

Organizational Communication - OB 321
Supplementary Material
Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

When we are attempting to transfer our meaning to another person, we use three different modes, methods, or channels to carry our intentions. We use these modes to tell people who we are, how we experience the world, and the meaning we attach to our experience. We communicate verbally and nonverbally, and often with mixed signals OR NOISE.

When two persons, A and B, are attempting to communicate with each other, their communication is distorted by their personalities, attitudes, values, belief systems, biases, the assumptions they are making about each other, their experience, background, and so on. A's communication to B flows through A's screen and through B's screen. When B responds to A, B is responding to what she heard rather than what A might have intended. She shoots her message back to B through her own screen of attitudes, values, and so on, through A's screen. What is often not understood is that the way we get messages through our screens and through another person's screen often is confusing and distorting in and of itself. We add to what we hear, we fail to hear, and we distort messages according to the modes that are used to convey messages.

Nonverbal Communication - Appearance and Other Cues

We say a great deal to each other about who we are and how we experience each other and the rest of the world through symbolic means. The symbolic communication mode is essentially passive, and messages emitted in this way are very easily misinterpreted.

What are some of the symbols that we use? First, our choice of clothes can tell a great deal about who we are, what our values are, what our status is, how conservative or liberal we are. We associate differences in occupational status with different uniforms. The banker wears a suit, the farmer wears overalls, and so on.

The second set of symbols with which we often associate meaning is hair. The type of hairdo, length and color of hair, and the presence or absence of facial hair say a great deal about who we are. However, these signals are often highly ambiguous.

A third symbolic form is jewelry. Married people often wear wedding rings, some people do not wear a watch, some people wear highly expensive jewelry, and so on. These are passive messages that are given out continuously to other people. A flag in the lapel, a red ribbon, an earring in one ear or in the nose say many things to other people.

A fourth form of symbolic communication to other people is cosmetics, or makeup. We associate meanings with different ways women apply makeup to their bodies. The prostitute usually has heavier makeup than other women. The man who uses a great many cosmetics is giving out a symbolic message about the meaning that his world has for him.

A fifth symbolic mode is the choice of automobiles. The business executive who drives a sports car is giving out a different set of messages to the world than his colleague who drives a luxury sedan or an ordinary family car.

A sixth symbolic mode is the choice and location of our houses. Social status is directly related to the type of dwelling one lives in and its location.

Seventh, the geography of our living spaces is a form of symbolic communication. If you sit behind your desk in your office interviewing somebody who is on the other side of the desk, you are giving out a fundamentally different set of messages than if the two of you sit face to face with no intervening furniture.

So we are giving out a continuous stream of signals about our meaning to other people through the symbols that we choose to surround ourselves and invest ourselves with. These symbols are essentially passive. They are, however, a real part of our communication. When we are talking, when we are not talking, and when we are sleeping, we emit passive symbolic signals.

Nonverbal Communication - Body Language and Vocalization

The science of nonverbal communication is called kinesics. One's nonverbal communication, or body language, is usually involuntary, and the nonverbal signals are expressed through behavior as well as verbally and also have symbolic meaning.

There are a number of forms of body language. Ambulation is a first form. We associate different meanings to different ways people carry their bodies from one place to another. How one carries her body, whether she glides, strides, stomps, etc. tells a great deal about who she is and how she is experiencing her environment.

Touching is perhaps the most powerful nonverbal communication form. The skin is the body's largest organ, and through the skin we take in a variety of stimuli. We can communicate anger, interest, trust, tenderness, warmth, and a variety of other emotions very potently through touching. People differ, however, in their willingness to touch and be touched. Some people give out nonverbal body signals that say that they do not want to be touched, and there are other people who describe themselves and are described by others as "touchy feely." There are many taboos associated with this form of communication. Persons can learn about their own personalities and self concepts through exploring their reactions to touching and being touched.

Eye contact is a third form of nonverbal communication. We tend to size each other up in terms of trustworthiness through reactions to each other's eye contact. Try a little experiment with yourself. Remember the last time you were driving down the road and passed a hitch-hiker. The odds are very high that you did not look him in the eye if you passed him up. Con artists and salespeople understand the power of eye contact and use it to good advantage. Counselors understand that eye contact is a very powerful way of communicating understanding and acceptance. Speakers understand that eye contact is important in keeping an audience interested in one's subject.

Posturing is a fourth form of nonverbal communication. How one postures the body when seated or standing constitutes a set of potential signals that may communicate how one is experiencing his environment. A person who folds his arms and legs is often said to be defensive. It is sometimes observed that a person under severe psychological threat will assume the body position of a fetus. The seductive person opens his body to other people and postures himself so that his entire body is exposed to the other person.

Tics constitute a fifth form of nonverbal communication. The involuntary nervous spasms of the body can be a key to one's being threatened. A number of people stammer or jerk when they are being threatened. But these mannerisms can be easily misinterpreted.

Subvocals constitute a sixth form of nonverbal communication. We say uh, uh, uh, when we are trying to find a word. We say a lot of non-word things in order to carry meaning to another person; we stammer, we hum, we grunt, we groan and so on. These subvocal noises are not words, but they do carry meaning.

Distancing is a seventh form of nonverbal communication. Each person is said to have a psychological space around her. If another person invades that space, she may become somewhat tense, alert, or jammed up. We tend to place distance between ourselves and others according to the kinds of relationships that we have and what our motives are toward each other. These reasons for establishing distances are often not displayed openly, but the behavior is, nevertheless, interpreted.

Gesturing is an eighth form of nonverbal communication. It is said that if we tie a Frenchman's hands, he is mute. We carry a great deal of meaning between each other through the use of gestures. But gestures do not mean the same thing to all people. Sometimes people attach a different emphasis or meaning to the hand signals that we give out. For example, the A-OK sign, a circle formed by the thumb and the first forefinger, is considered very obscene in some other countries. The "We're number one signal" is also considered obscene in some cultures. We give emphasis to our words and we attempt to clarify our meaning through the use of gestures.

Vocalism or inflection constitutes a ninth form of nonverbal communication. As an example, take the sentence, "I love my children." That sentence is meaningless unless it is pronounced. The way that sentence is packaged vocally determines the signal that it gives to another person. For example, if the emphasis is on the first word, "I love my children," the implication is somebody else doesn't. If the emphasis is on the second word, "I love my children," a different implication is given, perhaps that some of their behavior gets on my nerves. If the emphasis is placed on the third word, "I love my children," the implication is that someone else's children do not receive the same affection. If the emphasis is placed on the final word, "I love my children," a fourth implication may be drawn, that is, that there are other people whom I do not love. So the way we carry our words vocally often determines the meaning that another person is likely to infer from our message.

Verbal Communication

The communication mode which we rely on most often to carry meaning from one person to another is the verbal mode. Everyone who has ever thought about it has come to the insight, however, that there are enormous difficulties in sole reliance on this mode of communication. History is replete with examples of misunderstandings among people who were relying on words to carry meaning. Perhaps the most significant learning that has come out of this experience has been that words themselves do not have meaning. People have meaning, and words are simply tools that we use for trying to convey meaning that is idiosyncratic to one person into the idiosyncratic meaning system of the other person. One of the difficulties with words is that we attach to them different experiential and emotional connotations. Words are not always associated with similar experiences or similar feelings on the part of the listener and speaker. Other difficulties encountered in using the verbal mode include the use of jargon, the use of clichés, and the use of specialized vocabularies. It is often said that words have meaning only in context; it can be better said that words only have meaning when they are associated with people in context.

It is not uncommon to observe people attempting to find the right words to say what they mean. There is a myth that there is a way to "say it right." If we extrapolate from that phenomenon, it is easy to hypothesize that there are some people who, instead of experiencing feelings and sensations, more often experience language; that is, their experience parameters are defined by their vocabularies and their ability to be articulate. The psychologist, Piaget, describing cognitive development in children, says that we go through three phases: concrete, imagic, and abstract. When the little baby first experiences the world, he is incapable of a highly differentiated emotional or sensational experience. He experiences only distress or delight, and his/her major inputs are concrete; that is, he touches, tastes, sees, hears, and smells things. As it becomes necessary for him to interact with the world and significant others in his environment in order to have his needs met, he develops a fantasy

life, an imagic experience. He can imagine mother when mother is not concretely present. That fantasy life can remain throughout his life. As he develops verbal fluency, he begins to abstract, from physical stimuli which bombard him and from the images that are triggered by those stimuli, meanings which he attaches to his experiences. This abstract experience is a translation of sense data into a meaning system. The difficulty with adults, of course, is that very often we do not let into awareness the physical sensations which we experience. We often mistrust our fantasy lives and tend to be afraid to permit ourselves to dream. We experience the world, then, in an abstract way rather than in a concrete and imagic way. The meanings that we permit ourselves to be aware of are verbal and abstract. What we abstract from the physical stimuli which we experience is dependent on our vocabularies and our reasoning abilities. But those three layers of experience concrete, imagic, and abstract are going on continuously. People experience concretely, people experience imagically, and people experience the abstracting process which they do when they are awake and attributing meaning to what they see, hear, feel, taste, touch. Not all of these meanings can be carried from one person to another through the verbal mode only.

Summary and Implications

These two modes of communication - verbal and nonverbal - are used by every person when he/she is awake and talking. Nonverbal signals and cues are continuous, just as are our experiences of the world in concrete and imagic ways.

A steady stream of nonverbal signals is being emitted from us to other people. Our bodies, voluntarily or involuntarily, also give out a continuous stream of messages to other people. Those messages, of course, may be different from what we intend. There is also the possibility that our intentions are not highly correlated with our actual gut-level experience. When we are awake and talking with each other, we are giving out three sets of signals. These signals may not be correlated with each other. Our tongues may be saying one thing, our bodies saying another thing, and our appearance may be saying a third thing. True communication results when people share a common meaning experience. If there is a consistency among the cues that one is using to share meaning, then communication is much more likely to occur. When one is saying one thing and experiencing another, (s)he is giving out confusing, mixed signals that can be very misleading to another person.

The implications are clear. For communication to occur, there must be a two-way interchange of feelings, ideals and values. One-way communication is highly inefficient in that there is no way to determine whether what is heard is what is intended. The office memo is a form of one-way communication which is perhaps the least effective medium for transmitting meaning. A second implication is that for true communication to be experienced, it is necessary that there be a feedback process inherent in the communication effort. There needs to be a continuous flow back and forth among the people attempting to communicate, sharing what they heard from each other. The third implication is that the individual person needs to become acutely aware of the range of signals which (s)he is emitting at any given moment. (S)He can learn that by soliciting feedback from the people with whom (s)he is attempting to share meaning.