

## NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION / CUES

### Body Language

Charles Darwin, in his book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, wrote, “The power of communication between the members of the same tribe by means of language has been of paramount importance in the development of man; and the course of language is much aided by the expressive movements of the face and the body”. On paper, words are static but in face-to-face conversation message is conveyed at two levels simultaneously—verbal and nonverbal. Body language is a non-verbal communication and is an integral part of oral interaction. Nature has gifted human beings with the body that has a surprising versatility of expression. It keeps on communicating endlessly, round the clock, with an infinite variety of abstract signals, that too without getting tired. Although the most part of non-verbal communication is involuntary, it accounts for a larger part of the total message than the words. A research done by Albert Mehrabin, Professor Emeritus in psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), reports that words are only 7 per cent, voice tonality 38 per cent and body language 55 percent in a message. Body language gives listeners important clues about thoughts and feelings of a speaker, confirming or contradicting the words he/she speaks. We achieve complete communication when our body works with our ideas. Body language should not be considered in isolation; rather, it should be taken in a broader perspective of personal appearance and grooming, posture, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, paralinguistic aspects of speech and space (proxemics) and touch. A study of the following aspects of body language can help you acquire a deeper understanding of body language and motivate you to develop the right ones.

### Appearance and Dress

Appearance and dress are part and parcel of the message that we transmit to the listeners. The first impression is a lasting impression and the first thing we communicate about ourselves is through our appearance. Right from your hairstyle to your footwear, appearance speaks a lot about you. Well-groomed people are generally regarded as people with skills, intelligence and professionalism, while a dishevelled appearance puts them at a disadvantage in the eyes of the observers.

### Posture

Posture plays an important role in communication and it can be positive or negative according to the situation. Good posture is a natural alignment of the body. A physiotherapist would advise one to keep ears, shoulders and hipbone in a straight line while sitting and on standing the same should be from hip down to the knee. A gait appears confident if a person walks straight and squared shouldered with stomach in. Not only this, holding the head awkwardly puts a lot of strain on the neck and shoulders, extending the tension throughout the body, while an unnatural posture makes the body a mass of stresses resulting in an undue strain on our vocal cords. Crossed arms and legs may indicate an unseen barrier or a negative attitude. Similarly, leaning away from the speaker most likely shows opposition, while leaning forward means that a person is open, honest and interested. A slumped posture presents a person in low spirits while an erect posture shows his/her high spirits, energy and confidence. Posture, as far as possible, should be natural to your body but it should be examined and corrected if it is not up to the mark. With sincere and determined efforts one can get rid of inappropriate traits and develop the right way of walking, sitting and standing.

## **Gestures**

Gestures refer to the movements made by hands, arms, shoulders, head and torso. Sincere and meaningful gestures not only drive a point home but also add greater value to what is being said. Gestures clarify ideas and reinforce them; hence, they should be well suited to the audience as well as to the occasion. Too many gestures make a person look theatrical. For example, hand movements should be used to add emphasis to what is being said without waving arms around all over the place. Playing with earrings, wrist watch, fumbling with rings, twisting a key chain, clasping hands tightly, or cracking knuckles not only distracts the listener but also indicates hesitation, nervousness or lack of confidence. For communicating monosyllables such as “yes” or “no” avoid using fingers or head as it may be annoying for some people. Sometimes involuntary gestures such as biting nails and scratching your head, can give a lot of hidden information about a person’s mental state. Dr. Alan Hirsch of St. Luke’s Medical center, Chicago, explained “*Pinocchio Syndrome*” as something when “blood rushes to the nose when people lie. This extra blood may make the nose itchy.” People who stretch the truth tend to either scratch their nose or touch it more often. Positive gestures can make us better communicators. Conscious effort and practice is required to develop the right gestures.

## **Facial Expressions**

Face is the index of the mind; it conveys warmth and sincerity and is the most expressive part of our body. Expressions that cross our face send out signals which can be encouraging as well as discouraging. A smile stands for friendliness, a frown for discontent, raised eyebrows for disbelief, tightened jaw muscles for antagonism, etc. It puts the vocal cords at ease and helps the speaker sound interesting. Facial expressions are subtle as the face rarely sends a single message; rather it communicates a series of messages—anxiety, recognition, hesitation and pleasure—at the same time. Facial expressions should be encouraging. It has been seen that people often assume virtual masks which are rigid and incommunicable. For instance, if the mask is that of tight lips and a tense jaw with little expression, speakers may not get enough encouragement to talk. Some faces are very expressive while some are not. Let your expressions be natural and you should be careful enough not to display negative signs such as consistent frowning. At the same time, expressions should match the content of the verbal message.

## **Eye Contact**

Eyes are considered to be the window of the soul; hence, eye contact is a direct and powerful form of non-verbal communication. Eyes are a rich source of feedback as a speaker looks at the listeners to find how they are reacting—are they bored, asleep or interested? The listeners too may search for truthfulness, intelligence, attitude and feelings of the speaker. If a speaker or a listener avoids eye contact, it may mean that he/she is guilty of something or is telling a lie. In a small group one should look at everyone at eye level, neither above their heads nor at the walls or at the other places. In a large group one can maintain eye contact by drawing a large imaginary ‘M’ or ‘W’ round the room. Maintaining eye contact with only one part of the audience may instil a feeling of neglect amongst the rest. It is not enough that one should look at the listeners, how one looks at them also matters a lot. Consistent eye contact indicates that

the person is thinking positively of the speaker. If a person looks at the speaker but makes the arms-crossed-chest signal, the eye contact could be indicative that something is bothering the person. Fiddling with something while looking at the speaker means that the attention is somewhere else. The attention invariably wanders if a person is not being convinced by what the speaker is saying. So, we should be able to analyse the situation, particularly in the professional world and should make pleasant eye contact with the listeners to show that we are confident, concerned and interested.

## **Touch**

Touch is an important element of body language. It goes beyond and forges a bond that is more on an emotional and spiritual level than on the physical one. Touch is an inherent desire of almost all the creatures. Children instinctively seek physical contact whenever they are disturbed. As one grows older, one tends to suppress this desire possibly due to fear of social embarrassment. Touch can also convey negative feelings if it is used unwillingly. In India, one has to be careful of touch and the extent of it has its own cultural reservations.

## **The Voice of Silence**

Silence can be a very effective means of communication, if used positively and in the right context. The age old saying 'speech is silver; silence is gold' undoubtedly refers to the superiority of silence over verbal communication. A well-timed silence has more eloquence than speech. In face-to-face communication, it can communicate a number of messages. However, with the help of a right posture and proper facial expressions, silence can be highly effective.

## **Cultural Variations in Body Language**

These aspects of body language are an integral part of oral interaction and we should try to develop them for effective communication. However, some mannerisms are culture specific. Social status, age, occupation and ethnic background also influence non-verbal signs. People who are enthusiastic about communication should not take cultural differences of body signals lightly. We should know the variations that could cause failure in communication. In a country like India, there can be regional cultural variations too. For example, it has been observed that North Indians like to talk in a more informal tone than the people of the other parts of the country. A handshake, an embrace, a kiss on cheek and lips in public may be a traditional form of greeting in many western countries but in Asian countries such as India, Pakistan and China such gestures are frowned upon and are considered actions reserved for one's private life. In many cultures, 'thumbs up' is a positive sign while in Greece it is negative. In the west, most people sit when they wish to remain in place for some time, but in many Asian countries squatting is considered as primitive by some westerners. Bowing as a greeting is traditional in Japan but may be interpreted as a sign of subordination in other cultures. Therefore, one can see that it is not safe to assume that gestures used with all innocence in one country are accepted in the same manner throughout the world.