

Communication Skills, Part 2 – Non- Verbal Communication Skills

“It is not only what you say ... that is important, but it's how you say it that can make the difference... Nonverbal messages are an essential component of communication in the teaching process.” (1) “Nonverbal communication, conveyed through facial expressions, body language, pace, intensity and tone of voice gives you a powerful means for self expression.” (2)

“Good communication skills can help you in both your personal and professional life. While verbal and written communication skills are important, research has shown that nonverbal behaviors make up a large percentage of our daily interpersonal communication. How can you improve your nonverbal communication skills? The following top ten tips for nonverbal communication can help you learn to read the nonverbal signals of other people and enhance your own ability to communicate effectively.” (3)

Some major areas of nonverbal behaviors to explore are:

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| Eye contact | The visual sense is dominant for most people, and therefore especially important in nonverbal communication. <i>Is this source of contact missing, too intense or just right?</i> |
| Facial expressions | Universal facial expressions signify anger, fear, sadness, joy and disgust. <i>What is the face you show? Is it mask-like and unexpressive, or emotionally present and filled with interest?</i> |
| Posture and body orientation | Your posture—including the pose, stance and bearing of the way you sit, slouch, stand, lean, bend, hold and move your body in space-affects the way people perceive you. <i>Does your body look stiff and immobile, or relaxed? Are shoulders tense and raised, or slightly sloped? Is your abdomen tight, or is there a little roundness to your belly that indicates your breathing is relaxed?</i> |
| Proximity | Cultural norms dictate a comfortable distance for interaction between you and someone else. You should look for signals of discomfort caused by invading someone's space. Some of these are: Rocking, Leg swinging, Tapping, Gaze aversion |
| Touch | How do you like to be touched? Who do you like to have touching you? |
| Humor | Humor is often overlooked as a communication tool. Laughter can release stress and tension for both parties. You should develop the ability to laugh at yourself. It can foster a friendly environment; but be careful! |
| Intensity | Do you or the person you are communicating with seem flat, cool, and disinterested, or over-the-top and melodramatic? |
| Tone of Voice | Does the voice project warmth, confidence, and delight, or is it strained and blocked? Your tone of voice can convey a wealth of information, ranging from enthusiasm to disinterest to anger. Start noticing how your tone of voice affects how others respond to you and try using tone of voice to emphasize ideas that you want to communicate. For example, if you want to show genuine interest in something, express your enthusiasm by using an animated tone of voice. |
| Timing and pace | When you or someone you care about makes an important statement, does the response come too quickly or too slowly? Is there an easy flow of information back and forth? |
| Sounds that convey understanding | Do you use or pick up on sounds from others that indicate caring or concern? |

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| Confused about signals? | If you are confused about another person's nonverbal signals, don't be afraid to ask questions. A good idea is to repeat back your interpretation of what has been said and ask for clarification. An example of this might be, "So what you are saying is that..." |
| Incongruent Behaviors | If someone's words do not match their nonverbal behaviors, you should pay careful attention. For example, someone might tell you they are happy while frowning and staring at the ground. Research has shown that when words fail to match up with nonverbal signals, people tend to ignore what has been said and focus instead on nonverbal expressions of moods, thoughts, and emotions. |
| Consider Context | When you are communicating with others, always consider the situation and the context in which the communication occurs. Some situations require more formal behaviors that might be interpreted very differently in any other setting. Consider whether or not nonverbal behaviors are appropriate for the context. If you are trying to improve your own nonverbal communication, concentrate on ways to make your signals match the level of formality necessitated by the situation. |
| Misread Signals | According to some, a firm handshake indicates a strong personality while a weak handshake is taken as a lack of fortitude. This example illustrates an important point about the possibility of misreading nonverbal signals. A limp handshake might actually indicate something else entirely, such as arthritis. Always remember to look for groups of behavior. A person's overall demeanor is far more telling than a single gesture viewed in isolation. |
| Use Signals | Remember that verbal and nonverbal communication work together to convey a message. You can improve your spoken communication by using nonverbal signals and gestures that reinforce and support what you are saying. This can be especially useful when making presentations or when speaking to a large group of people. |
| Group Signals | A single gesture can mean any number of things, or maybe even nothing at all. The key to accurately reading nonverbal behavior is to look for groups of signals that reinforce a common point. If you place too much emphasis on just one signal out of many, you might come to an inaccurate conclusion about what a person is trying to communicate. |

Practice, Practice, Practice

Some people just seem to have a knack for using nonverbal communication effectively and correctly interpreting signals from others. These people are often described as being able to "read people." In reality, you can build this skill by paying careful attention to nonverbal behavior and practicing different types of nonverbal communication with others. By noticing nonverbal behavior and practicing your own skills, you can dramatically improve your communication abilities.

References used for this document:

- (1) <http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/commun-1.htm>
- (2) http://www.helpguide.org/mental/eq6_nonverbal_communication.htm
- (3) <http://psychology.about.com/od/nonverbalcommunication/tp/nonverbaltips.htm>