

HS 218  
CIS - 2nd year

## LEARNING OUTCOME 3

Explain the features of non-verbal communication, and recognize the importance of improving your nonverbal communication skills.

### 1-3 Learning Nonverbal Communication Skills

Psychologist and philosopher Paul Watzlawick claimed that we cannot not communicate.<sup>36</sup> In other words, it's impossible to not communicate. This means that every behavior is sending a message even if we don't use words. The eyes, face, and body convey meaning without a single syllable being spoken.

**What Is Nonverbal Communication?** Nonverbal communication includes all unwritten and unspoken messages, whether intended or not. These silent signals have a strong effect on receivers. However, understanding them is not simple. Does a downward glance indicate modesty? Fatigue? Does a constant stare reflect coldness? Dullness? Aggression? Do crossed arms mean defensiveness, withdrawal, or just that the person is shivering?

**What If Words and Nonverbal Cues Clash?** Messages are even harder to decipher when the verbal and nonverbal cues do not agree. What will you think if Scott says he is not angry, but he slams the door when he leaves? What if Alicia assures the hostess that the meal is excellent, but she eats very little? The nonverbal messages in these situations speak louder than the words. In fact, researchers believe that the bulk of any message we receive is nonverbal.

Successful communicators recognize the power of nonverbal messages. Cues broadcast by body language might be helpful in understanding the feelings and attitudes of senders. Be careful, however, before attaching specific meanings to gestures or actions because behavior and its interpretations strongly depend on context and on one's cultural background, as you will see.

#### 1-3a Your Body Sends Silent Messages

Think about how effective nonverbal behavior could benefit your career. Workplace-relevant nonverbal cues include eye contact, facial expression, body movements, time, space, territory, and appearance. These nonverbal cues affect how a message is interpreted, or decoded, by the receiver.

**Eye Contact.** The eyes have been called the windows to the soul. Even if they don't reveal the soul, the eyes are often the best predictor of a speaker's true feelings. Most of us cannot look another person straight in the eyes and lie. As a result, in North American culture, we tend to believe people who look directly at us. Sustained eye contact suggests trust and admiration; brief eye contact signals fear or stress. Good eye contact enables the message sender to see whether a receiver is paying attention, showing respect, responding favorably, or feeling distress. From the receiver's viewpoint, good eye contact, in North American culture, reveals the speaker's sincerity, confidence, and truthfulness.

**Facial Expression.** The expression on a person's face can be almost as revealing of emotion as the eyes. Experts estimate that the human face can display over 250,000 expressions.<sup>37</sup> To hide their feelings, some people can control these expressions and maintain so-called poker faces. In North America, however, most of us display our emotions openly. Raising or lowering the eyebrows, squinting the eyes, swallowing nervously, clenching the jaw, smiling broadly—these voluntary and involuntary facial expressions can add to or entirely replace verbal messages.

**Posture and Gestures.** An individual's posture can convey anything from high status and self-confidence to shyness and submissiveness. Leaning toward a speaker suggests attentiveness and interest; pulling away or shrinking back denotes fear, distrust, anxiety, or disgust. Similarly, gestures can communicate entire thoughts via simple movements. However, the meanings of some of these movements differ in other cultures. Unless you know local customs, they can get you into trouble. In the

United States and Canada, for example, forming the thumb and forefinger in a circle means everything is OK. But in parts of South America, the OK sign is obscene.

In the workplace you can make a good impression by controlling your posture and gestures. When speaking, make sure your upper body is aligned with the person to whom you're talking. Erect posture sends a message of confidence, competence, diligence, and strength. Women are advised to avoid tilting their heads to the side when making an important point to avoid seeming unsure and thus diminishing the impact of the message.<sup>38</sup>

### 1-3b Time, Space, and Territory Send Silent Messages

In addition to nonverbal messages transmitted by your body, three external elements convey information in the communication process: time, space, and territory.

**Time.** How we structure and use time tells observers about our personalities and attitudes. For example, when Warren Buffett, industrialist, investor, and philanthropist, gives a visitor a prolonged interview, he signals his respect for, interest in, and approval of the visitor or the topic to be discussed. On the other hand, when David Ing twice arrives late for a meeting, it could mean that the meeting has low priority to David, that he is a self-centered person, or that he has little self-discipline. These are assumptions that typical Americans might make.

**Space.** How we order the space around us tells something about ourselves and our objectives. Whether the space is a bedroom, a dorm room, or an office, people reveal themselves in the design and grouping of their furniture. Generally, the more formal the arrangement, the more formal and closed the communication style. An executive who seats visitors in a row of chairs across from his desk sends a message of aloofness and a desire for separation. A team leader who arranges chairs informally in a circle rather than in straight rows conveys her desire for a more open exchange of ideas.

**Territory.** Each of us has a certain area that we feel is our own territory, whether it is a specific spot or just the space around us. Your father may have a favorite chair in which he is most comfortable, a cook might not tolerate intruders in the kitchen, and veteran employees may feel that certain work areas and tools belong to them. We all maintain zones of privacy in which we feel comfortable. Figure 1.5 categorizes the four zones of social interaction among Americans, as formulated by anthropologist Edward T. Hall.<sup>39</sup> Notice that North Americans are a bit standoffish; only intimate friends and family may stand closer than about 1.5 feet. If someone

**Figure 1.5 Four Space Zones for Social Interaction**



### Chapter 1: Succeeding in the Social and Mobile Workplace





"How professionals present themselves is just as essential to their success as their expertise. If you've worked hard, yet find it difficult to be taken seriously as a qualified professional, it may be that your style doesn't match the level of your expertise. Style is often overlooked as an aspect of power and effectiveness, but it's key to building confidence and success."<sup>40</sup>

Karen Anderson Peters,  
associate, *The Leadership Style Center*

violates that territory, North Americans feel uncomfortable and may step back to reestablish their space. In the workplace be aware of the territorial needs of others and don't invade their space.

### 1-3c Appearance Sends Silent Messages

Much like the personal appearance of an individual, the physical appearance of a business document transmits immediate and important nonverbal messages. Ideally, these messages should be pleasing to the eye.

**Eye Appeal of Business Documents.** The way an e-mail, letter, memo, or report looks can have either a positive or a negative effect on the receiver. Sloppy e-mails send a nonverbal message that you are in a terrific hurry or that you do not care about the receiver. Envelopes—through their postage, quality, and printing—can suggest that the messages they carry are routine, important, or junk mail. Letters and reports can look neat, professional, well organized, and attractive—or just the opposite. In succeeding chapters you will learn how to create business documents that send positive nonverbal messages through their appearance, format, organization, readability, and correctness.

**Personal Appearance.** The way you look—your clothing, grooming, and posture—transmits an instant nonverbal message about you. Based on what they see, viewers make quick judgments about your status, credibility, personality, and potential. If you want to be considered professional, think about how you present yourself. One management consultant prefers bright-colored dresses, stiletto heels, and bling. But to be perceived as professional, she adopts a more conservative look to match the occasion and the customer: "The success I dress for is that of my *client*."<sup>41</sup> As a businessperson, you will want to think about what your appearance says about you. Although the rules of business attire have loosened up, some workers show poor judgment. You will learn more about professional attire and behavior in later chapters.



The tattoo craze in some U.S. populations continues unabated. Americans spend \$1.65 billion on tattoos annually. The Food and Drug Administration estimates that 45 million (14 percent) of Americans have at least one tattoo. The percentages almost triple among U.S. adults aged eighteen through twenty-five and twenty-six through forty (36 and 40 percent). Young people do not fear harming their job prospects, and some studies suggest that attitudes among business professionals are changing slowly.<sup>42</sup> Think twice, however, before displaying "tats" and piercings at work. Conspicuous body art may make you feel distinctive and daring, but what could be the risks for your career?