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# The Silent Communicator

Further than Figures

The Silent Communicator

Body language says much more than you might think.

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"Boy, that cashier sure was in a bad mood!" said my friend as we walked out of a popular clothing store. "Why do you say that?" I questioned. "Was she rude to you?" "No, she was very efficient, but she didn't make eye contact, nor did she smile," my friend replied.

Was my friend jumping to an unfair conclusion? No matter what your response, the key factor is that our body language — our facial expressions and voice — send a powerful message that far outweighs any other aspect of communication. But don't just take my word for it. Let's look at some empirical research.

In 1967, Dr. Albert Mehrabian, a professor at the University of California, established what has now become a classic statistic for the effectiveness of spoken communication. Through his research, he determined that 55 per cent of meaning in a conversation lies in visual message, 38 per cent is paralinguistic (the way the words are said), and only seven per cent is in the actual spoken words. The visual message includes things such as posture, gestures, and facial expressions; paralinguistics defines characteristics such as the tone, pace, pitch, and volume of voice. These factors account for 93 per cent of the meaning we convey to others.

Additional supporting research conducted by Michael Argyle at Oxford University in 1970 further concluded that non-verbal cues, when combined with verbal cues of almost identical strength, have 4.3 times as much impact as the verbal cues alone. Which means that the old adage "Actions speak louder than words" is truer than you might have realized.

Paradoxically, body language or non-verbal communication, though silent, is a noisy blabbermouth. As a professional seeking to improve your effectiveness in communicating with others, there are two aspects to take into account. First, consider what your body language is saying to others. Are you putting forth a confident and clear message, or are you confusing others through self-defeating mannerisms and mixed messages? Second, consider what others are really telling you through their non-verbal cues. Are you reading their visual and auditory messages, or are you missing the mark? Let's take a closer look at a few aspects of body language.

## Eye contact

Perhaps the most potent non-verbal communicator is eye contact and the direction of our gaze. Eye contact can be used to seek information, show interest, invite interaction, provide feedback, and even threaten. In fact, when we greet people, we not only look at them, but also move our eyebrows up and down quickly once. This "eyebrow flash" is a worldwide indicator of recognition and greeting. Generally speaking, too much eye contact (staring or frequent glances at another person) is often perceived as demonstrating a sense of

superiority, a wish to insult, or lack of respect. Too little eye contact can be interpreted as not paying attention, or being impolite, insincere, or shy. And lowering one's eyes is usually taken to be a sign of submission.

## Facial expressions

The smile is probably the most positive and universally used expression. Smiles are normally used as greeting gestures, and to indicate varying degrees of pleasure, happiness, and amusement. In some contexts, they can show sarcasm or other negative feelings. Disgust and contempt are shown by a narrowing of the eyes and a grimacing mouth. Anger is most often characterized by frowning, scowling, or gritting of teeth. Interest is often indicated by the head cock — holding the head at an angle to the subject of interest.

## Voice

A voice that is too loud can imply a wish to dominate, and one that is too soft can indicate submissiveness, neither of which is conducive to a relationship of trust. Similarly, a voice that is too harsh can put off a listener, and one that is too smooth can create suspicion. Voices that are nasal or breathless are not likely to inspire confidence. And speed of talking is just as important — fast talkers are perceived as just that.

## Body posture

It is possible to tell a great deal about a person's state of mind from their body posture. For example, those who are feeling optimistic, self-assured or forceful tend to adopt more erect body postures than those who are feeling disheartened, shy, or obedient. Positive attitudes tend to be mirrored in those leaning forward, negative or hostile attitudes are often indicated in those leaning backwards. Arms folded across the chest can signal an unsympathetic attitude, while arms held loosely by the sides of the body can be interpreted as openness and accessibility.

However, recognize that all these aspects of non-verbal communication represent generalities. You cannot use another person's body language as a definitive sign of how they are feeling, but rather, as an indicator of what you should explore further.

So let's go back to what your body language is saying to others. One way to be a more successful communicator is to focus on matching your non-verbal message to the verbal message that you are trying to convey. Ask a good friend to observe you the next time you are trying to persuade someone about something, or video tape the next presentation you do. Evaluate your non-verbal language to see what message you are conveying. Are you talking loudly or too fast? Are you making eye contact appropriately? Are you smiling? The answers to these questions will help you identify what aspects of non-verbal communication you need to work on.

Next, look more closely at what others are telling you with their body language. The key here is to recognize that body language is not infallible. You can't simply assume that a person's lack of eye contact means that he is not paying attention, or that his narrowed eyes indicate disgust with your point of view. Perhaps he simply has a speck of dust in his eye! But it is a red flag, an indicator, that something *may* be wrong. And the body language gives you a flashing red light that says probe further. Ask open-ended questions to find out what is really going on.

Here's a simple assignment to test out the power of your body language. For the next week, greet everyone you encounter in the course of your work with a pleasant smile and brief, direct eye contact, demonstrating that you are genuinely pleased to see them. Here's what you'll probably discover:

- most people will return your greeting smile;

- most encounters will proceed more easily;
- people with whom you have not had a positive relationship in the past respond positively;
- if you meet the same people several times during the week, you will find that at least some aspect of your relationship with them will improve.

You can use body language as a powerful way to improve your working relationships with others. It all starts with paying greater attention to the silent messages.

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