

Nonverbal communication: a serious business advantage

[Sociology, Communication](#)



Business Advantage 2 NonverbalCommunication: A Serious Business

Advantage Whether it is called intuition or just good judgment, the ability to perceive and to use nonverbal cues to one's advantage gives the business person the power and the skill to be more successful. T. S. Eliot wrote in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, " There will be time, there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet. " Perhaps he meant that those in business must be prepared in such a way as to make their face agree with the message that the consumer expects to receive.

The communication experts agree that when two people have a face-to-face conversation only a small fraction of the total message they share is actually contained in the words they use. A portion of the message is contained in the tone of voice, accent, speed, volume, and inflection. However, approximately 93 percent of it is understood through nonverbal communication behaviors (Source needed). The combination of gestures, postures, facial expressions, and even clothing can support or interfere with the verbal messages that a person delivers.

The importance of nonverbal cues in the business world has not been studied extensively, but it only makes sense that it can have a strong impact on any communication within or outside the business realm. For instance, selling is an area where the nonverbal actions can make or break a deal. People are unlikely to want to buy from a sales person who refuses to make eye contact, who has poor posture, who lacks energy, and who seems unconvinced about the products and services represented. The importance

of nonverbal communication in conjunction with appropriate verbal skills can make a difference to the success of a business transaction.

Therefore, this paper will Business Advantage 3 examine nonverbal communication as an important and integral component for business organizations and will determine nonverbal cues that are beneficial for successful business interactions. The ability to perceive and use nonverbal cues to one's advantage gives the business person the power to be successful. Nonverbal communication includes any part of the body used by a person to send a message to another person. A person's dress, attitude and movements are all contributions to personal business transactions.

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These cues can help a business owner get the message across or be able to correctly interpret a message received from a customer. Often the nonverbal messages express true feelings more accurately than the actual words. A study by Fatt (1998), notes that any communication in interpersonal relationships is insufficient with just mere words (p. 1). Consequently, he states, “ Nonverbal communication thus becomes the yardstick against which words and intentions are measured” (p. 1). The most common use of nonverbal communication in business has been in marketing research.

It is used to determine consumers' attitudes towards new products. For example, executives watching a focus test group pay more attention to the nonverbal cues of the group. They are able to more closely identify the test group's true feelings by observing their body language, facial expressions and eye contact. Facial expressions especially are particularly helpful as they

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can show hidden emotions that contradict their verbal statements (Remland, 1981, p. 18). Additionally, in business settings, the way one is viewed affects his transactions. Martin Remland (1981) writes that as much as 90 percent of a manager's time is spent

Business Advantage 4 communicating with others face-to-face (p. 2). Therefore, business people especially managers have to present themselves as a complete package that includes knowledge of their products, appropriate dress, and adequate use of nonverbal behaviors that depicts sincerity and trustworthiness. Nonverbal behavior is a major component of power perception in a business setting. Within a business, the main function of nonverbal communication is to facilitate relationships. Organizations have two major sectors—management and staff—who are usually at odds with each other.

According to Aquinis and Henle (2001), “ The effective use of power and the perceptions of one's power by subordinates, peers and superiors are critical determinants of managerial and organizational success” (p. 537). In this study on perception of power bases, Aquinis and Henle used three specific nonverbal behaviors—eye contact, facial expression, and body posture (p. 538). They defined power as the “ potential of an agent to alter a target's behavior, intentions, attitude, beliefs, emotion, or values” (p. 538). They also used French and Raven's power taxonomy that includes five types (p. 538).

The first is reward power that means the target believes he can get “ something” from the agent. Second is the coercive power where the target thinks the agent can and will punish him. The third power is legitimate power

where the target must obey what the agent requests. Referent power is the need for the target to be associated with the agent. Lastly, the expert power is the target's belief that the agent is very knowledgeable. Using these definitions of power in vignettes, Aguinis and Henle manipulated one employee's nonverbal behavior while asking a second employee to rate the power base.

Business Advantage 5 They found that direct eye contact and a relaxed facial expression increased perception of power except for coercive power. Body posture had no effect at all. There are other less sophisticated indicators that also signify status. These include behaviors and appearance cues such as clothing, age, gender, and race. In a study by Mast and Hall (2004), the accuracy of judging other people's status based on behavioral and appearance cues was investigated. They found that only one cue was used to determine if a woman was in higher status.

That was a downward head tilt. In males, the observers used both formal dress and a forward lean (p. 161). Mast and Hall also indicated that erect posture was not indicative of status in their research (p. 161). Communication experts agree that in face-to-face communication 93 percent of the message is nonverbal and only seven percent is in the actual words which is absolutely necessary to understand in a business setting. Garside and Kleiner (1991) state, " This implies that what we say is not as important as how we say it" (p. 26).

Today's businesses need employees who are not only knowledgeable in their field but who also have exceptional interpersonal skills. It is understood that

most successful executives prefer verbal communication because it allows them to read body language and to hear tone of voice. Fatt (1998) believes that knowledge of nonverbal processes of communication can improve business success. According to Fatt, "...face-to-face communication, which is heavily weighted with nonverbal information stimulates the greatest number of senses, and provides more complete information than any other mode" (p.). Business Advantage 6 Since knowledge of nonverbal processes can enhance business success, it is important to recognize and use appropriate nonverbal cues. The first of these is face-to-face communication which provides immediate feedback that allows the business person to modify one's approach to meet the needs of each encounter. In a research study by Graham, Unruh, and Jennings (1991), they gathered information on the importance of nonverbal feedback to accurate assessments in business transactions.

Their findings indicated that nonverbal communication was important to all surveyed and showed that most relied on facial expressions for accurate information. Their recommendations for businesses included, "...paying more attention to nonverbal cues, engaging in more eye contact, and probing for more information when verbal and nonverbal cues are discrepant" (p. 60). One way to do so is through reinforcement behavior that demonstrates approval or disapproval. Also, response-matching is a way in which the business person uses a similar style of speech, posture, or gestures.

Thirdly, accommodation is a way of adjusting to personal styles of those involved. It involves " issues of territoriality, dominance and/or

submissiveness, and intimacy” (Fatt, 1998, p. 5). Professionals must use this feedback to note the body language to modify and adjust to the receiver’s behaviors. Another factor to consider is that face-to-face also allows a portion of the message to be contained in vocal elements. These include tone of voice, speed, volume and inflection (Graham et al. , p. 58). Establishing rapport is also a valuable result of face-to-face communication.

Rapport is essential in building good business relations with customers and co-workers. It helps Business Advantage 7 to communicate understanding and acceptance of the other person. There are behaviors that greatly contribute to establishing a personal relationship. These include: a sincere smile, a relaxed open stance, a slight lean towards the other person, and maintained eye contact. Mirroring is a very useful technique that can send as well as receive subtle nonverbal messages. In order to mirror another person, it is necessary to match their rate of breathing, speak at the same rate of speech and in their tone of voice.

It is also necessary to assume a similar posture and body language to confirm rapport and a comfortable environment. According to Fatt, “ A salesperson who mirror customer’s behavior well and out of a sincere desire to communicate or to be of service usually established a strong rapport with a customer” (p. 6). A business person also utilizes information from nonverbal sources to overcome any barriers to communication with clients. Effective communication is an important aspect of management and sales positions.

By decoding nonverbal behaviors, business people can increase their knowledge and understanding of what the client desires. In the first initial contact first impressions can affect both sides of the business transaction. Therefore, a person who displays confidence has a great advantage in developing rapport and trust with business associates. One's ability to signal trustworthiness is a significant result of knowledge of nonverbal communication. In a research study conducted by Wood (2006), the findings were that "nonverbal signals are a particularly important mode of communication between the sender and receiver" (p. 02). Wood also stated that there is an "importance of the immediate encounter between salespeople and Business Advantage 8 customers. During the first encounter, these nonverbal signals are sought out, perceived, and used by customers in their assessment of the trustworthiness of salespeople" (p. 202). Therefore, by using and focusing on nonverbal techniques, the business person can give signals of trustworthiness. Additionally, Wood found that for salespeople all nonverbal signals have a significant impact on the customers (p. 202).

Along with confidence, the business person must have an adequate knowledge of reading nonverbal signals. For those with confidence, this type of communication is very natural and they give little thought to it. They greet customers and associates with a firm handshake that send a statement about their confidence. In addition, unflinching eye contact is a sign of frankness and interest which are both essential to sway and sell. David Morand (2001) presented research that suggested management also needed to be able to appraise emotional expressions of customers.

He stated, " Sensing others' emotional states is obviously a skill central to the whole notion of interpersonal communicative competency" (p. 23). He found that it was essential for " managers to have the ability to decode messages sent by others, specifically focusing on messages existing at a nonverbal emotional level" (p. 23). There are also nontraditional uses of nonverbal communication in the business setting. For instance, the business facility makes a visible statement that reflects its own perceptions. It makes a visible statement about its culture and the way business is done at that facility.

One example of this is the head-quarters of Bank of America. It is a very dark, large structure that looms over all the other buildings near it. This sends a powerful message of the perceptions of their company image (Fatt, 1998, p. 2). Larson and Kleiner Business Advantage 9 (2004) claim, " A company with a strong culture and a lot of pride in itself will typically reflect that pride through its physical environment" (p. 2). Additionally, the office furnishings give more information to customers. The furniture of employees gives clues as to the status of that person in the company.

If one is on the bottom of the work hierarchy, there probably would be a small, cheaply-made desk with a small chair. The next class would add arms to the chair and some other piece of furniture. Management would have larger desks, a bookshelf and a table. Finally, the top executives would have plush carpeting and a sofa in addition to what those below had (p. 2). Included in the physical aspects of a business is the office environment. Businesses that are more open with very few walls rely on constant

communication. They send the message that there are few barriers to communication.

The physical aspects of a business help customers to gain insight into the organization and to the people who work within it (Larson & Kleiner, p. 3). Another nontraditional use of nonverbal communication in the business setting is through the use of computers with growing online businesses. Online businesses are at a disadvantage without the assistance of nonverbal interactions. However, according to Timothy Bickmore (2004), there is a huge need for programs that recognize and receive nonverbal signals in order to increase sales volume (p. 9). In addition, many companies are utilizing text messaging and instant messaging for customer assistance. Qiu and Benbasat (2005) investigated advancement for programming to develop a trust relationship since this medium is void of any nonverbal signals (p. 75). They state, " With the help of emerging multimedia technologies, companies can now use computer-generated voice and humanoid avatars to embody customer service representatives, thus enriching the interactive experiences of their customers" (p. 75).

Bickmore adds, " Embodied conversational agents (ECAs) are animated humanoid computer characters that emulate face-to-face conversations through the use of hand gestures, facial display, head motion, gaze behavior, body posture, and speech intonation" (p. 39). However, Bickmore also states, " There is no cookbook defining all of the rules for human face-to-face interaction that human-computer interface practitioners can simply

implement” (p. 44). Until ECAs are fully functioning, companies should continue with the proven face-to-face interactions to improve sales volume.

Because businesses try to eliminate unnecessary travel and expenses, they are utilizing such mediums as videoconferencing. Even though videoconferencing can replace business meetings, there are disadvantages. The immediate feedback that comes with face-to-face contains cues from the facial expression, voice inflection, and gestures is often not as effective with videoconferencing. For instance, Bekkering and Shim (2006) state, “ With a slow signal, it may appear to the viewer that the speaker hesitates, and hesitation in answering is generally considered to be a sign of dishonesty” (p. 105).

Another concern is that the camera used can be manipulated to improve one’s advantage such as making one appear taller and giving more influence over the meeting. A third concern involves turn-taking cues. “ In face-to-face conversations, participants alternate speaking and listening by using an intricate mechanism of verbal and nonverbal cues” (p. 105). These researchers go on to say that in videoconferencing one gives up eye contact because it is distorted by separation of screen and camera (p. 105). This infers Business Advantage 11 that perhaps the speaker is being deceptive, and, thus, there is a lack of trust.

Therefore, business people will find face-to-face communication a better source of feedback as well as a better rapport builder. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “ What you do speaks so loud that I cannot hear what you say” (Inspirational Quotes). This has never been truer than in today’s business

world. There is a vital link between nonverbal communication and business success. Because of this, body language and other nonverbal cues are communication tools that are too powerful to be ignored. Nonverbal communication can enhance a business person's powers to persuade while removing any communication barriers with clients.

It can improve relationships between the work hierarchies, thus changing the work atmosphere to be more productive. Additionally, it can serve in a nontraditional manner where the business facility itself makes a statement about the company image. The uses of understanding nonverbal communication in a work environment are endless. Therefore, there is still a definite need for training in this area for all employees of a business. This training would complete the business person's package that includes required knowledge of the business represented, charisma, and employability skills.

In conclusion, since effective communication is based on skills, and skills can be learned, then communication abilities can be improved in the business environment. It is an integral part of hearing what is said in a business transaction. Business Advantage 12 References Aguinis, H. , & Henle, C. (2001). Effects of nonverbal behavior on perceptions of a female employee's power base. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 141(4), 537-549. Retrieved March 27, 2007, from EBSCOhost database (6002448). Bekkering, E. , & Shim, J. P. (2006). i2i Trust in videoconferencing. *Communications of the ACM*, 49(7), 103-107.

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