends or close businesspeople and colleagues congratulating one another on an accomplishment. The fourth and most intense touch is known as **intimate touch**, which is usually reserved for couples expressing love and affection through kissing, hugging, or caressing. The amount and nature of touching considered appropriate for the situation varies from culture to culture.

Individuals from an English, German or Swedish culture tend to use touch less as a rule, and rely upon the physical setting to set the tone of a given situation. However, those with Asian, African American, Italian or Latino heritage incorporate a much larger amount of touch into their personal exchanges, using elaborate, extended handshakes, embraces or even kisses to convey their affection and gratitude. Many misunderstandings and much discomfort can arise from a situation that places two people from drastically different cultures together. It is always best to attempt to adapt oneself as comfortably as possible to a situation to decrease the possibility of personal insult and awkwardness.

**Posture**
The posture displayed by individuals in the communication process also transmits signals about a variety of things, including status, confidence, interest, and openness. Higher-stature people often stand more erect and hold their heads higher than do lower-status people. In a sitting position, however, higher-status people are likely to have a more relaxed posture than lower-status people who tend to sit in a rather rigid, erect position.

Self-confident individuals usually stand more erect than those lacking confidence. Those interested in a conversation tend to lean forward toward those with whom they are communicating, while those lacking interest may slump down.

**Voice**
The meaning of words can be altered significantly by changing the intonation of one's voice. Think of how many ways you can say "no"—you could express mild doubt, terror, amazement, and anger among other emotions. Vocal meanings vary across cultures.
In many cases, voice mannerism – pitch, rhythm, range, rate, nonwords (such as “ah,” “um,” “uh”), and pauses – communicate more than the actual words.

Voice mannerism also communicates messages about the sender’s emotional state. Excitement is communicated by a high-pitched voice and rapid rate of speaking. Messages communicated in anger are often accompanied by a loud speaking voice, while seriousness and sadness are communicated by a low-pitched voice. Pauses may indicate uncertainty on the part of the sender.

The nonverbal messages communicated by the sound of the human voice can provide valuable information during communication. There are eight attributes of speech that provide especially important vocal cues to the listener;

Loudness. Without enough loudness you cannot be heard. However shouting or a harsh voice may be perceived as disruptive or insulting. Many times, lowering your voice almost to a whisper will help you make a point better than shouting.

Pitch – Most factual communication includes moderate changes in the pitch of your voice. A monotone involves little or no change and may be perceived as indicating apathy or boredom. A high pitch voice may be perceived as indicationg excitement. A low-pitched voice may be perceived as indicating anger.

Rate – A slow rate of speech may frustrate the listener. An increasing rate may be perceived as the result of increasing intensity. A fast rate may be perceived as an indicator of nervousness and it may be difficult to understand.

Quality – This is the characteristic that permits you to differentiate one voice from another.

Regularity – The regular or rhythmic voice will normally make you sound more confident or authoritative. Irregular speech might be perceived as more thoughtful or uncertain depending on your words and other nonverbal messages.

Articulation – Speaking each word clearly makes you easier to understand.

Pronunciation – To be understood, you must also use the correct sounds and emphasis in pronouncing each word. Mispronouncing a word might be perceived as indicator of ignorance or incompetence.

Silence – The absence of sound can also send a strong message. Silence gives you an opportunity to listen. You can obtain useful information from the listening to what one says and how he/she says it.
Silence
As a type of nonverbal communication, silence has implications for both written and verbal messages.

In verbal encounters, silence on the part of the receiver can communicate several things. It can communicate that the receiver wishes the sender to continue talking. A receiver who outranks the sender in the organization might use silence to make the sender feel uncomfortable. A receiver’s silence can also signal that he/she is contemplating a response before verbalizing it.

Time
The way individuals use their time also communicates nonverbally. Arriving late for an appointment may diminish the importance that the visitor is perceived to attach to the appointment. Making someone wait for a scheduled appointment can also be interpreted to mean that the visitor is not very important to the person with whom he/she has the appointment.

Cultures vary widely in the way they interpret the meaning attached to the use of time. Americans believe in arriving on time for an appointment. People of some other cultures are not affected by a visitor who arrives an hour late for an appointment.

Space
People in different cultures require different amounts of physical distance for communication. Too little or too much space between people can have a negative effect.

- A space closer than 1.5 feet is normally considered to be for intimate communication. If you attempt to conduct any significant communication from any distance closer than 1.5 feet with somebody not very close could annoy or even make him/her nervous.
- Allow a distance of 1.5 to 4.0 feet for close interpersonal contact only.
- Allow a distance of 4.0 to 12.0 feet for most business transactions or consultations. Note that four feet is about the distance across the typical conference table.
- Communicate only briefly or formally at a distance beyond 12.0 feet.