

## NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Nonverbal communication plays a central role in human behavior and it is important to recognize that communication frequently involves more than a verbal message. Effective communication requires that we understand the role of nonverbal behavior as one dimension of communication competence.

Nonverbal behavior has become a major field of research in the communications discipline and one consistent theme is that the meaning of nonverbal message depends on its context. If we observe a person crying with no information regarding the situation, it is difficult to determine if the tears are an expression of joy or sorrow. We must also consider nonverbal communication in a cultural context. Nonverbal behaviors such as eye contact, facial movements, and use of personal space vary from one culture to another.

The study of nonverbal communication involves a broad range of topics. What follows are some descriptions of kinesics (study of bodily movement) and proxemics (study of personal space and territoriality). These categories have been selected based on their relevance to managerial and professional communication.

### **Movements Have Symbolic Meaning**

Kinesics involves the study of bodily movement. Ekman and Friesen (1969) developed a classification system identifying five types of body movements which have communication functions.<sup>1</sup>

**Emblems** are movements which have a direct verbal translation, generally a word or phrase. These are often culture specific. The popular hand gesture displayed by University of Texas Longhorn fans translates as "Hook 'em, Horns"; that same emblem displayed to a married Italian man would suggest his wife is having an affair. Recognizable emblems would include "A-OK" and "Victory."

**Illustrators** are nonverbal cues directly linked with words. They reinforce verbal communication and allow us to accent or emphasize words or ideas. We also use illustrators to help describe something, as in "It was this wide."

**Affect displays** are body movements which reveal our affective, or emotional, state. Facial cues are the primary way we reveal our feelings nonverbally. Affect displays can be used to influence others. A speaker, for example, displays enthusiasm

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<sup>1</sup> P. Ekman and W. Friesen, "The repertoire of nonverbal behavior. Categories, origins, usage, and coding." *Semiotica*, 1 (1969), 49-98.

and hopes it exudes to the audience. Affect displays may also be emotional expressions and not necessarily symbolic.

**Regulators** are nonverbal cues which regulate interaction. Consider the regulators used in normal conversation which determine turn-taking. Individuals utilize eye behavior, inflection, and head nodding to regulate conversation.

**Adaptors** are movements that satisfy personal needs and help you adapt to your environment. Adaptors may also be behaviors or objects that are manipulated for purpose. Adaptors include behaviors like yawning and moving/adjusting your glasses.

### **Eye Contact and Facial Behavior**

In interpersonal and group communication, we generally are communicating something by looking or not looking at someone. When eye contact does occur, it may perform one or more functions.

The eyes can indicate thought processes, or the cognitive function. It is common for many people to glance away when they are thinking. Eyes can also perform a **monitoring function**. From interpersonal to public speaking situations, we can monitor our communication effectiveness by looking at others and monitoring their feedback.

As mentioned previously in this teaching note, eye contact also helps to regulate the flow of communication. If a professor asks a question and you did not wish to respond, you will most likely avoid establishing eye contact; direct eye contact suggests a willingness to respond. The eyes can also offer insight to emotions and feelings as part of their **expressive function**.

Facial behavior expresses emotions we experience internally and is particularly intentional, probably because we are conscious of it and it is a very visible part of communication. Facial expressions are particularly useful for indicating our clarity or confusion over the content in a message.

### **Space and Territoriality**

Proxemics explains how people use space to communicate while territoriality describes how we stake claim to an area. Hall (1959, 1966) suggests that there are four zones of personal space which surround us and have meaning in communication.<sup>2</sup> Interpretations of personal space vary across cultures. The spatial distances include the following four zones:

- \* Intimate zone                      physical contact to 18 inches  
*common zone for intimate relationships*

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<sup>2</sup> E.T. Hall. The Silent Language, Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1959.  
E.T. Hall. The Hidden Dimension, Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1966.

- \* Personal zone            18 inches to 4 feet  
*common zone for interpersonal communication*
- \* Social zone              4 feet to 10-12 feet  
*normal distance used in work settings*
- \* Public zone              10-12 feet and beyond  
*communication at this distance is general formal*

Various factors affect how close we sit or stand next to someone. The distance is normally determined by social and cultural norms and the unique patterns of those interacting. The nature of the topic itself may influence distance.

Cultural norms are important in determining the use of personal space in communication situations. The following scale provides a measure for how selected cultures view personal space:

**Personal Space in Several Cultures**

Latin American	Arab	French	American	German	Japanese
SMALL					LARGE
SPACE					SPACE

It is important to recognize cultural differences in the interpretation of personal space as they relate to greetings, conversations, and seating at meetings.

The concept of territoriality is borrowed from studies of animal behavior, but humans, too, claim particular areas. Look at where you are sitting in class; it is probable you are in the same seat where you sat previously (or at least in the same general area) even though you do not have assigned seating. We frequently display territorial behavior in public places by marking a spot with a coat or other object. Individuals claim their territory when they arrive and choose a seat at a meeting or conference.

**Summary**

Nonverbal communication is highly believable and at least as important as verbal communication. While it is useful to observe nonverbal behavior, it is important to remember that:

- \* the context of nonverbal behavior is relevant
- \* individuals respond differently to different situations
- \* cultural norms affect peoples' reactions to nonverbal cues.

This teaching note attempts to introduce you to some concepts of nonverbal communication which are relevant to professional communication. A bibliography listing additional sources follows.

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## **Selected Bibliography of Nonverbal Communication**

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