

Lost in translation

People are constantly telling each other exactly what they think and feel—and it often has nothing at all to do with the words they say

by Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D.

Your boss tells you that you'll be considered for a promotion. But if she's leaning back with crossed arms and a forced smile, she's sending the opposite message. Your customer may say he's not interested in the deal you're presenting. But if he keeps glancing at the contract on the table, he's telling you that he is interested.

These are but two examples of how body language plays an important role in our day-to-day business activities. In workplace settings around the world, in fact, people are constantly telling each other exactly what they think and feel—and it often has nothing at all to do with the words they say.

A thorough understanding of the role of body language is a vital tool in today's business environment. And yet I see it time and time again: professionals at all levels of the organization who aren't reading the



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clear signals of others or who don't have a clue how their own nonverbal behavior is sabotaging their efforts. Six factors have converged to make body language in the workplace more important now than ever before.

1. Emotional literacy in communication

When gauging the impact of



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workplace communication, I've found that it's not the medium or the message that matters most. What really counts is the quality of the interpersonal relationship that exists between sender and receiver. And a large (and largely unexplored) part of that relationship is determined by nonverbal cues.

Look at it this way: If words are used to communicate content, body language comments on the emotions and relationships behind the content. A classic study by Dr. Albert Mehrabian at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) found the *total impact* of a message is based on words used, 7 percent; tone of voice, 38 percent; and facial expressions, hand gestures, body position and other forms of nonverbal communication, 55 percent.

Consider the oil company CEO who showed up at a refinery in an expensive suit and tie to discuss the company's state of affairs with rank-and-file operators, electricians and members of the warehouse staff—dressed in their fire-retardant blue overalls. After being introduced and walking carefully to the front of the room, he removed his wristwatch and quite visibly placed it on the lectern. The unspoken message: "I'm a very important man, I don't like coming into dirty places like this, and I have exactly 20 minutes to spend with you."

Quite different from what he actually said: "I'm happy to be with you today."

Which do you think those refinery workers believed—the CEO's spoken words or what his body language said?

2. Leadership's move from command to influence

The effectiveness of "command-and-control" management tactics declined dramatically with the end of the Industrial Age. Today's leaders must lead through influence, rather than rely on the control (or at least the illusion of control) that a management position implies. And influence relies on the effective use of two communication skills: (1) the ability to really understand the other person's perspective (which means listening to what's being said) and knowing how to read the messages that are being delivered nonverbally, and (2) the ability to communicate congruently, to align the spoken word with body language that supports an intended message.

When a leader stands in front of a thousand employees and talks about how much he welcomes their input, the message gets derailed if he hides behind a lectern, or leans back away from his audience, or puts his hands behind his back, or shoves them in his pockets, or folds his arms across his chest. All of those send closed nonverbal signals. Conversely, when a leader fully faces the audience, makes eye contact, keeps her movements relaxed and natural, stands tall, and uses open hand and arm gestures, she sends silent signals of inclusion, credibility and candor.

3. The validation of face-to-face communication

For years, communicators have debated the most effective ways of delivering messages. Newsletters, videos, personal voice mails, public address systems,

even text messaging all seem to have their proponents. But if a leader is going to talk about new initiatives, major change, strategic opportunities—or if he or she has to deliver bad news—every employee communication survey shows a preference for face-to-face delivery.

Consider the case of one Fortune 25 company, where teleconferences provided an ongoing opportunity for small groups of employees to get up close and personal with the CEO. Time after time, employees would ask about policies or pending organizational changes that had already been communicated in various company publications and dozens of e-mail announcements.

After the meetings, the CEO would ask his communication manager, "How many times have we told them about that? Why don't they know that?"

"Oh, they know it," the communication manager replied. "They just want to hear it from you. More important, they want to be able to look at you when you say it."

4. The visual technology revolution

For much of the recent past, business professionals felt they could duck behind a computer monitor and ignore their nonverbal behavior. After all, who cares about body language when sending an e-mail, text messaging, blogging or (until recently) taking part in a videoconference?

Cisco Systems is one of several companies working on products that make the virtual experience almost the same as a

face-to-face interaction. I was lucky enough to get a demonstration of Cisco's TelePresence, which uses "life-size" high-definition video and directional sound technology that makes voices seem to come from where a user is located at the remote site. This new generation of videoconferencing makes participants feel as though they are actually sitting in the same room with people who are on the other side of the world.

5. The reality of a global workforce

Organizations worldwide have discovered that intercultural communication is important—not just because they have to deal increasingly with globalization, but also because the workforce within their own national borders is growing more ethnically and culturally diverse.

In the high-stakes world of

international business, body language often speaks for itself. Unfortunately, much of the meaning may be lost in translation. The most innocuous of gestures, when misinterpreted, can wreak havoc on business dealings. Today, everyone is part of the global marketplace, and business professionals may be required to deal with their counterparts in other countries or lead a multicultural team.

6. The latest scientific findings

Even digital technology is exploring this topic. Alex Pentland and a team of researchers from the Human Dynamics group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab have developed a range of small electronic devices that track not only the physical location of the people who wear them, but also their body language. By taking note of people's

proximity to others and the patterns of their movements (body language), the MIT team is gathering insights regarding the subtle differences between effective and ineffective teams, and the kinds of interactions that build or block collaboration.

In his book *On Becoming a Person*, psychologist Carl Rogers wrote, "Real communication occurs when we listen with understanding—to see the idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to them, to achieve their frame of reference in regard to the thing they are talking about."

Reaching that goal of understanding, of empathy, can mean a big difference in the business world. Which is why nonverbal cues are so important to our professional relationships and such a crucial part of business communication. •

about the author

Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D., is an executive coach, author and keynote speaker who addresses association, government and business audiences around the world. This article is based on her latest book, *The Nonverbal Advantage: Secrets and Science of Body Language at Work*.

Improve your interpretations using the five "Cs" of body language

The good news about understanding body language is that our brains are hardwired to respond instantly to nonverbal cues. The bad news: That circuitry was put in place a long time ago, when our ancestors faced threats and challenges very different from those we face in modern society. Life is more complex today, with layers of social restrictions and nuanced meanings adding to the intricacies of our interpersonal dealings. This is especially true in workplace settings, where the corporate environment adds its own complexities—a unique set of restrictions and guidelines for behavior.

You can improve your ability to read body language by filtering your impressions through the five "Cs": context, clusters, congruence, consistency and culture.

Context: The meaning of nonverbal communication changes as the context changes. We can't begin to understand someone's behavior without considering the circumstances under which the behavior occurred.

Clusters: Nonverbal cues occur in what is called a "gesture cluster"—a group of movements, postures and actions that reinforce a common point. A single gesture can have several meanings or mean nothing at all (sometimes a cigar is just a cigar), but when you couple that single gesture with other nonverbal signals, the meaning becomes clearer.

Congruence: When people believe what they are saying, you see it corroborated in their body language. Their gestures and expressions are in alignment with what is being said. You also see incongruence, where gestures contradict words. Incongruence is a sign not so much of intentional deceit as of inner conflict

between what someone is thinking and saying.

Consistency: You need to know a person's baseline behavior under relaxed or generally stress-free conditions so that you can compare it with the expressions and gestures that appear when that person is under stress. Knowing someone's behavioral baseline enhances your ability to spot meaningful inconsistencies.

Culture: Basically, there are two kinds of body language signals: instinctive and acquired. Acquired gestures are socially generated, so identical gestures often have different meanings among different societies. From greeting behaviors to hand gestures to the use of space and touch, what's proper and correct in one culture may be ineffective—or even offensive—in another.

—C.K.G.

