

Understanding Nonverbal Language

Besides words and tone, nonverbal cues contribute to the spoken communication process. Body language and nonverbal signals add meaning to your message. Nonverbal language includes hand and arm gestures, eye contact and movement, facial expressions, the position of your body, and your overall appearance. Your audience perceives nonverbal language as part of your message, and uses it to determine how to interpret your words. Being more aware of body language and nonverbal cues will help you be a more effective listener and speaker. Table A-2 summarizes do's and don'ts for using nonverbal language. Figure A-3 shows examples of nonverbal language in the workplace.  As you rehearse your presentation for the career fair, Juan Ramirez gives you a few pointers about your body language and nonverbal communication.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

QUICK TIP

Prolonged eye contact, however, can make your listener uncomfortable.

1. Maintain eye contact

Eye movements send signals that help regulate the flow of information between people. Your eyes can show interest, understanding, happiness, confusion, anxiety, and fear. Make eye contact to establish credibility and show you are engaged with your audience. People trust you when you look directly at them as you speak, and are skeptical if you don't maintain eye contact.

2. Present pleasant facial expressions

The human smile is a powerful cue that transmits messages including friendliness, happiness, warmth, and acceptance. If you smile frequently when you are talking with others, they perceive you as approachable, appealing, and friendly. They are also likely to react positively to your message and remember what you say. A frown or grimace also sends a powerful message, though it is usually negative.

QUICK TIP

Gestures vary from culture to culture. What may be meaningful in one country may not in another.

3. Gesture appropriately

People usually move their heads, hands, and fingers when they speak. Effective communicators use physical gestures to emphasize important points. When properly used, gestures can enliven and animate what you say and help to communicate your enthusiasm and sincerity. If you do not move at all when you speak, others might perceive you as boring or tense.

4. Maintain good posture

Your posture is your body's position when you are sitting, standing, or walking, and it communicates your mood, attitude, and interest in a topic. When communicating with others, sit or stand with an erect (but not stiff) posture, which sends a message of confidence and competence. Lean slightly towards your listener to show you are receptive and interested in what they have to say. Avoid speaking when your back is turned or you are distracted with another task because this signals disinterest and insincerity.

QUICK TIP

Signs of discomfort in your listener include looking away, stepping backwards, turning their body at an angle to you, or folding their arms over their chest.

5. Keep your distance

In communication, **proximity** is how physically close you are to your audience. Maintaining appropriate proximity is an important part of verbal communication. People expect you to respect their personal space and feel uncomfortable if you intrude on it. Appropriate proximity is affected by the relationship you have with the listener, the type of communication (intimate, friendly, professional, or public speaking), and your cultural norms. If you notice signs of discomfort that suggest you've moved into your listener's space, immediately increase the distance between you and your listener.

YOU TRY IT

1. Use your e-mail software such as Microsoft Office Outlook to create an e-mail message to your instructor
2. Create a checklist of what you can do to send positive nonverbal cues in the workplace
3. Send the message to your instructor as requested

FIGURE A-3: Nonverbal language in the workplace



Hand gesture seems aggressive



Lack of eye contact suggests conflict



Smile invites participation



Posture reinforces competence

TABLE A-2: Nonverbal language do's and don'ts

element	do	don't
Eye contact	Maintain eye contact to foster trust and engagement	Don't avoid making eye contact with your listener or maintain prolonged contact
Facial expressions	Smile frequently and present a pleasant expression in general	Don't maintain a poker face
Gestures	Punctuate your speech with appropriate and meaningful gestures	Don't exaggerate or lose control of your gestures
Posture	Stand and sit with an erect posture to communicate confidence and competence	Don't turn your back to someone when speaking
Physical distance	Establish a proximity appropriate for your message and audience	Don't ignore signs that your listener is uncomfortable with your proximity

Learning the body language of success

More than the words you speak, your body language communicates the qualities that contribute to career success: confidence and leadership. In fact, the most successful business professionals use nonverbal communication that conveys authority and calm. Carmine Gallo, author of *10 Simple Secrets of the World's Greatest Business Communicators*, focuses on gestures and movement in body language. Instead of burning energy with nervous mannerisms such as drumming your fingers or rubbing your nose, Gallo recommends that you move with purpose. Videotape yourself for a few minutes as you give a

presentation, and then watch for mannerisms that do not serve a useful purpose—they make you seem distracted or lacking control. However, standing too still as you are speaking makes you appear rigid and uncomfortable, especially if you have your hands in your pockets. If you are giving a presentation, Gallo suggests walking around the room. If you are having a conversation, take your hands out of your pockets so you can gesture naturally. Source: Gallo, Carmine, "Actions Do Speak Louder Than Words," *BusinessWeek*, November 17, 2005.

FIGURE A-9: Cross-cultural communication



Respect differences in culture



Watch for signs of misunderstanding

TABLE A-7: Cross-cultural communication do's and don'ts

element	do	don't
Message	Keep your message simple, clear, and familiar	Don't use clichés, idioms, or obscure language
Speaking pace	Speak slowly and clearly	Don't exaggerate the slow pace; speak naturally
Feedback	Be extra attentive to feedback that signals your listener does not understand your message	Don't wait for your listener to ask for explanations
Listening	Listen patiently; you'll eventually catch on to the rhythms of an accent	Don't correct the grammar or pronunciation of a nonnative speaker

Overcome barriers to communication.

1. What types of words should you use to overcome barriers to communication?

- a. Foreign words
- b. Ambiguous words
- c. Power words
- d. Familiar words

2. Which of the following is *not* an appropriate medium for spoken communication?

- a. Busy environment
- b. Face-to-face meeting
- c. Phone call
- d. Presentation

Communicate ethically.

1. Ethics deals with:

- a. complying with the law
- b. principles for acceptable conduct
- c. persuading customers
- d. expressing opinions

2. Which of the following is *not* a way to communicate ethically?

- a. Be truthful
- b. Present a balanced point of view
- c. Say what your listener wants to hear
- d. Separate fact from opinion.

Understand cross-cultural issues.

1. When speaking to someone whose native language is different from yours, you should:

- a. discuss one topic at a time
- b. speak with animation and many gestures
- c. correct grammar and pronunciation errors
- d. use the same accent as your listener

2. An idiom is:

- a. an expression that means something other than its literal meaning
- b. an overused expression
- c. a dictionary definition
- d. a type of nonverbal communication

Technology @ work: Web conferencing.

1. Web conferencing tools are software and services that let you:

- a. organize presentations on the Web
- b. translate your spoken word to another language
- c. collaborate on the Web
- d. use an Internet-connected computer to meet with others

2. What is the role of the Web conference host?

- a. To organize the meeting
- b. To coordinate the meeting
- c. To launch the software
- d. To set up the Internet connections

▼ CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. You are interviewing for your dream job and the interviewer says the company is looking for someone with top-notch verbal skills. How do you answer?
2. Suppose you are discussing an important project with a colleague at your desk when a visiting supplier walks by and interrupts you by commenting on the way you are dressed. How do you respond?
3. Speaking and writing each have pros and cons as forms of communication. When should you use forms of oral communication? When should you use forms of written communication?
4. Do you think gossip has its place in the workplace? Should gossip be encouraged or discouraged by managers and other employees?
5. Many people in your company are being laid off, and you and other members of your department fear you might lose your jobs. You see a document on your supervisor's computer labeled "Staffing Plans." What do you do? Should you mention the document to your colleagues?