

Nonverbal Communication in Virtual Meetings

For more than two months, much of the country has been working from home and attending an endless string of virtual meetings on Zoom, Skype or WebEx. During this time, I've been sharing with my coaching clients the importance of nonverbal communication.

When participating in any virtual meeting, the way you present is important. While we often think it is what we say that carries the most weight in our meetings, it's more often what we don't say. Thinking that the majority of your communication is verbal can cause a severe disconnect with the people who are in your meeting.

Relaying information in real time is not limited to verbal interchanges or the use of language. Nonverbal communication is extraordinarily powerful and has been the subject of study for many social scientists, philosophers and psychologists. Nonverbal communication is defined as all wordless interactions, including hand gestures, posture, facial expressions and eye contact. In addition to this, vocal intonation, speaking style, speed and tone all affect how you converse with others.

Nonverbal communication is much more subconscious than verbal communication. While you have to think about language before using words, a smile, laugh, facial expression or hand movement can go largely unplanned.

While vocabularies and languages are considerably different across cultures, nonverbal communication remains universal and understood globally. People from Massachusetts to Morocco understand a smile or a frown.

In both your personal and professional life, your posture is evaluated by how relaxed you seem as well as your body's orientation, leaning and the position of your arms. Gestures are defined as any movements and signals you use, such as waving, winking, rolling the eyes, nodding, and pointing.

As a leader or manager, it's vital to understand not just the meaning of the words you speak, but the overall presentation. Exploring the many functions of nonverbal communication will make your meetings more collaborative and more productive.

Functions of nonverbal communication

Repetition. Gestures, such as nodding, serve to reinforce what's being said. A nod of the head is, in fact, one of the most universal gestures, understood across many cultures. It is widely accepted as an agreement or understanding between people.

Substitution. Substitution involves replacing a spoken word with a nonverbal cue. You can nod your head without saying a word or wave your hand instead of saying goodbye. You haven't uttered a word, yet you have communicated effectively.

Complement. A smile can complement words of enthusiasm or praise.

Accenting. You may accent a particular word in a sentence, such as, "I am very disappointed in you!" A strong tone of voice dramatizes the message.

Misleading or deceiving. Can you tell when an employee is lying? Detecting deception is usually based on nonverbal cues. In criminal investigations, for instance, facial expressions, body movement and tone of voice can expose the truth versus a lie.

Improving nonverbal communication

Communication, whether verbal or nonverbal, drives all activity between you and others. So, how do you improve yours as you listen to and speak with others in virtual meetings?

Step 1: Watch yourself ... and others. When communicating, focus on what your body is doing. The goal is to increase the expressive nature of your body, when appropriate, without coming across as overdramatic. Be aware that gestures are often very useful in a group setting, such as in meetings and presentations.

If a person's words fail to match their nonverbal cues, it's best to trust the nonverbal messages. Listen with your eyes. In most cases, the nonverbal message is much more accurate.

Step 2: Maintain eye contact. Eye contact is crucial when speaking with anyone, particularly coworkers, superiors or direct reports, as it promotes trust and understanding. Try to increase eye contact when speaking with others and see if they're making and maintaining eye contact with you.

If someone avoids eye contact, you'll likely sense the person's discomfort or dishonesty. You can ease another's discomfort by asking questions that enhance communication.

Step 3: Work on your posture. It's likely that your mother emphasized the need to stand up straight and avoid slouching in your chair. As it turns out, Mom had given you your first lesson in nonverbal communication. Posture is a nonverbal indicator of confidence.

A gesture conveys a message by using one part of the body, whereas a postural shift involves the movement of the body as a whole. A closed posture (folded arms and crossed legs) indicates a closed personality and a lack of confidence. Open posture (arms spread in a relaxed manner) is a much more confident pose. Your posture should also be in sync with your message, so you avoid sending mixed messages.

When you're sitting, sit up straight. Slumping conveys disinterest and inattention. Leaning back, or rocking back and forth in your chair, tells others you're bored. In contrast, leaning forward in your chair when listening to someone speak, demonstrates an active interest in both the person and conversation.

Step 4: Set the stage. A sloppy environment sends the message that you're disorganized and careless. Messy areas may be a symptom of a larger problem, such as inefficiency, which stems from an inability to find files or other important papers. Disorganization creates stress and limits productivity. Instead of creating vertical piles on your desk, rely on to-do files that can be stored inside a drawer.

Step 5: Read your audience. If you're making a presentation, be aware of your audience's nonverbal communication. As your presentation progresses, watch for signs of slouching, yawning or dozing off; this means you've lost their attention. If, on the other hand, the group is energized and interested, participants' body language may convey that they want you to ask for their thoughts and input. Learning to read a group's mood enhances your abilities as both a speaker and a manager.

Step 6: Listen to your voice. Paralanguage, or paralinguistics, involves various fluctuations in one's voice, such as tone, pitch, rhythm, inflections and volume. These cues can have a powerful effect on communication. A loud or forceful tone, for example, may convey a stronger and more serious message

compared to softer tones. Sarcasm can also cause problems -- a manager's sarcastic tone creates stress because their tone (joking) is meant to contradict their words (hurtful or biting).

Step 7: Question yourself. Throughout the day, monitor your progress. Ask yourself the following questions about your performance: How was I perceived at the meeting? Could I have done something differently? Were people really interested and paying attention to what I was saying? Did I listen well to others?

As you answer these questions, your self-awareness will increase.

Credit: <https://www.smartbrief.com>