

## Improving Non-Verbal Communication

“The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn’t said.” – Peter F. Drucker

Non-verbal communication is the single most powerful form of communication and includes facial expressions, body language, gestures, use of personal space, tone of voice, eye gaze and posture amongst others. Daily we are responding to thousands of non-verbal cues which help let us in on what is going on in someone else’s mind.



One study at UCLA revealed that **up to 93% of communication effectiveness is determined by non-verbal cues**. Non-verbals convey mood/state of mind, interpersonal feelings, support our verbal message (spoken words) and provide feedback and insight into the messages we are receiving when listening. Improving your skills in interpreting non-verbal communication will enhance your ability to interact meaningfully with others and reduce misinterpretation of messages and conflict situations.

People communicate on many levels and **every gesture communicates something if you ‘listen with your eyes.’** Both verbal and non-verbal communication work together to convey a message. You can improve your spoken communication by using non-verbal cues and gestures to reinforce and support your message. This is very useful when making presentations or speaking to a large group of people.

*“When we speak (or listen), our attention is focused on words rather than body language. But our judgement includes both. An audience is simultaneously processing both verbal and nonverbal cues. Body movements are not usually positive or negative in and of themselves; rather, the situation and the message will determine the appraisal.” - Givens, D.B. (2000) ‘Body Speak: What Are You Saying?’  
Successful Meetings magazine (October 2000) 51 p4*

### **Tips for Improved Non-Verbal Communication:**

1. **Eye Contact** - Maintain frequent eye contact but avoid staring, glaring or looking away. When people fail to look others in the eye, it may be interpreted they are trying to hide something. However, too much eye contact can be confronting or intimidating.
2. **Facial Expressions** – Whilst other non-verbal cues may vary depending on culture, the facial expressions for happiness, sadness, fear and anger are similar throughout the world. Use facial expressions - especially a smile - to communicate sincerity to your listener. Before talking on the telephone, be conscious of your facial expression – if you are smiling, this will be conveyed in your tone of voice.
3. **Tone of Voice** - The tone of your voice conveys an array of information - from excitement to disinterest to anger. The important parts of your message can be reinforced by changing your vocal pitch. Stress and intonation patterns help to make your message clearer and more meaningful to the listener. Notice how your voice tone affects how

## Improving Non-Verbal Communication (Cont'd)

others respond to you. Try using tone of voice to emphasize the message you want to communicate.

4. **Body Movement** - Be relaxed and attentive. To gain acceptance, lean slightly toward your listener. Avoid slouching or sitting rigidly. Sit up straight – good posture conveys a professional image. Nodding your head from time to time will signal you understand the message being conveyed.
5. **Gestures** – Use selective hand movements that enhance your message and 'paint the picture' for your listener. Avoid distracting non-verbal behaviours like fiddling with a pen which will negatively impact your listener and show you are not truly concentrating.
6. **Groups of Signals** - Look for groups of signals that reinforce a common point rather than putting too much emphasis on just one isolated signal out of many. This may lead you to come to an inaccurate conclusion about what a person is trying to communicate. e.g. If a person is smiling, nodding, leaning forward and taking notes, one could comfortably conclude they are genuinely interested in what they are hearing.
7. **Incongruent Behaviour** - If a person's words say one thing but their non-verbal behaviour does not match then you need to pay careful attention. Research reveals that when words fail to be consistent with non-verbal signals, people tend to ignore what has been *said* and concentrate instead on non-verbal expressions of moods, thoughts, and emotions. e.g. a person might say "I'm fine" but they look to the ground and their voice tone signals you otherwise.
8. **Ask Questions** - If you are getting confused messages about a person's non-verbal signals, ask questions to clarify what they really mean or re-state what you think they have said. e.g. "So what you are saying is that..." or "By that statement do you mean..."

According to Alton Barbour, author of "*Louder Than Words: Nonverbal Communication*," the total impact of a message breaks down like this:

7% **WHAT** you say (words)

38% **HOW** you say it  
(volume, pitch, tone,  
rhythm, etc)

55% Your **BODY** language  
(facial expressions,  
gestures, posture, etc)

Finally, **Practice, practice, practice** - Being able to "read people" is a skill you can build by watching and practicing different types of non-verbal communication with others. By enhancing these skills, you can dramatically improve your communication abilities.

**Want to learn more?** Visit our [website](#) to check out our [Communication Strategies](#) pages. We invite you to benefit now and learn new communication skills and tips for free by signing up for our [bi-monthly Newsletter](#) "**Getting to Agreement**" which provides practical "how to" articles in every issue. Topics include our regular communication focus, [collaboration](#), [mediation](#), [negotiation strategies](#), questions and answers from subscribers and clients, recommended reading, case studies and website updates. **Every issue has a specific article dedicated to an aspect of communication** and is packed full of **practical "how to" tools** and techniques for communicating more effectively and achieving satisfying outcomes. **Click [here](#) for a free sample** of our Newsletter and start improving your skills today.