

Nonverbal Cues

More than half of face-to-face communication is exchanged through nonverbal cues. Because up to 65 percent of the meaning your message is unspoken, it is imperative to learn to “read” nonverbal communication.

After you learn to “speak” this second language, you can use it to amplify your message. You also want to master reading nonverbal language. By reading your listener, you can gather real-time feedback that tells you whether or not you are communicating successfully. If your message is not getting through, maybe you need to adjust *your* nonverbal broadcast.

What do nonverbal cues communicate?

Eyes, tone of voice, expression, volume, and gestures reflect attitudes, emotions, state of mind, and related messages. While you probably are aware of this, you may not realize just how important those messages are to your listener.

Nonverbal cues can reveal three basic emotions:

- Like or dislike.
- Submission or dominance.
- The degree to which others can arouse reactions.

Nonverbal Clusters

Nonverbal clusters are several related nonverbal signals that work in concert. Generally, the presence of a nonverbal cluster is more significant than a single signal and reflects changes in attitude and state of mind.

Below is an example that shows how we use nonverbal cluster signals to judge the success of our communication:

You are talking to a peer. Your listener yawns. What might be the significance of the yawn? Is your listener:

- Unreceptive to your message?
- Sleep deprived?
- In need of additional oxygen?

Nonverbal Clusters (Continued)

Now, you are having the same conversation. This time your listener yawns while frequently glancing around the room with a bored look and tapping a pencil on the desk. From this cluster of nonverbal behavior, you can assume that your listener is not receptive to your message.

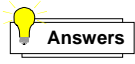


Case Study 6.1: Mixed Signals

Read the following case study and answer the question below. Then turn the page to compare your answer with the suggested response.

Imagine yourself seated across from your supervisor's desk telling her about a conflict with a coworker. As you relay the details of the incident, she begins to page through a color catalog of protective clothing that is open on the desk. When you ask her opinion, she continues to look downward, but responds, "Personnel issues are my highest priority. I will look into it."

What are some of the feelings you might experience after this conversation?



Case Study 6.1: Mixed Signals (Continued)

Answer to Case Study

What are some of the feelings you might have after this communication? Examine your answer to see if it includes any of these elements:

- Confusion
- Mistrust
- Distance
- Disrespect

No answer is incorrect.



- It is especially troubling when people send mixed messages.
- Listeners instinctively react with mistrust and caution.
- When words and actions are not in sync, the nonverbal cues contradict or supersede verbal messages.
- Conflicting words and nonverbal messages can indicate that the speaker:
 - Is experiencing conflict.
 - Is not sincere.
 - Is not committed to the message.

Nonverbal cues can have an impact equal to or stronger than the words that are spoken. When the speaker's body language is in sync with the verbal message, the message is reinforced. Listeners are more likely to respond to this extra persuasion with increased respect, harmony, or trust.

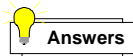
But mismatched body language can actually block communication and breed resentment and distrust. In fact, when there is a conflict between verbal and nonverbal messages, people are more likely to believe the nonverbal message.



Activity: Nonverbal Behaviors

Review the nonverbal behaviors listed below and jot down how the behaviors might be evident in each of the situations described.

	Emergency Planner Makes Presentation to Civic Association	Fire Chief Gives TV Interview at Site of Explosion	American Red Cross Manager Thanks Office Staff (2) for Efforts
Vocal intonation -Volume -Speed -Clarity -Inflection			
Style of dress			
Personal effects -Hairstyle -Clothing -Jewelry			
Silence			
Body language -Posture -Eye movement -Body position -Fidgeting -Expression			
Gestures			



Activity: Nonverbal Behaviors (Continued)

Compare your ideas about how nonverbal behavior would be expressed to the sample responses below.

	Emergency Planner Makes Presentation to Civic Association	Fire Chief Gives TV Interview at Site of Explosion	American Red Cross Coordinator Thanks Office Staff (2) for Efforts
Vocal intonation	Clear, energetic voice, dynamic	Moderate volume, slower speed, authoritative	Fast speed, somewhat high volume, irregular inflection, warmth
Style of dress	Business attire	Uniform	Agency T-shirt and slacks
Personal effects -Hairstyle -Clothing -Jewelry	Hair should be neat. Clothes should be good quality. Avoid extreme clothing or too much jewelry.	Appropriate to the serious nature of the emergency.	Hair should be neat. Clothes should be good quality. Avoid extreme clothing or too much jewelry.
Silence	Use brief silences in asking a sequence of questions aloud.	Use silence between interview questions. Do not talk to fill lulls.	Turn off the office radio to spotlight the importance of the message.
Body language -Posture -Eye movement -Body position -Fidgeting -Expression	Standing straight, but relaxed, making contact with people in various parts of the room, leaning slightly forward with expressive face.	Chief should stand still, keep head high, and face the interviewer.	Coordinator should lean toward staff, maintain good eye contact, have animated facial expressions, modulate voice, smile, and hold arms and hands relaxed away from body.
Gestures	Use natural hand gestures.	Minimize gestures and fidgeting on camera.	Touch staff on arm or hand.



Read the nonverbal cues that your audience sends while you make a presentation. Use them as immediate, personal feedback for reflecting on your success or lack of communication. Then, adjust your delivery in response to the audience's level of understanding and interest.

Cross-Cultural Meanings of Nonverbals



Caution

Nonverbal language can have meaning that is culture-specific. An example of a nonverbal behavior that has different meanings among different cultures is eye contact. In the United States, maintaining strong eye contact indicates that the listener is attentive and interested in the message. In some Asian cultures, looking directly into a speaker's eyes indicates disrespect, while lowering the eyes indicates polite manners. In the animal world, direct eye contact is a challenge or form of aggression, while averted eyes mean submission or harmlessness.

Touching someone while speaking is known as “haptics.” When, where, and how often we touch each other has cultural significance. Americans tend to touch each other less than members of many other cultures.

We need to be especially sensitive to cultural differences regarding haptics. For example, a disaster relief worker in Louisiana successfully calms an elderly, female hurricane victim by patting her on the shoulder as they talk. The same worker uses the identical tactic on a male Hawaiian disaster victim and is told she will be “very sorry if you put your hands on me again.”

“Chronemics” is the timing of verbal exchanges—the pause between the conclusion of one person speaking and the other replying. For some, a long wait before a reply indicates lack of attention. However, in some cultures, a pause before replying indicates a polite and considered response.

Personal space is another aspect of nonverbal communication that is culturally specific. Within each culture, there are expected personal distances for different types of relationships. Nonverbal communication can be confusing when these comfort zones are violated.

Studies indicate that Americans prefer these proximities:

- Personal distance – 1.5 to 4 feet. This is the distance typically found between friends and intimates.
- Social distance – 4 to 12 feet. This is the usual distance for social and business transactions.
- Public distance – 12 feet or more. This distance is generally preferred among strangers in public.

Cross-Cultural Meanings of Nonverbals (Continued)

Below are examples of some typical nonverbal clusters and their meanings in the United States:

- Boredom
 - slouching in seat
 - yawning
 - staring out window
 - no eye contact
 - neutral expression
 - fidgeting
 - closed posture
 - drifting attention
 - slow to respond
 - neutral or “slurred” speech
- Frustration
 - rubbing forehead with hand
 - tense, worried expression
 - throwing hands up in the air
- Agreement or Enthusiasm
 - leaning towards speaker
 - making eye contact
 - touching speaker’s arm or hand
 - nodding head
 - relaxed, open posture
 - smiling or laughing
 - faster speech
 - higher pitch
- Disagreement or Confusion
 - Frowning
 - shaking head
 - leaning back or away
 - pursing lips
 - tightened jaw and closed posture
 - staring elsewhere
 - shallow, rapid breathing
 - limited facial expression and hand gestures
 - slower speech
 - lower pitch

Cross-Cultural Meanings of Nonverbals (Continued)

- Evaluation
 - chewing on eyeglass frames
 - wearing a thoughtful, intense expression

Nonverbal cues are summarized in Job Aid 6.2 on the following page. This job aid is also included in Appendix A.