

Nonverbal Communication

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A stylized silhouette of a mountain range in a darker shade of teal, located in the bottom right corner of the slide.

Introduction

- ◆ Communication involves more than spoken or written words. For example, when Lois Lane arrives punctually for a job interview wearing a conservative blue suit and when she leans forward to answer questions in an animated voice, she is sending messages to the interviewer. These nonverbal messages will be observed and registered, just as her words are interpreted and processed, by the interviewer. Learning to recognize and to control nonverbal cues is important to the successful communicator.

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- ◆ Some authorities consider nonverbal signals to be even more important than words. In experiments testing the communication of feelings (such as approval or disapproval of another individual), psychologist Albert Mehrabian found that body movements and tone of voice conveyed 93 percent of a message. The actual words conveyed only 7 percent. Whether you are communicating feelings or ideas (and most messages contain both), a number of nonverbal factors are at work.

Paralanguage—How the Voice Communicates

- ◆ The way in which a message is spoken is often as important as what is said. Paralanguage describes the vocal qualities, such as tone, inflection, volume, emphasis, and pitch, of spoken message. Notice how the significance of the following message shifts according to the word emphasized:

- ◆ Although the words are the same, the receiver perceives different messages when voice emphasis changes. Paralanguage often reveals the emotions, conscious and unconscious, underlying our words. Dynamic speakers and successful business leaders capitalize on paralanguage to reinforce their words. Because their voice patterns complement their words, they avoid sending conflicting messages.

Kinesics— How the Body Communicates

- ◆ Body Language, the best-selling book by Julius Fast, popularized the concept of nonverbal communication. It would be inaccurate, however, to suggest that specific positions and movements are infallible indicators of underlying motivation. Such simplicity, of course, belies reality. Although we may not be able to catalog every body movement and indicate its hidden meaning, we should be aware that facial expression, eye contact, posture, and gestures exert a significant effect on viewer

Facial Expression

- ◆ Experts estimate that we can make and recognize nearly 250,000 distinct facial expressions. The most common expressions are interest, enjoyment, surprise, distress, shame, contempt, anger, and fear. In conversations, facial expressions are a principal source of feedback. Alert communicators display and interpret facial expressions accurately; they modify their messages to produce the effect they intend. For example, the appearance of frowns, yawns, or smirks on the faces of listeners in the audience should signal Clark Kent, a sales representative, to alter his presentation because he's not obtaining his desired result.

Eye Contact

- ◆ Often described as the "windows of the soul," eyes are the most expressive element in face-to-face communication. Among North Americans, individuals who maintain direct eye contact are usually considered to be open, honest, and trustworthy. "Shifty" eyes suggest dishonesty; and a downward gaze may be interpreted as a sign of submission, inferiority, or humility. In this culture it's difficult to have confidence in a speaker who is unable to "look you in the eye." It must be remembered, of course, that the interpretation of much nonverbal communication is culture dependent.

Posture

- ◆ The way you stand and hold your body also sends messages about your self confidence. Stooped or bowed shoulders may signal that you are burdened, self conscious, lacking confidence, submissive, beaten, guilty, or afraid. A straight back with squared shoulders typifies strength and responsibility. Hunched shoulders suggest anxiety or weariness.

Gestures

- ◆ Some hand gestures are recognized and easily interpreted.
- ◆ For most North Americans a circle formed with the index finger and thumb signals satisfaction, shaking the index finger indicates a warning, and showing the palm symbolizes a peaceful greeting. Other gestures are not so easily translated. Do crossed arms mean "I will not let you in"? Does rubbing the nose with a finger represent disapproval? Does patting the hair mean approval? Does forming a "steeple" with the fingertips indicate superiority? The interpretation of these gestures and others depends greatly on the situation and also on the culture.

Image—How Appearances Influence Communication

- ◆ The image an individual projects and the objects surrounding that person can communicate nonverbally. Clothing, for example, tells a great deal about an individual's status, occupation, self-image, and aspirations. A researcher testing the perceptions of individuals conducted an experiment in which two men dressed in inexpensive and expensive clothing on alternate days. Their task was to enter stores of all types and select merchandise. When it was time to pay, they searched their pockets and announced that they had left their wallets at home. Then they tried to pay by check. When dressed in expensive clothing, the men were able to cash twice as many checks as they did when wearing inexpensive clothes.

- ◆ Clothing apparently communicated a nonverbal message indicating worth, integrity, and trustworthiness. Appearances definitely affect perceptions. If you look successful, you are often perceived to be successful.
- ◆ In addition to clothing, a person's possessions send messages. In a business office, the condition of an individual's desk, the appearance (or lack) of personal decorations, the kind of paintings on the wall, the quality of the furniture, and the books or magazines in view suggest the occupant's status, work habits, personal habits and interests, education, and personality traits. An office visitor forms opinions, conscious and unconscious, from such nonverbal clues.

Proxemics—How Space Influences Communication

- ◆ Proxemics refers to the amount of space that individuals naturally maintain between each other. Sociologists report four territorial zones: intimate space (up to 50 cm), personal space (30-75 cm), social space (120 to 200 cm), and public space (300 cm or more). When our territorial space is invaded, we resent and resist the intrusion. Business conversations may take place in personal or social space, but never in intimate space. Meetings are usually conducted in public space. Although effective communicators probably could not name these four zones, they instinctively understand and observe spatial requirements.

- ◆ Manipulation of space illustrates another form of nonverbal communication. The arrangement of furniture in an office, for example, communicates a variety of information about the occupant. Richard Snyder, human resources director, places a visitor's chair close to his desk, suggesting that he is open, approachable, and genuinely interested in getting to know his visitors personally. On the other hand, Victoria Santos, branch manager, places visitors' chairs across the room from her desk and keeps a coffee table in front of the chairs. The nonverbal message is that she is distant, aloof, and uninterested in visitors.

Nonverbal Communication Summary

- ◆ Ideas and feelings are communicated by more than the words we speak or write. Messages are also sent nonverbally by paralanguage (how the voice sounds), by kinesics (facial expressions, eye contact, posture, and gestures), by image (clothing, objects, and appearances), and by proxemics (spatial relationships). Becoming aware of nonverbal signals helps you improve your ability to control these elements in your own communication. You can also become more skilled at deciphering nonverbal cues, thus enhancing your comprehension of the total message.

THANK YOU

