

The Importance of Non-Verbal Communication

We tend to be less aware of the nonverbal accompaniment to much of what we say than we are to the actual words we speak. We often carefully monitor and edit our words to achieve the desired effect, but **how** we are saying them as likely more important. Being mindful of our non-verbal communication can prevent the wrong or unintended message from inadvertently being passed on.

Face-to-face communication allows for the most richness in non-verbal communication; this richness recedes from our interactions as we move from telephone conversations to e-mail, memos, bulletins and post-it notes. These forms of communication, however, still require that we pay significant attention to elements of our messages that could lead to unintended interpretations.

Overall, communication consists of:

Body Language	55%
Paralanguage (tone, volume)	38%
Verbal Content	7%

Non-Verbal Communication can...

- **Repeat** the verbal message (point in a direction while stating directions)
- o **Accent** a verbal message. (verbal tone indicates the actual meaning of the specific words)
- o **Complement** the verbal message (a nod reinforces a positive message (among Americans);
- o **Contradict** the verbal message (saying something is true while avoiding eye contact or nervously fidgeting)
- o **Regulate** interactions (touching someone's arm to signal that you want to talk next)
- o **Substitute** for the verbal message (especially if it is blocked by noise, interruption; nodding instead of saying yes.
- o **Change the meaning of words** (e.g. saying "Okay" as a scream or a whisper)

Our reliance on non-verbal communication is especially intense when we are:

- In emotional or stressful situations
- Feeling threatened, vulnerable or powerless
- Feeling confused about someone's intentions, or feel we are getting mixed messages
- When we are talking with someone from a different culture, work area, or group with which we have little familiarity

Key components of thoughtful non-verbal communication include:

- ✓ **Eye Contact:** look the person in the eye during the conversation
- ✓ **Physical distance:** maintain a comfortable distance between you and the other person
- ✓ **Posture:** lean slightly forward in a relaxed and open posture
- ✓ **Gestures:** avoid fidgeting and distracting motions
- ✓ **Volume:** loud enough to be heard
- ✓ **Facial expression:** relaxed, showing positive regard to the other
- ✓ **Tone:** even, natural. Avoid sarcasm, whining.

In email: cautious use of exclamation points and question marks (e.g. using multiple question marks), bold, underline, color, emoticons and other highlights. When in doubt, have someone else read your email to check for differing interpretations.