

Non-verbal Communication

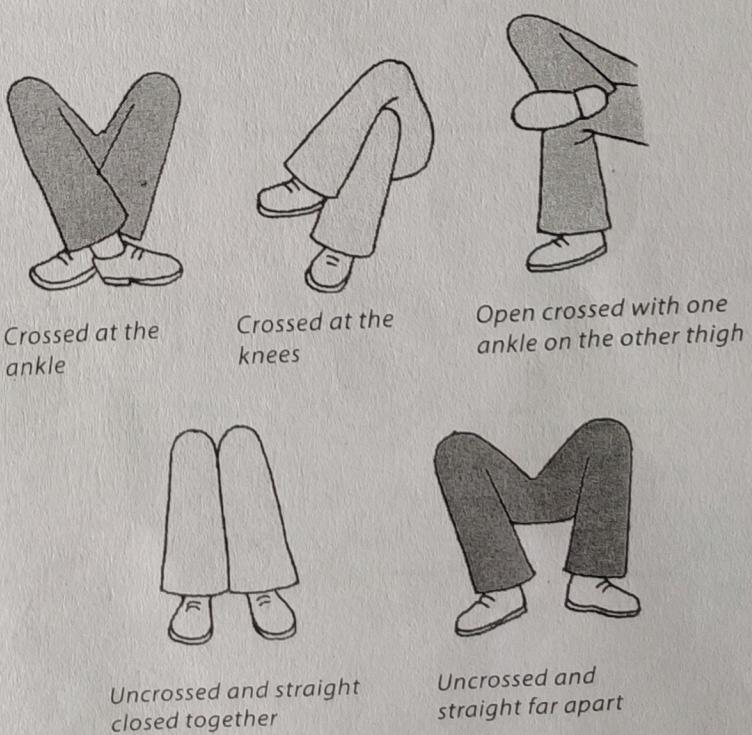
OBJECTIVES

You should study the chapter to know

- the meaning of non-verbal communication
- the different aspects of non-verbal communication such as kinesics, proxemics, and chronemics
- cross-cultural communication differences

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication takes into account both the verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication. While verbal communication is organized by language, non-verbal communication is not. This chapter discusses non-verbal communication. Non-verbal communication refers to all communication that occurs without the use of words, spoken or written. It is concerned with body movements (kinesics), space (proxemics), and vocal (paralinguistic) features. It includes all unwritten and unspoken messages, both intentional and unintentional. Non-verbal cues, however, speak louder than words, as even though speech can be made up, bodily expressions can rarely be masked well enough to hide one's true feelings and emotions.



Personal appearances, facial expressions, postures, gestures, eye contact, voice, proximity, and touch are all non-verbal signals that influence the way in which a message is interpreted and understood. Though they have a profound impact on the receivers, it is difficult to analyse them accurately. This is because the interpretation of non-verbal cues is a very subjective concept, varying based on people's varied backgrounds (refer to cross-cultural communication). Nevertheless, they must not be ignored, but recognized and understood as correctly as possible. See the PowerPoint presentation on body language in the CD. See also the GD and interview video situations on body language.

KINESICS

Kinesics is the study of the body's physical movements. It is the way the body communicates without words, i.e., through the various movements of its parts.

'You cannot not communicate. You communicate just by being. Nodding your head, blinking your eyes, shrugging shoulders, waving hands, and other such physical activities are all forms of communication.'

-Watzlawick and associates

'He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent he chats with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore.'

-Sigmund Freud

Some kinesic behaviours are deliberate. For example, you nod your head to indicate acceptance. While speaking, listening, reading, or writing, we consciously use words to receive or send ideas. Why do we use words? Because they are the primary symbolic forms that convey our thoughts. On paper, words remain static; however, punctuation marks are used to convey pauses, expressions, emotions, etc. But in face-to-face communication, the message is conveyed on two levels simultaneously. One is verbal and the other is non-verbal. For example, suppose you are congratulating two of your friends on their successful interviews. If you extend your hand to them with a big smile on your face along with the utterance, 'Congrats', your appreciation has more impact on them than the word in isolation. Your smile and the handshake are kinesics, which enhance the impact of your verbal communication.

The non-verbal part of any communication is not as deliberate and conscious as the verbal part. Rather, it is subtle and instinctive, and often involuntary. It is important to study body language because it is estimated that the verbal component of oral communication carries less than 35 per cent of the social meaning of the situation, while more than 65 per cent is attributed to body language. People react strongly to what they see.

Body Language

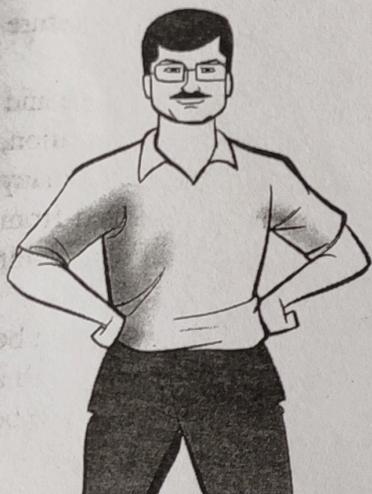
When a speaker presents himself/herself, we see him/her before we start hearing him/her. Immediately, we begin developing impressions of his/her abilities and attitudes based on the non-verbal signals he/she sends. This is why body language is so critical in oral communication.

Body language includes every aspect of our appearance, from what we wear, how we stand, look, and move, to our facial expressions and physical habits, such as nodding the head, jingling change in the pocket, or fiddling with a necktie. Our use of space and gestures are other key indicators.

Personal appearance Personal appearance plays an important role; people see before they hear. Just like we adapt our language to the audience, we should also dress appropriately. Appearance includes clothes, hair, accessories, cosmetics, and so on. Today, the purpose of clothing has

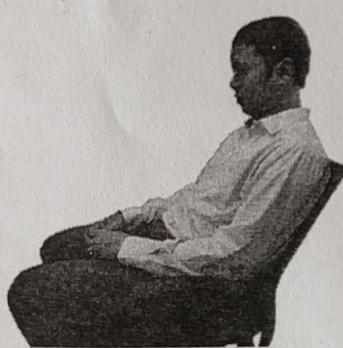
altered from fulfilling a basic need to expressing oneself. Clothes also accentuate the body's movements, and the choice of clothes reveals a lot about the wearer's personality and attitude.

Personal appearance must be so planned that it communicates effectively to others. Even before a speaker utters his/her first syllable the audience begins to form an opinion about him/her and visualizes the way he/she is going to talk. One's appearance may put the audience into a resistant or hostile attitude or induce in them a receptive mood. To be clean and well groomed, conforming to the need of the occasion, is of utmost importance. Appearances communicate how we feel about ourselves and how we want to be viewed.



Posture Posture generally refers to the way we hold ourselves when we stand, sit, or walk. One's posture changes according to the situation. If nervous, one would normally be seen pacing, bobbing the shoulders, fidgeting with notes, jingling coins, moving constantly, or staying glued to the ground.

When we are with friends we are probably spontaneous. We are not conscious about our posture and our physical movement is natural. But when we encounter an unfamiliar situation, we become more conscious of our posture. For instance, during an oral presentation, stiff positions, such as *standing akimbo* (with hands on hips and elbows pointing away from the body), send the message of defiance or aggression. It is always better to lower the hands to one's sides in a natural, relaxed, and resting posture. Standing, sitting, or walking in a relaxed way is a positive posture, which will encourage questions and discussion. Also being comfortably upright, squarely facing an audience, and evenly distributing one's weight are aspects of posture that communicate professionalism, confidence, attention to detail, and organization. The way one sits, stands, or walks reveals a lot:



Slumped



Erect



Lean forward



Lean backward



Crossed arms



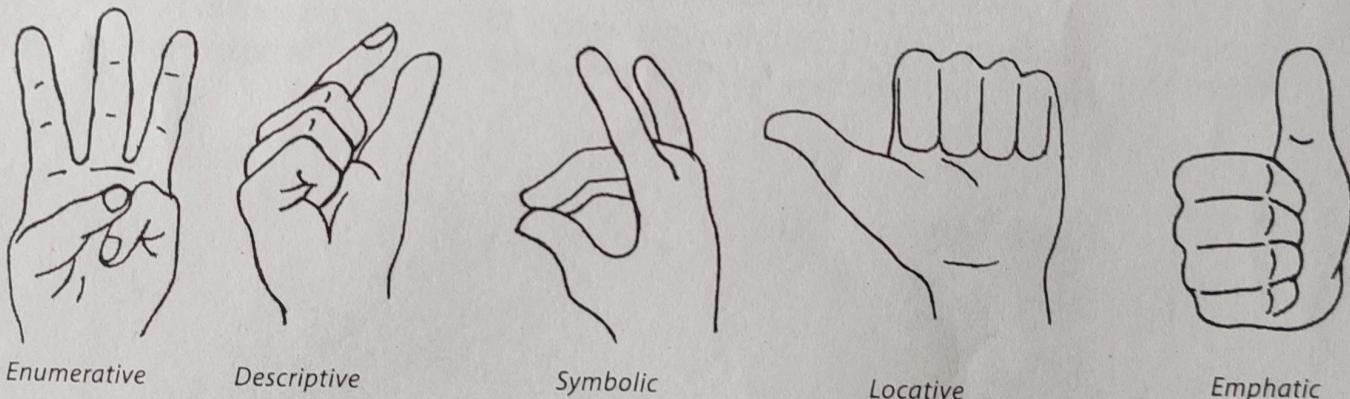
Uncrossed arms

- Slumped posture—low spirits
- Erect posture—high spirits, energy, and confidence
- Lean forward—open, honest, and interested
- Lean backward—defensive or disinterested
- Crossed arms—defensive and not ready to listen
- Uncrossed arms—willingness to listen

Gesture Gesture is the movement made by hands, head, or face. Skillful and appropriate gestures can add to the impact of verbal communication. A well-timed gesture not only drives a point home but also enhances the value of what is being said. Similarly, an awkward gesture (like playing with a key chain or button) can mar the effectiveness of the message.

Gestures clarify our ideas or reinforce them and should be well suited to the audience and occasion. Gestures are more numerous than any other form of non-verbal communication, and the meanings attached to them are diverse. It has been observed that there are as many as 700,000 varied hand gestures alone (Birdwhistell 1952), and the meanings derived from them may vary from individual to individual. Some hand gestures are shown in a PowerPoint presentation on body language in the CD.

Gestures should not divert the attention of the listener from one's message. They should be quite natural and spontaneous. Be aware of and avoid irritating gestures such as playing with a ring, twisting a key chain, clasping hands tightly, or cracking knuckles. Gestures can roughly be divided into the following types:



Enumerative

Descriptive

Symbolic

Locative

Emphatic

- Enumerative—numbers
- Descriptive—size of the objects
- Symbolic—abstract concepts
- Locative—location of an object
- Emphatic—emphasis

Facial expression Along with postures and gestures, facial expressions also play an important part in non-verbal communication. The face is the most expressive part of our body. A smile stands for friendliness, a frown for discontent, raised eyebrows for disbelief, tightened jaw muscles for antagonism, etc. Facial expressions are subtle. They can be used in a variety of ways to aid, inhibit, or complement communication. The face rarely sends a single message at a time. Instead, it sends a series of messages—facial expressions may show anxiety, recognition, hesitation, and pleasure in quick succession.

Facial expressions are difficult to interpret. Though there are only six basic expressions, there can be many shades and blends of these. Also, people tend to hide their true feelings, and

project expressions that are appropriate according to the circumstances. The six basic facial expressions are:

- Happiness
- Disgust
- Anger
- Surprise
- Fear
- Sadness

Eye contact Eyes are considered to be the windows of the soul. We look at the eyes of a speaker to find out the truthfulness of his/her words, intelligence, attitudes, and feelings. Eye contact is a direct and powerful form of non-verbal communication. We use our eyes to cull information. Eyes are also a rich source of feedback.

Looking directly at listeners builds rapport. Prolonging the eye contact for three to five seconds (without, however, giving the impression of staring) tells the audience that the presenter is sincere in what he/she says and that he/she wants us to pay attention. Eye contact is especially important when we start a conversation.

Our upper eyelids and eyebrows help us convey an intricate array of non-verbal messages. Arabs, Latin Americans, and South Europeans look directly into the eyes. Asians and Africans maintain far less eye contact. In the professional world one should make personal and pleasant eye contact with the listeners. Eye contact shows one's intensity and elicits a feeling of trust. A direct look conveys candour and openness. This direct and powerful form is a signal of confidence or sincerity; therefore, experienced speakers maintain longer eye contact. The eyes should convey the message, 'I am pleased to talk to you, do believe in what I am saying?'



PROXEMICS

Proxemics is the study of physical space in interpersonal relations. Space is related to behavioural norms. The way people use space says a lot about them. In a professional setting, space is used to signal power and status. For instance, the head of a company has a larger office than junior employees.

Gestures should be in accordance with the space available. When there is plenty of space to manoeuvre, one should move more boldly and expand one's gestures. When seated at a table, one should use milder gestures. One can even subtly reach out over the table to extend one's space. This expresses control and authority.

It is possible to learn a great deal about how to manipulate space by watching dynamic and influential speakers. Interestingly, like kinesics, proxemics also has cultural variations. A Latin American or French person is likely to stand closer to another person when conversing than an Anglo-Saxon would in the same situation. Americans, addressed from a close distance, may feel offended or become aggressive. Studies show that Americans, unlike many other nationals, avoid close contact with one another in public places. Indians decide the distance based on the relationship. They prefer to maintain distance with elders and a superior person. However, with a friend they may maintain less distance. Edward T. Hall (1966) divides space into four distinct zones (see Figure 3.1).

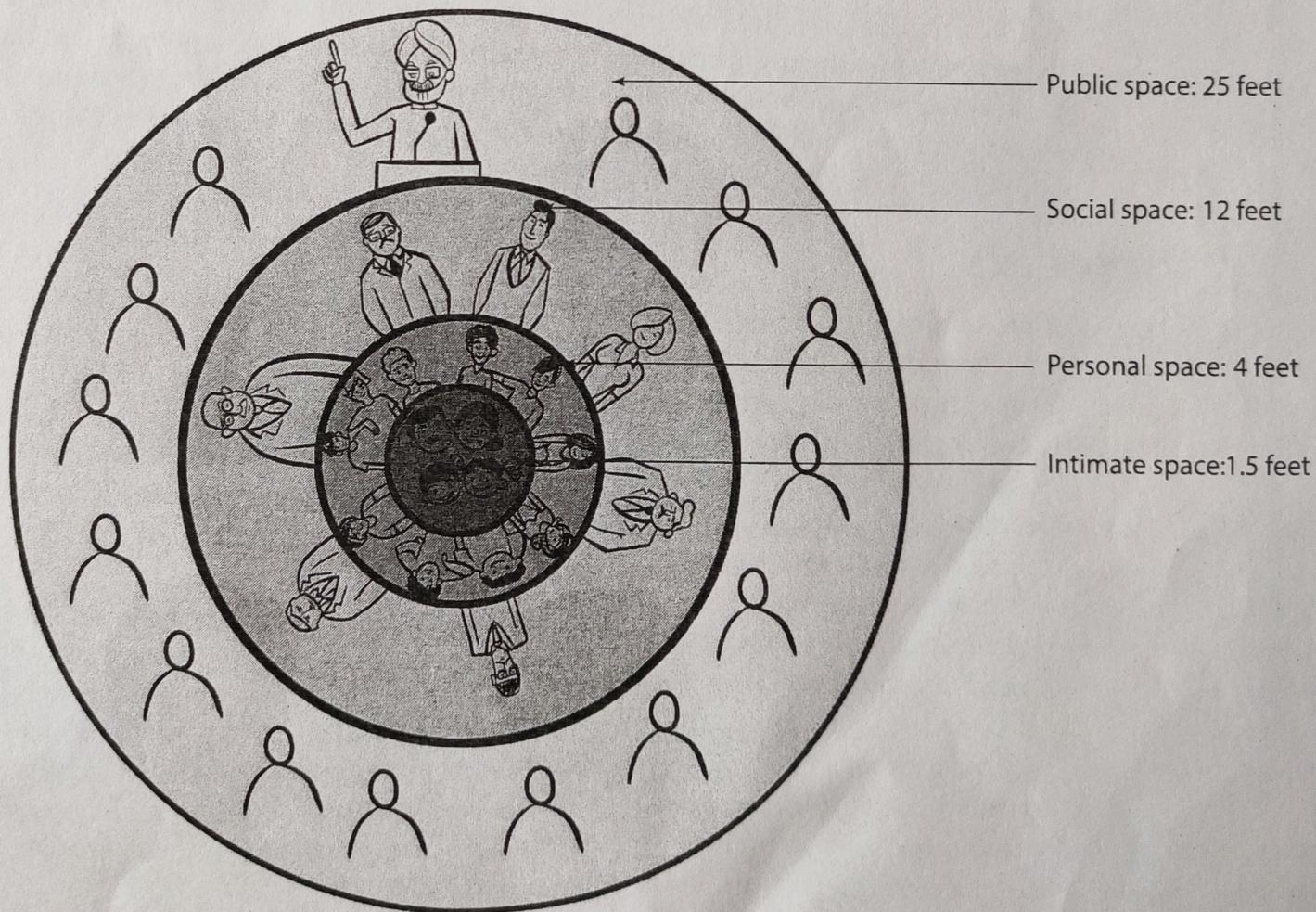


FIGURE 3.1 The four distinct space zones

Intimate This zone starts with personal touch and extends just to 18 inches (one and a half feet). Members of the family, lovers, spouses, relatives, and parents fall under this zone. The best relationship that describes it is the mother-child relationship. This zone does not need active conversation. One can whisper or make unintelligible sounds but still be able to communicate. Other individuals come close for a very brief period and only under special circumstances—when they want to congratulate, sympathize, or console. A handshake, a pat on the back, or a hug, all come into this zone.

Personal This zone stretches from 18 inches (one and a half feet) to 4 feet. Close friends, colleagues, peers, etc. fall in this zone. Instead of whispering sounds or utter silence, there can be normal conversation in this zone. Though this zone is personal, it is quite a relaxed and casual place. It permits spontaneous and unplanned communication. Sitting or standing so close brings one closer to the listener and gives the impression of friendliness and warmth.

Social Social events take place in the radius of 4 feet to 12 feet. In this zone, relationships are more formal and official. People are more cautious in their movements. These situations involve less emotion and more planning. The number of people decides whether it should be a sitting—sitting or sitting—standing position. It is through experience that one decides which position to take. If the number of people is less and eye contact can be maintained, a sitting—sitting position can be used. To be authoritative with a large audience, a sitting—standing position is used.

Public This zone starts from 12 feet and may extend to 25 feet or to the range of eyesight and hearing. Events that take place in this zone are formal. Here the audience views what is happening as an impartial observer. The degree of detachment is very high. The audience is free to do whatever it feels like. Here the speaker has to raise his/her voice to communicate to others or use a microphone. Public figures like the prime minister of a country, for example, have to maintain this distance for security reasons.

CHRONEMICS

Chronemics is the study of how human beings communicate through their use of time. How do we communicate with others? What does time mean to us? In order to use time as an effective communication tool, we should understand its impact on the various aspects of our lives and act accordingly. We must attempt to use time as effectively as possible.

In the professional world, time is a valuable resource. When we are late for an appointment, people react negatively. If we arrive early, we are considered either over-eager or aggressive. So, we should always be *on time*. By valuing someone else's time, we communicate our professionalism or seriousness both subtly and explicitly.

People have their own *time language*. To one person who wakes up at 8:00 a.m., 6:30 a.m. may be early; to another, 8:00 a.m. may be late if he/she wakes up at 5:00 a.m. every day!

Time language also varies from culture to culture. In Latin countries, meetings usually begin well after their appointed time. Everyone knows this. It is customary, and no one is offended by the delay. In Scandinavia or Germany, on the other hand, strict punctuality is the rule, and tardiness is frowned upon. In India, time language varies according to the occasion. Punctuality is expected for a professional meeting, but it is not insisted upon for a party. People in India are generally liberal with time.

CORRELATING VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Imagine you are giving a presentation in front of your professor and friends. They all seem to be listening to you, but their non-verbal behaviour indicates boredom and restlessness. Somewhat puzzled and unsure of yourself, you seek their agreement and several of them concur verbally through verbal expressions such as 'Great!', 'Wow!', 'Perfect!', etc. Nevertheless, their non-verbal language conveys the impression that they are far from confident about the presentation. What would you do in such a situation? You should try to understand the non-verbal cues and pause the presentation to ask a few questions. Questions usually get people involved and make a presentation more interactive and meaningful.

'Words conceal but actions reveal'. This is true because when we speak to somebody, we are constantly sending some non-verbal cues as well. The way we use our voice, our body language including our facial expressions, posture, gestures, eye contact, and the distance we maintain add meaning to the words spoken, or modify the verbal message being conveyed. The tone of our voice can change the meaning perceived from positive to sarcastic, and the stress points of our sentences can highlight the specific points and subtly change the meaning of our utterances.

We should learn to recognize patterns of non-verbal language, beginning with our own. We should always be aware of how non-verbal language operates throughout the organization. According to psychologists, people use non-verbal behaviour to express their emotional attitudes: the degree of like and dislike towards others, the degree of dominance and submissiveness, and the degree of responsiveness, i.e., the intensity of positive and negative feelings aroused in them by others.

A good body posture is usually an indicator of confidence and uprightness. However, without mental and emotional confidence, our words will sound hollow to the audience. For instance, a used-car salesman from a dubious franchise may have a great body posture, and greet you with a warm smile and a firm handshake. However, if in his heart he sees you as just another customer he can take for a ride, then sooner or later, his internal conflict between what he says and what he really thinks will cause him to trip up. His movements and gestures will start giving away his real intentions. You will start feeling uncomfortable around him, even though you may be unable to pinpoint why. However, if the same used-car salesman is genuinely interested in helping you find the right car and puts your needs before his own, then his words and actions will be in harmony with his underlying intentions and you will instinctively trust him, even though you might not be able to identify the reason for such trust.

Non-verbal communication can be divided into two categories—conscious and unintentional. When speaking of the former category, one can think of the silent pauses a speaker takes to emphasize on some point. Also when someone does not intend to continue a conversation in the direction it is taking, they play with their key rings or some other accessory or they avoid making eye contact and look somewhere else. In unintentional non-verbal communication, one is not trying to express certain feelings and thoughts but displays them involuntarily. For instance, you might have observed that when people tell lies, they touch their face unintentionally. However, somebody good in interpreting body language may be able to catch this.

Eyes play a very important part in both intentional and unintentional non-verbal cues. When someone gives you a cold stare, you feel unwelcome. When a speaker makes a point and looks at you for longer than usual, he/she might be trying to say that the point is especially relevant to you. Eyes betray feelings that people try to hide. Hand movements are also very effective non-verbal communication. Usually, hands are used more for conscious communication and do not give unintentional cues. However, when people are tensed or worried, their hand movements

give away their real feelings. Even if they utter some confident words, their eye contact, facial expressions, or gestures will reveal the truth. Hence, it is generally said that when your verbal and non-verbal messages do not match, your listeners will rely more on your non-verbal cues.

There are times when we recognize non-verbal cues without putting conscious thought into it. For example, when someone puts their palm up, it is understood that they want to end the conversation. Or when you are speaking, and the listener suddenly jerks their head towards you; you know you have said something of interest.

CROSS-CULTURAL VARIATIONS

'Preservation of one's own culture does not require contempt or disrespect for other cultures.'

—Cesar Chavez

This age of globalization and information technology has entirely changed the face of governments, businesses, and organizations. People are not confined to the geographical walls of their own nations anymore, but have become part of an international network. Communication being the backbone of inter- and intra-organizational coordination, it is essential for people to comprehend the linguistic and cultural differences among

organizations to get the desired results at the workplace.

It is not simple to define culture in concrete terms. Culture is a complex concept, with a variety of definitions. The dictionary meaning of the word 'culture' is a group or community with which we share common experiences that shape the way we understand the world. It consists of groups that we are born into, such as gender, race, or national origin, etc. It also includes groups we join or become part of, or the new habits we acquire as we interact with different people throughout our lives. Culture consists of various elements such as language, religion, politics, etc. Let us now discuss each element individually.

Language

Language forms the basis of all communication. It includes spoken, written, and body language. As mentioned, we are no longer restricted to one state or country during the course of our profession, relations, etc. As such, we often have to deal with people who speak different languages.



Religion and beliefs

Another important element of culture is religion. An individual's religious beliefs and norms, sacred objects, philosophical systems, prayers, and rituals are all parts of culture. Religion and belief affect the communication process. For example in India, some religious rites have become integral to our culture and have been adopted by people from other religions. Before starting any important project, it

is a norm in India to follow certain religious rites and offer prayers. In conferences, it is observed that before starting the deliberation, prayers are offered and lamps are lit.

Values and attitudes

Different values and attitudes of individuals towards time management, decision-making, achievement, work, change, etc. are also important parts of culture. These attributes affect communication between people with differing values to a great extent. It becomes important

for people of different cultures to respect and appreciate each other's values to be able to communicate effectively without adversely affecting their sensitivities. In the Indian culture, e.g., little importance is attached to the personal space and privacy of an individual. For example, when you meet someone and think of striking up a conversation, you can ask questions about that person's marital status or where he or she works or lives. Some South American and Mediterranean countries also allow this liberty. On the other hand, in Western countries, such unnecessary questions will be treated with a lot of apprehension and be considered highly inappropriate. In India, people do not place much importance on punctuality. It is fashionable to walk into a party late, or acceptable to dial into a teleconference five minutes later. Our Western counterparts may look at these as signs of disrespect. Gradually, in the global workplace, people of various cultures are learning to accept and respect each other better than they could a decade earlier. Knowing these basic differences and shaping our reactions accordingly are essential for overall successful communication.

Politics and law

The political system of a nation consists of national intents, power, ideologies, political risks, sovereignty, law of the country in which the organization works, rules and regulations imposed by the government, etc.

Technology

Technology includes scientific make-up, invention, communication media, urbanization, etc. and these are all essential parts of culture. For example, with the growth of information and communication technology, we have seen a tremendous change in the social and cultural framework of urban India.

Social organization

Social organization is an important element of culture. It consists of social institutions, the authority structure, interest groups, and status systems, etc. All these elements constitute the culture of a nation. For instance, maintaining eye contact with a senior during conversation was considered disrespectful in our culture until a few years ago. However, all this is changing in the professional world. Most organizations are adopting a corporate culture that might take some time to get oneself acquainted with. In most multinational companies, it is okay to address one's senior with his/her first name. It is an American tradition, and does not show disrespect or over-familiarity like we think it does. So, one must be cognizant of the various hidden conventions that are prevalent in the professional world.

Significance of Understanding Culture

There are different cultural groups in the world with different patterns of behaviour, religions, languages, politics, values and norms, etc. Thus, the same action is interpreted differently in different nations. For example, 'thumbs up' in America means approval, but is considered vulgar in Iran and Ghana (see the PowerPoint presentation on body language in the accompanying CD). This makes clear the importance of understanding different cultures. However, when we cross cultural boundaries, we carry our own culture with us. We must understand that our own cultural context cannot be used to judge the standards of another. It is imperative to give importance to another culture and not to judge others' behaviour according to our own cultural values.

