

## WHAT IS NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION?

Sometimes it is difficult to know how other people really feel. Often they do not know for sure themselves and other times they have reason for not wanting to tell us. In either case, there are times when we cannot find out what is going on inside another person's mind simply by asking. What should we do in these cases? They happen every day, often in the most important situations.

Stop for a moment and examine yourself as you read this. If someone were observing you now, what nonverbal clues would they get about how you are feeling? Are you sitting forward or reclining? Is your posture tense or relaxed? Are your eyes wide open or do they keep closing? What does your facial expression communicate? Can you make your face expressionless? Do people with expressionless faces communicate something to you? Of course, we do not always intend to send non-verbal messages. Consider, for instance, behaviors like blushing, frowning, sweating, or stammering. We rarely try to act in these ways, and often we are not aware when we are doing so.

### **Non-verbal Communication Transmits Feelings**

Without being able to use words, people's bodies generally express how they feel-nervous, embarrassed, playful, friendly, etc. Here is a list that contains both thoughts and feelings. How would you express each item non-verbally? Which ones are easier to express?

You are tired.

You are attracted to another person in the group.

You are angry at someone in the group.

### **Functions of Non-verbal Communication**

Non-verbal behaviors can *repeat what is said verbally*. If someone asked you for directions to the nearest drugstore, you could say, "Go North for two blocks," and then repeat your instructions non-verbally by pointing north.

Non-verbal messages may also *substitute for verbal messages*. When you see a familiar friend wearing a certain facial expression, you do not need to ask, "How is it going?" In the same way, experience has probably shown you that other kinds of looks, gestures, and other clues say, "I am angry at you," or, "I feel great," far better than words.

Non-verbal messages can *complement verbal messages*. If you saw a student talking to a teacher, and his head was bowed slightly, his voice was low and hesitating, and he shuffled slowly from foot to foot, you might conclude that he felt inferior to the teacher, possibly embarrassed about something he did. The non-verbal behaviors you observed provided the context for the verbal behaviors-they conveyed the relationship between the teacher and student. Complementing non-verbal behaviors signal the attitudes the people have for one another.

Non-verbal behaviors can also *accent verbal messages*. Just as we can use Italics in print to highlight an idea, we can emphasize some part of a face-to-face message in various ways. Pointing an accusing finger adds emphasis to criticism (as well as probably creating defensiveness in the receiver). The shrugging shoulders accents confusion, and hugs reflect excitement or affection.

Non-verbal behavior also serves to *regulate verbal behavior*. By lowering your voice at the end of a sentence, "trailing off," you indicate that the other person may speak. You can also convey this information through the use of eye-contact and by the way you position your body.

Non-verbal behavior can often contradict the spoken word. People express different and even contradictory messages simultaneously in their verbal and non-verbal behaviors. A common example of this sort of "double message" is the experience we have all had of hearing someone with a red face and bulging veins yelling, "Angry? No! I am not angry!"

## TYPES OF NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

### **Body-Orientation**

Body-orientation is the degree to which we face toward or away from someone with our body, feet, and head. Facing someone directly signals your interest, and facing away signals a desire to avoid involvement. This explains how we can pack ourselves into a crowded elevator, standing at intimate distances, without offending others. Because there is a very indirect orientation here (everyone is usually standing shoulder to shoulder, facing in the same direction), we understand that despite the close quarters everyone wants to avoid personal contact.

### **Posture**

Another way we communicate non-verbally is through our posture. To see if this is true, stop reading for a moment and notice how you are sitting. What does your position say non-verbally about how you feel? Are there any other

people near you now? What messages do you get from their posture? By paying attention to the postures of those around you, as well as your own, you will find another channel of non-verbal communication that can furnish information about how people feel about themselves and each other.

### Gestures

Gestures are another good source of non-verbal communication. In an article titled, "Non-verbal Leakage and Clues to Deception," Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen observed how gestures transmit emotions. They explained that because most of us, at least unconsciously, know that the face is the most obvious channel of expressing emotions, we are especially careful to control our facial expressions when trying to hide our feelings. But more of us are less aware of the ways we move our hands, legs, and feet, and because of this these movements are better indicators of how we truly feel. Have you ever seen anyone say that "everything is fine" while ceaselessly biting their fingernails, tapping their pencil, bending paper clips, and so on? It is possible to observe anger by looking beyond a smile and noticing the whitened knuckles and clenched fists.

### The Face and Eyes

The face and eyes are probably the most noticed parts of the body. Ekman and Friesen have identified six basic emotions that facial expressions reflect--surprise, fear, anger, disgust, happiness, and sadness. The eyes themselves can send several kinds of messages. Meeting someone's glance with your eyes is usually a sign of involvement, while looking away signals a desire to avoid contact. Most of us remember trying to avoid a question we did not understand by glancing away from the teacher. At times like these we usually became very interested in our textbooks, fingernails, the clock--anything but the teacher's stare. Of course, the teacher always seemed to know the meaning of this non-verbal behavior and ended up picking on those of us who signaled our uncertainty.

### Voice

The voice itself is another channel of non-verbal communication. How we say words is as important as what we say. If you think about it for a moment, you will realize that a certain way of speaking can portray different meanings. For example, look at the possible meanings from a single sentence just by changing the word emphasis:

- This** is a fantastic communication book.  
(Not just any book, but this one in particular.)
- This is a **fantastic** communication book.  
(This book is superior, exciting.)
- This is a fantastic **communication** book.  
(The book is good as far as communication goes; it may not be so great as literature, drama, etc.)
- This is a fantastic communication **book**.  
(It's not a play or record, it's a book.)

There are many other ways the voice communicates feelings--through its tone, speed, pitch, and number and length of pauses, volume, disfluencies (such as stammering, use of "uh," "um," "er," and so on). All these factors together can be called "paralanguage," and they can do a great deal to reinforce or contradict the message our words convey.

### Touching

Touch seems to increase a child's mental functioning as well as physical health. L. J. Yarrow has conducted surveys which show that babies who have been given plenty of physical stimulation by their mothers have significantly higher IQ's than those receiving less contact. Touch can communicate many messages. Besides the nurturing/caring function it can convey friendship, intimacy, and aggressiveness.

### Clothing

People intentionally send messages about themselves by what they wear and we make interpretations about others on this basis. Think about the people you know. See if you can tell anything about their personal attitudes or social philosophies by the way they dress. Take a look at your friends. Do you find that the people who spend time together share the same ideas about clothing? Is there a "uniform" for political radicals and one for conservatives? Is there a high fashion "uniform" that tells the public who is in style and who is out-dated? There is a real danger inherent in reading many non-verbal messages. That danger is that we find ourselves stereotyping others on skimpy evidence, and often our interpretations are mistaken. By jumping to conclusions about another human from these surface appearances, we may very well be stereotyping ourselves out of some important relationships. There is an old generalization that you cannot judge a book by its cover. In light of what we know about non-verbal communication, we could change it to "You can tell only a little about a book from its cover; you need to have more information before you will be able to speak with any authority about it."

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