

Nonverbal Communication

by Saoirse O'Brien

First highlighted by Charles Darwin in his 1872 study "The expression of the emotions in Man & Animals," nonverbal communication has fascinated anthropologists and scholars alike for centuries.

So, what's the big deal and why is it of such relevance in today's physical and virtual world?

Ray Bird Whistle's finding that up to 70% of communication is nonverbal, and that, as a rule, people tend to trust nonverbal communication over verbal, shows us how important this hidden narrative is in everyday life.

Nonverbal communication is broken into three categories:

- The environment where the communication takes place
- The communicator's physical characteristics
- The communicator's behaviours during the exchange

Both consciously and unconsciously, communicators 'code' and 'decode' messages that pass between each other. A simple example of this would be the agreeable 'head-nod'.

Used correctly, nonverbal communication can add weight to what you are saying by complementing and emphasising your point of view. Used incorrectly, it contradicts your argument and has the potential to make you seem untrustworthy, rude, disinterested, or lacking confidence.

Nonverbal communication is a powerful tool in the digital age where the lion's share of communication – be it business meetings, interviews or even dating – takes place online.

Let's discuss the 5 most important aspects of nonverbal communication (known as 'nonverbal cues'); what are the most common mistakes; and how can they be utilised in both face-to-face and virtual settings?

1. Environment

Choose where your meeting takes place. Location immediately sets the tone for the meeting. For example, a board room sends a different message to a meeting over lunch. Similarly, the environment also sends a message. A messy desk or untidy reception can signal larger problems, like disorganisation or lack of care. In a virtual setting, taking a meeting in a messy bedroom should be avoided. Likewise, positioning yourself in front of a bright window where you can't be seen signals unpreparedness. Your environment communicates a lot about you or your business and is even more important during a virtual meeting as the viewer is automatically immersed in the scene you set. Consider this: 83% of nonverbal communication is received by the eyes and on average, people will make a decision about you within the first four seconds of your meeting. In a virtual world, when all our nonverbal cues are visual, attention to your surroundings is paramount.

To ensure you are setting the right scene, ask yourself whether the location you are choosing reflects the tone you wish to portray? What does it say about you or the company? In the virtual world, both parties can control their surroundings and ergo the message they wish to convey. In an interview scenario this is particularly significant. Take time to 'produce' your online meeting. Check the lighting and Wi-Fi strength, and if you haven't used the chosen video software before, do a dry run. Some software options such as Zoom allow you to upload a virtual image behind you - a company logo perhaps - to enhance the professional quality of the call. Lastly, every production requires costume!



Banish shabby clothes, un-ironed shirts, or garish prints. Take pride in your appearance, as well as your environment.

2. Eye Contact

Good eye contact has always been one of the most obvious yet integral ways we communicate, showing confidence and building rapport. It allows you to gauge and convey interest whilst helping you maintain conversational flow. Good eye contact adds conviction to your beliefs and conveys your 'presence' or willingness to participate. Conversely, poor eye contact portrays a lack of confidence and may contradict what you are saying. Studies show a lack of eye contact provokes an immediate feeling of distrust in the other party. Other examples of poor eye contact include gazing out a window or staring at your notes. Avoid the wandering eye!

You'll know by now if you are someone who makes good eye contact or someone who avoids it. If you are the latter, try to understand the reason why. Most issues such as nervousness, shyness or a lack of confidence are helped by preparation. In every meeting, presentation, or interview there are parts you can rehearse.

Take an interview for example: within it you can rehearse speaking your CV aloud; your examples; and your reasons for wanting to work there. Know these parts so well that they become 'muscle memory', then practice with a friend whilst making that crucial eye contact. If you are easily distracted, try to focus on the spoken words of others to keep your imagination at bay. Virtually, have only the meeting tab open and turn off email notifications so that you remain engaged.

3. Facial Expression

Facial expressions and emotions are intrinsically linked. The facial expressions that convey emotions are universal. This means that the manner in which your face portrays sorrow, happiness or anger can be understood by anyone, anywhere. Professor and podcaster, Brené Brown, explains how facial expression is one of the first gatekeepers in communication.



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How you hold your face determines whether someone will approach or avoid you. Consider two people at a cash register, one looks 'checked out' and unenthused, the other 'present' and happy. We go to the 'present', happy person every time. Facial expressions convey interest and complement verbal conversation.

They also allow you to show that clarification is required, or that you wish to wrap things up. Emotionally, if they are incongruent with your words – like saying you are happy when you are sad – it is likely your expression will contradict you. Contradictory facial cues create distrust between people, even on an unconscious level, as it seems you don't mean what you say.

To help with this, we suggest replaying a scenario where you felt you expressed yourself incorrectly and trying to identify what triggered your miscommunication. For example, if you get agitated by tight timeframes and you realise this impacts your expression, ensure you have ample time when scheduling meetings. Facial expressions become crucially important in virtual meetings as talking over one-another degrades audio-clarity.

So, watch for facial cues. Lastly, if you are inclined to glance at yourself onscreen, rather than the other party, it is best to minimise yourself entirely!

4. Physicality

When we speak of physicality, we refer to everything pertaining to the body. In terms of nonverbal communication, we mean posture, deportment, and gesture. The way you carry yourself conveys confidence. How you gesture can make people feel at ease, more willing to open-up and generates buy-in. It's easy to tell if a person is warm or cold by their gestures or indeed, their lack thereof. In a business setting, your posture denotes whether you are engaged in the situation or checked out e.g. 'open' or 'closed.' Hunching, folding your arms across your chest or a distinct lack of hand gestures are examples of closed body language. Twitching, foot tapping and clicking a pen are signs of nervousness and will interfere with audio-clarity.

To counteract issues of physicality, develop awareness of where you could improve, be well prepared for the forthcoming conversation and practice good posture. Find a position in a chair where you are comfortable and ground your feet to the floor. Look at yourself in a mirror while seated and analyse what you see. When on a video call, it is easier for you to control how much of your physical cues the other party can or can't see.



Mannerisms like toe-tapping may not come into play, but deportment and slouching may become a greater issue - so sit up straight! Proper gesticulation enhances and complements your communication.

1. Touch

While not something we advocate during a Pandemic, touch is considered a vital part of non-verbal communication, so it warrants discussion. In a business setting, before the elbow-tap we had the handshake. Consider Madd Mikkelsen in the famous Carlsberg ad - "The humble handshake - Not that firm. NEVER floppy". In 'The Joy of Selling', J.T. Auer explores different ways of shaking hands, from limp to robotic to overpowering. Whether subconscious or conscious, your handshake sends a clear message to the receiver. In today's world, touch is not as relevant during a virtual meeting but is of significance in a real-life setting. Being too tactile with someone is typically inappropriate. However, appropriate touching can show pride, e.g. pat on the back or empathy, e.g. a hand on the shoulder. Playing with your hair or wringing your fingers conveys insecurity. The most common example of touch in a business setting is a handshake.

There is no medium for touch over a virtual meeting between two communicators. However, how you hold your pen or sip your water should convey calmness and control. Shakily, shuffling through notes conveys nervousness or a lack of preparation. As with all the examples I have mentioned so far, practice makes perfect and doing so in front of someone else gives you the best chance of catching these unintentional cues before someone else does.

As the adage goes, actions speak louder than words. Business savant, Peter Drucker, summarises it well in his argument that "the most important part of communication is listening to what isn't said." My favourite quote on this topic is by anthropologist Edward Sapir, who wrote "nonverbal communication is an elaborate secret code that is written nowhere, known by none, and understood by all."

Hopefully, this article has gone some way to help you better code and decode nonverbal cues.

If you are considering a job move but think your interviewing skills or content could do with an overhaul, PeopleSource has set up a free consulting service for all accounting and finance professionals. 'Job Search Reboot 101' gives candidates access to our diaries to book a 30-minute one-on-one live video session with an experienced consultant. We cover CV content, LinkedIn profile, video interview preparation and market insights.

A 'Reboot' session can be booked directly online - <https://www.peoplesource.ie/workshop-application-form> or call us on 01 631 6065.

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