



## [DR. SHIRLEY'S CAREER CORNER]

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# Body talk: Communication or confusion

“Actions speak louder than words.” How often during your lifetime have you heard that quote? Does it ring true?

A vital form of the communication process often overlooked is nonverbal communication. It is a powerful tool that helps us to connect with others, express what we really mean and maneuver through difficult situations. Needless to say, nonverbal communication has a significant impact on the overall quality of our relationships, both professionally and personally.

When we interact with others, we continuously send and receive a myriad of wordless cues. Our level of eye contact, the gestures we make, how we walk and sit, other body movements, vocal qualities (tone, pitch, rate, volume, inflection), touch and personal space are all nonverbal behaviors that can send strong messages. These messages can generate a sense of trust, interest and credibility, or they can produce distrust, disinterest and confusion.

Keep in mind that when your verbal message (the words you speak) is contradicted by your nonverbal message, you send a mixed message to others. Based on research published in the book, “Silent Messages,” by Dr. Albert Mehrabian, more than 90 percent of the time, the receiver of your mixed message will believe only the nonverbal aspect.

Dane Archer, of the University of California at Santa Cruz, in his video series, “Exploring Nonverbal Communication,” cites the following as nonverbal elements we should all consider.

- Facial expressions. The human

face is extremely expressive, able to convey countless emotions without saying a word. And unlike some forms of nonverbal communication, expressions for happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, fear and disgust are the same across cultures.

- Eye contact. Eye contact is an especially important form of nonverbal communication. The way you look at someone can communicate many things — interest, hostility, attraction, etc. It is also important in gauging the other person’s response and in maintaining the flow of conversation. However, you should also be aware of how eye contact is viewed by other cultures.

- Body movements and posture. Consider how your perceptions of people are impacted by the way they walk, sit, slouch, stand up straight or hold their head. The way you move and carry yourself communicates a wealth of information. This includes your posture, bearing, stance and various subtle movements.

- Gestures. They are woven into the very fabric of our daily lives. We wave, point, beckon and use our hands when we’re expressing ourselves, often without thinking. However, the meaning of gestures can be very different across cultures and regions, so it’s important to be careful to avoid misinterpretation.

- Touch. We communicate a great deal through touch. Think about the messages given by the following: a firm handshake, a timid tap on the shoulder, a warm bear hug, a reassuring slap on the back, a patronizing pat on the head or a controlling grip on your arm.

- Voice. Yes, we actually communicate in a nonverbal manner with our voices. Vocal sounds such as tone, pitch, volume, inflection, rhythm and rate are important nonverbal elements. When we speak, others “read” our voices in addition to listening to our words. These subtle speech sounds provide minute but powerful clues into our true feelings and what we really mean. Think about how tone of voice, for example, can be a sign of anger, sarcasm, affection or confidence.

- Space/proximity. Have you ever felt uncomfortable during a conversation because the other person was standing too close and invading your “personal” space? Well, we all have a need for physical space, although that need differs depending on the culture, the situation and the closeness of the relationship. You can use proximity to communicate many different nonverbal messages, including cues of aggression, dominance, professionalism or affection.

Successful nonverbal communication depends on an understanding of the cues you’re sending, coupled with the ability to accurately pick up on the cues others are transmitting to you. When you increase your power in this facet of communication, you will begin to experience improved rapport with and a better understanding of others, which in turn, can certainly lead to expanded trust, confidence and credibility.

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