

# Communication: Mehrabian

## Albert Mehrabian communication studies

Albert Mehrabian is currently Professor Emeritus of Psychology, UCLA. He is most well known for his publications on the relative importance of verbal and nonverbal messages. Mehrabian comes to two (2) main conclusions in his studies:

1. There are basically three (3) elements in any face-to-face communication:

- Words
- Tone of voice
- Non-verbal behaviour

2. The non-verbal elements are particularly important for communicating **feelings and attitude**, especially when they are inconsistent, i.e. if words disagree with the tone of voice and nonverbal behaviour, people tend to believe the tonality and non-verbal behaviour.

According to Mehrabian, these three (3) elements account differently for our liking for the person who puts forward a message concerning their feelings:

- words account for 7%
- tone of voice accounts for 38%
- body language accounts for 55% of the liking.

They are often abbreviated as the "3 Vs" for Verbal, Vocal & Visual.

For effective and meaningful communication about emotions, these three (3) parts of the message need to support each other - they have to be "congruent". For example:

**Verbal:** *"I do not have a problem with you!"*

**Non-verbal:** *person avoids eye-contact, looks anxious, has a closed body language, etc.*

It becomes more likely that the receiver will trust the predominant form of communication, which to Mehrabian's findings is non-verbal (38% + 55%) rather than the literal meaning of the words (7%).

This is known as "the 7%-38%-55% rule".

So in summary Mehrabian found:

- 7% of message pertaining to feelings and attitudes is in the words that are spoken.

- 38% of message pertaining to feelings and attitudes is the way the words are said.
- 55% of message pertaining to feelings and attitudes is in facial expression.

Mehrabian did not intend the statistic to be used or applied freely to all communications and meaning as they frequently have been. They derived from experiments dealing with communications of **feelings and attitudes (i.e., like-dislike)**, so unless a communicator is talking about their feelings or attitudes, these equations are not applicable.

## Active listening skills

Being able to effectively communicate with parties in the workplace is a cornerstone of managing communication and behaviour in a high stress environment. It is important to be able to interact in a way that engages and maintains that level of engagement.

The five (5) principal skill components of good active listening are:

### (1) Body language/demeanour

How you respond in terms of your posture, gestures, demeanour and tone has a significant impact on the way that you are perceived by parties.

Facial expressions, body position, eye contact, attentiveness, avoiding distraction, and distracting mannerisms, and not showing disinterest or negative opinion, all assist in engaging with parties, building communication, and generation a constructive environment for effective communication.

### (2) Minimal encouragers

Even the slightest negative tone or movement can indicate to parties our support or lack of support for their involvement in a meeting process.

Nods, smiles, positive Mmmhmms and ahahhs, looks of understanding, questioning and empathy all encourage people to participate in communication which builds trust and assists them to have the confidence to discuss sometimes very difficult issues. One of the issues for those uncomfortable speaking in front of large groups of people or superiors is the sense of not being heard. Minimal encouragers help to address that issue at an early stage.

Note that these do not signal agreement.

### (3) Genuine curiosity

An approach based on genuine curiosity is as much a philosophy as a skill. The underpinning of respectful curiosity is that parties themselves understand best what is going on for them, or if

they don't, then the best way for you to find out where the gaps are is to hear them talk. A respectfully curious approach allows parties to give voice to their stories and their worldview. Parties get to talk about their situation from their perspective and you allowing them to do so provides space for interpretation and possibilities to arise that we may never think of.

Genuinely curious questions are deceptively simple. They include examples such as:

*"Why are you defending this matter?"*

*"What were you hoping to achieve by bringing attention to this item?"*

*"When you talk about X what does that look like to you?"*

#### (4) Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is a mini intervention with parties that feeds back to them what they have said in a way that assists them to know that you have heard both the factual and emotional content of what they are saying. For example:

*"You are upset because this matter has been X because they X and now they X?"*

*"You are worried because you are not X and you are not sure what you need to do here?"*

#### (5) Normalising statements

Normalising statements take a third person approach to setting parties at ease in what otherwise can be a difficult and stressful situation. The focus of a normalising statement is to relieve tension by ensuring the party knows that it is not unusual for someone in their situation to feel or respond in the way that they do. An example of a normalising statement is:

*"Many people feel overwhelmed with all of the X."*

Care needs to be taken that such comments are not experienced as judgemental or patronising.

#### (6) Summarising

The process of summarising doesn't need to be limited to the end of a meeting. A well timed (clear, fair, and well enunciated) summary of a party's explanation, statement, or proposal can be used to good effect.

Summarising back to parties gives them the sense that you have heard and understood their view of the issues. Care is necessary that they don't take your 'understanding' as agreement.

(7) Reframing

Paraphrasing, summarising and asking questions can all be done in a reframing way. The features of reframing are:

- Neutralising negative statements.
- Neutralising attacks or negative inferences against other parties.
- Restating the issue in more general terms that the parties may be able to progress from.
- Putting a series of statements into a logical progressive sequence.

Example	Reframed example
<i>"That @#\$% has never X. I was always the one that X, now he wants X so he can X. That's not what X wants"</i>	<i>"You have told me that you are and have always been there for you are worried now that X will be taken away when X wants to"</i>

Being heard and acknowledged in the process goes a long way to engaging and encouraging parties to participate in a constructive manner. Research shows that people tolerate unsatisfactory outcomes far more easily when they perceive have been heard and respected from a procedural perspective. Active listening is a cornerstone of building that level of personal and procedural satisfaction.