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Nonverbal communication in business

By Lee Hopkins

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There are five key elements that can make or break your attempt at successful nonverbal communication in business:

- Eye contact
- Gestures
- Movement
- Posture, and
- Written communication

Let's examine each nonverbal element in turn to see how we can maximise your potential to communicate effectively...

Eye contact

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Good eye contact helps your audience develop trust in you, thereby helping you and your message appear credible. Poor eye contact does exactly the opposite.

So what IS 'good' eye contact?

People rely on visual clues to help them decide on whether to attend to a message or not. If they find that someone isn't 'looking' at them when they are being spoken to, they feel uneasy.

So it is a wise business communicator that makes a point of attempting to engage every member of the audience by looking at them.

Now, this is of course easy if the audience is just a handful of people, but in an auditorium it can be a much harder task. So balance your time between these three areas:

slowly scanning the entire audience,

focusing on particular areas of your audience (perhaps looking at the wall between two heads if you are still intimidated by public speaking), and

looking at individual members of the audience for about five seconds per person.

Looking at individual members of a large group can be 'tricky' to get right at first.

Equally, it can be a fine balancing act if your audience comprises of just one or two members — spend too much time looking them in the eyes and they will feel intimidated, stared at, 'hunted down'.

So here's a useful tip: break your eye-to-eye contact down to four or five second chunks.

That is, look at the other person in blocks that last four to five seconds, then look away. That way they won't feel intimidated.

Practice this timing yourself, away from others. Just look at a spot on the wall, count to five, then look away. With practice you will be able to develop a 'feel' for how long you have been looking into your audience member's eyes and intuitively know when to look away and focus on another person or object.

## Gestures

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Most of us, when talking with our friends, use our hands and face to help us describe an event or object – powerful nonverbal aids.

We wave our arms about, turn our hands this way and that, roll our eyes, raise our eyebrows, and smile or frown.

Yet many of us also, when presenting to others in a more formal setting, 'clam up'.

Our audience of friends is no different from our business audience — they all rely on our face and hands (and sometimes legs, feet and other parts of us!) to 'see' the bigger, fuller picture.

It is totally understandable that our nervousness can cause us to 'freeze up', but it is in our and our communication's best interests if we manage that nervousness, manage our fear of public speaking, and use our body to help emphasise our point.

I found that by joining a local Toastmasters International club I was rapidly able to learn how to 'free up my body' when presenting to others.

Movement

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Ever watch great presenters in action — men and women who are alone on the stage yet make us laugh, cry and be swept along by their words and enthusiasm?

Watch them carefully and you'll note that they don't stand rigidly in one spot. No, they bounce and run and stroll and glide all around the stage.

Why do they do that?

Because they know that we human beings, men in particular, are drawn to movement.

As part of man's genetic heritage we are programmed to pay attention to movement. We instantly notice it, whether we want to or not, assessing the movement for any hint of a threat to us.

This, of course, helps explain why many men are drawn to the TV and seem transfixed by it. It also helps explain why men in particular are almost 'glued' to the TV when there is any sport on. All that movement!

But to get back to the stage and you on it... ensure that any movement you make is meaningful and not just nervous fidgetting, like rocking back and forth on your heels or moving two steps forward and back, or side to side.

This is 'nervous movement' and your nervousness will transmit

itself to your audience, significantly diluting the potency of your communication and message.

So move about the stage when you can — not just to keep the men in the audience happy, but to help emphasise your message!

Posture

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There are two kinds of 'posture' and it is the wise communicator that manages and utilizes both.

** Posture 1

The first type of 'posture' is the one we think of intuitively—the straight back versus the slumped shoulders; the feet-apart confident stance versus the feet together, hand-wringing of the nervous; the head up and smiling versus the head down and frowning.

And every one of the positions we place the various elements of our body in tells a story—a powerful, nonverbal story.

For example, stand upright, shoulders straight, head up and eyes facing the front. Wear a big smile. Notice how you 'feel' emotionally.

Now, slump your shoulders, look at the floor and slightly shuffle your feet. Again, take a note of your emotional state.

Notice the difference?

Your audience surely will, and react to you and your message accordingly.

A strong, upright, positive body posture not only helps you breath easier (good for helping to calm nerves!) but also transmits a message of authority, confidence, trust and power.

If you find yourself challenged to maintain such a posture, practice in front of a mirror, or better yet join a speaking club like Toastmasters International.

** Posture 2

The second type of 'posture' comes from your internal mental and emotional states.

You can have great body posture but without internal mental and emotional posture your words will sound hollow to your audience.

For example, a sleazy used car salesman at 'Dodgy Brothers Motors' might have great body posture and greet you with a firm handshake, a steady gaze and a friendly smile.

His body will start betraying his real, underlying intentions and you'll start to feel uncomfortable around him, even if you can't figure out why.

But, if a different used car salesman with a genuine desire to help you find the right car for you puts your needs before his own, then his words and actions will remain congruent (in harmony) with his underlying intentions and you will trust him, even though you might not be able to identify why.

I have met salesmen and women who don't actually make the money they claim to make in their 'fabulous business opportunity', and while their words are practiced and polished, and their body posture is 'perfect', their words ooze like honeyed poison from their lips and I remain unconvinced.

This second type of 'posture' is fundamentally tied to truth and honesty. It is about 'walking the talk' and being who you say

you are.

It's all about making sure that your words and your intentions are underpinned by truth and honesty. Because all of us, no matter how polished a presenter we might be, are at the mercy of our body and its ability to 'tell the truth' in spite of what our lips might utter. Nonverbal clues rule!

Written communication

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I could spend a lifetime writing about the art of written communication.

There is an art (and also a science) that can be learnt with diligence and practice. To write too formally; to write too informally; to write too briefly; to write too lengthily...

My first suggestion would be to avail yourself of one of the following three books, each of which is absolutely brilliant at

giving you the skills and insights into effective business writing:

The Business Style Handbook: An A-to-Z Guide for Writing on the Job with Tips from Communications Experts at the Fortune 500 by Helen Cunningham and Brenda Greene

The Elements of Business Writing: A Guide to Writing Clear, Concise Letters, Memos, Reports, Proposals, and Other Business Documents by Gary Blake and Robert W. Bly

Effective Business Writing: Strategies, Suggestions and Examples by Maryann V. Piotrowski

From persuasive memos to complaint letters, sales letters to executive summaries — these exceedingly useful guides help you to write clearly and in an appropriate format, style and tone. Each book has numerous examples that show how to overcome writer's block, organize messages for maximum impact, achieve an easy-to-read style, find an efficient writing system and much more.

But, if you want my personal recommendation...  
...if you want to want to get hold and devour my personal best recommendation, then it's this book by Ken Evoy: Make Your Words Sell. "Stunning" is the only way to describe it! To grab your own copy go to <http://www.sbi2004.com/myws>

In conclusion...

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There are five key elements that can make or break your attempt at successful nonverbal business communication:

Eye contact
Gestures
Movement
Posture, and
Written communication

Nonverbal communication in a business setting requires not only recognition of these elements, but confidence in meeting their challenges.

Good luck!

When you match consumer psychology with effective communication styles you get a powerful combination. At Hopkins–Business– Communication–Training.com you can find the secrets to communication success. At Hopkins we show you how to communicate better for better business results.

How to Tell What They Really Meant

By Susan Dunn

How to Tell What They Really Meant by Susan Dunn, MA, Emotional Intelligence Coach

Part of Emotional Intelligence is understanding the emotions of others, and one of the most important channels we use to communicate emotions is nonverbal communication.

When we're engaged in communication, we must pay attention to all sorts of things besides just the actual words. No matter how we try to define words, they still mean one thing to one person, and another to another.

To understand this, all you need to do is take a sentence and emphasize different things, or use a different tone of voice. For instance, try saying this sentence 5 different times, each time emphasizing a different word: "I know what he said." The emphasis makes quite a difference.

Now consider that what "he" said was, "I love you." How would you say "I know what he said"? Certainly with tenderness, love, and maybe even awe.

However, if the person who said "I love you" was someone you despised, you would say "I know what he said" with resignation, or pity, or maybe even disdain.

Now consider what "he" said was that you were the one solely responsible for the demise of the project. How would you say, "I know what he said"? Agitated, and there's a big "but" about to follow.

Included in nonverbal communication are tone of voice, pace, posture, proximity (how close the person is to you), gestures, facial expressions, and movements (small and large). All ways of communicating besides language.

Nonverbal communication is important because it is less under our conscious control than the words we speak. Therefore it tends to reveal our emotions, whether we intend to or not. After all, there are times when we wouldn't want someone to know how we "really " felt.

With practice you can learn to modulate a good bit of your nonverbal communication, but not all of it. For instance, there's something called "the Adam's apple jump" that remains involuntary. According to The Nonverbal Dictionary©, this jump of the cartilage in the throat is "an unconscious sign of emotional anxiety, embarrassment, or stress." It means the man doesn't like what's going on, or strongly disagrees.

The expansion and contraction of the pupil's in our eyes is another example of something that's very hard to control. Our pupils expand when we like something ("let more of this in") and contract when we do not ("I don't want to see this"). We do this in response to sunlight, but also to emotional things.

So how do you interpret what's going on? The first step is to notice change. If the person's been sitting in a certain position for quite a while and then shifts dramatically, something has happened you need to take note of. However, here's the tricky part. It could be they think you're lying, it could be they got a

cramp in their leg, it could be they love what you're saying and wanted to move closer (unconsciously), it could be they have to go to the bathroom, it could be something you said angered them.

Someone told me the other day how much they liked doing phone work. I agreed with her, saying that it filtered out a lot of distractions. "Yeah," she said, "all those things I'm imagining that aren't really going on."

So how do we quit imagining and figure out what the nonverbal message meant? It takes practice. You begin with self-awareness - noticing your own nonverbal reactions. Start paying attention to the things YOU do in the course of communicating. Notice when you move, when you change your facial expression, what you do with your hands. Then hook it up with what was going on, to explain why you do these things.

Next, start observing more in others. Facial expressions and gestures can be tricky, especially if you're in a multicultural situation. A sign of peace in one country is a gross obscenity in another. Some cultures are more facially expressive than others. A smile can mean "I agree" in one country, while in another country, direct disagreeing isn't permitted, so a smile is just a convention.

You can study nonverbal expressions through photographs by accessing some of the sites on the Internet.

Then start asking more questions when it's appropriate. And it may always be appropriate as far as that goes. As my friend said ... we imagine. Nobody likes to feel like you're "mind-reading," and the more important the conversation, the more important that you check out what you think the other person meant, or said, or implied. When we assume, we can get into trouble.

In fact you should check in from time-to-time just to see if they're still paying attention. For instance someone who interviews people all day long tends to tune out if you talk more than 90 seconds.

Interjecting things such as "Was that what you had in mind?" or "Am I addressing the point in a way that's helpful?" can bring the other person back. Your reading of nonverbal communication will tell you they've left when their eyes glaze over.

If you see a shift in the nonverbal that concerns you, note it, think about it, and then respond appropriately. It's important to observe what's going on in the other so you can keep the conversation on course. It's part of Emotional Intelligence, social skills and good manners.

For instance, one person may want to hear all the details of your surgery, while it may be too much for another. You may need to vent your spleen about your ex-spouse or your boss, but the listener may find it too intense and become uncomfortable. If you're getting "warding off" signals, back off.

In negotiations and sales, you must be alert to changes that can signal you're using the wrong approach so that you can reorient and try something different.

Being able to read nonverbal communication effectively is important to your social and professional relationships. It will affect your ability to be intimate, to sustain friendships, to influence people, and to succeed in your career.

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