



Book Body Language in Business

Decoding the Signals

Adrian Furnham and Evgeniya Petrova
Palgrave Macmillan, 2010
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Recommendation

Body language and other forms of nonverbal behavior are the subtext of all communication. Becoming fluent as a receiver and a sender is a necessary business skill. Authors Adrian Furnham and Evgeniya Petrova set out to debunk popular myths about body language, particularly any promises that you can learn to “read people like a book.” They examine different aspects of body language, such as facial expression, gesture, touch and eye contact. They also explain ways that body language provides cues and, in some cases, can mislead. Lastly, they offer practical strategies to consider in using your body language as well as decoding others’ signals. Furnham and Petrova broaden their examination of nonverbal communication to include other subjects, including feng shui, public speaking and bullying. Body language enthusiasts seeking detail will find this all-encompassing analysis insightful. For the less committed, the book’s aerial view of so many facets of this subject might muddy the waters. However, *BooksInShort* considers this an essential read for those wishing to sharpen their “soft” skills or raise their emotional intelligence.

Take-Aways

- Nonverbal communication includes body language as well as statements made via appearance, behavior or possessions.
- Nonverbal behaviors reinforce, emphasize, punctuate or even contradict the spoken word.
- Understanding nonverbal behavior is a crucial business skill.
- Body language includes looks, gestures, posture, touch, odor and expressions.
- Character or culture influence some facial expressions, but others are innate.
- The human smile is rich and varied, and communicates many different messages.
- People accurately assess others within seconds based on a “thin slice of behavior.”
- Some people are better than others at controlling and interpreting nonverbal messages.
- Nonverbal behavior offers cues about whether someone is lying or telling the truth.
- Fluency in body language is a valuable ability, especially when speaking in public, negotiating or selling.

Summary

What Is Nonverbal Communication?

A broad definition of nonverbal communication includes any kind of signal sent through the senses, as well as social statements made via dress, appearance or the possession of particular objects. Body language is nonverbal behavior that sends signals that communicate to the receiver, consciously or subconsciously. Body language can be subtle or overt, rehearsed and controlled, or spontaneous and physiologically revealing. It can be ideal for communicating and emphasizing a message.

“Bodily communication is communication without words: it is anything someone does to which someone else assigns meaning.”

Nonverbal behavior (NVB) serves to:

- “Repeat, echo and emphasize what is being said.”
- “Complement, modify and elaborate on verbal messages.”
- “Contradict or confuse verbal messages to show ambivalence or cover up motives.”
- “Substitute words.”
- “Underline, accentuate, punctuate and moderate language.”
- “Regulate and coordinate language.”

“Body language sends messages – messages about emotions, attitudes and personality.”

When people communicate verbally, they use the spoken or written word to convey messages. Visual cues include all NVB’s transmitted during face-to-face interactions, such as appearance, smell, age, dress and movement. Vocal cues can indicate the speaker’s emotional state, class, education or age.

“Nonverbal communication is a more primitive and often more powerful means of communications than verbal communication.”

In addition to what you say, how you say it has great meaning based on your tone, volume, speed, emphasis, pauses and more. However, experts who authoritatively announce that people send 70% of their messages nonverbally discount the power of language.

In most cases, words are the most accurate, precise way to communicate, particularly because people can’t control all their nonverbal signals. Many strong emotions “leak out.” For example, someone who is nervous might sweat or blush. Controlling your body language is not always possible, even when you can read it in others.

“We have an amazing ability to pinpoint other people accurately on a range of different personality and qualities scales without any deliberation or conscious thought on our part.”

Understanding nonverbal behavior can give you an advantage in negotiations, improve your work performance, boost your ability to manage people and enhance your communications. “Soft” skills, like reading body language, have come to carry more weight in business.

Body Language

Biologists began to study body language in the late 1800s. Charles Darwin published the first definitive book on the subject, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, in 1873. However, studying body language became popular many years later, in 1967, when Desmond Morris published *The Naked Ape*. Today scientists from various persuasions, from anthropology to psychology and even sexology, study and write about the topic. Though many people have published carefully researched data, a lot of gobbledygook also appears on this theme, particularly in the areas of “symbolism, power, and controllability” and the claim that “you can read people like a book.” For example, Freudians say that people who stand with their hands in their pockets are withdrawn, reclusive or secretive when actually they might just be cold.

“The face is a highly expressive region. It is ‘readout’ of emotions: immediate, spontaneous, honest and uncontrollable.”

Body language encompasses many physical signals such as looks, gestures, posture, touch, odor and expression. The eyes convey messages as plain as punctuation; for instance, glancing up at the end of a statement to gauge other people’s reactions. Eyes communicate complex emotions, like shame. Extended eye contact signals attention, cooperation and liking. The way people make and maintain eye contact varies among cultures. Outgoing people make more eye contact; introverts avoid an open gaze.

“Where, when and how we look are all part of the phenomenon of eye gaze, one of the most important and primitive ways of communication.”

Facial expressions are highly communicative. Many are innate to humans, such as looks of surprise, fear or pain. Cultural background influences how people use facial expressions in social situations. They compose their faces in one way at a funeral and another way at a wedding. Although people might try to mask their emotions by using a “poker face,” the more genuine the expression, the more authentically it reads – especially with smiles. Fake smiles don’t involve the eyes and recipients instinctively understand if a smile is real or counterfeit.

“Our ability to attribute other people’s states and attitudes relies on reading body language.”

Psychologist Paul Ekman studied smiles extensively and identified several types, including:

- “**The felt smile**” – A genuine smile that conveys positive feeling.
- “**The fear smile or contempt smile**” – A smile built on negative emotion.
- “**The dampened smile**” – A smile someone tries to suppress.
- “**The miserable smile**” – A smile someone uses to make the best of a situation.
- “**The flirtatious smile**” – A come-hither signal.
- “**The Chaplin smile**” – An exaggerated smile that is almost a parody of a smile.
- “**The qualifier smile**” – A smile someone uses to convey unpleasant news.
- “**The coordinated smile**” – A polite signal that shows, “I’m listening.”

“There is a skill in being a sender and a skill in being a receiver of nonverbal communication.”

Humans use gestures for many reasons including emphasis, indicating directions or drawing an imaginary picture. Some gestures are nearly universal, such as nodding to

show agreement, clapping to indicate approval or rubbing your stomach to signal hunger. Yet gestures vary greatly from one country to another. For example, a circle created by your thumb and forefinger means “okay” in the US and “zero” in France, but in central Europe it is the equivalent of an obscenity.

“EQ is about emotional literacy, and emotional literacy is about reading the cues of nonverbal communication.”

Posture and body orientation send messages. Sitting at the head of a table signals power; standing over someone indicates dominance. How close you stand to someone – your body proximity – establishes territory. Cultures define personal space differently, but people generally establish four zones of body closeness: “intimate, personal, social and public.”

“When stakes are high and emotions intense, especially in business negotiations, body language is the source of information to be taken into account.”

Touch, odor and voice are integral elements of body language. Contact, from embracing to patting someone’s hand, stroking them or linking arms, is a powerful communicator. People use touch to persuade, sympathize, show affection or threaten. Many attach a spectrum of meaning to the way a person shakes hands. Animals communicate via odor and so do people, but this primitive system often operates beneath human consciousness.

What You See...

Ideally, people should evaluate each other based on individual character, but assuming that appearance doesn’t play a part is naive. Science proves that people assess others in seconds based on a “thin slice of behavior.” Moreover, this initial assessment is uncannily accurate. Height, weight, body shape, skin texture, symmetry of features and hair characteristics shape a person’s attractiveness. Furthermore, firms are likelier to hire and promote good-looking people, who generally have an easier time overall.

“Business people hope to detect the real, infallible truth and catch liars by carefully analyzing...body language.”

How you dress can indicate your social class, reveal your values, underscore your image or make an artistic statement. Many businesses dress their employees in uniforms to denote cleanliness, rank or professionalism. Color also plays a role since many colors have symbolic associations.

People express their emotions through body language, in part, because they can't help it. Blushing, perspiring, changes in breathing or pupil dilation are physical signs of emotions like anger, embarrassment or sexual excitement. As people mature, they learn to read other people’s emotions by watching their body language. Some of this skill is innate while some is culturally learned. Often, someone people describe as perceptive and intuitive is simply very adept at reading body language. However, some people send and interpret nonverbal messages better than others. Generally, women read body language better than men.

“Training and experience do help in the business of lie detection, but even then it is by no means simple or foolproof.”

People decode more proficiently as they mature, but the skill usually peaks in the mid-20s. Some evidence shows a relationship between intelligence and nonverbal skills. The smarter the child, the better he or she is at reading NVBs. Extroverts and optimists read people better than introverts or close-minded people do. Why do people act differently in various situations? The setting, social rules, relationships and reasons for an interaction all influence their behavior. Skilled people-watchers observe nuances in conduct that enrich their understanding. Such people usually rate high in Emotional Intelligence (EQ), the ability to “express emotion, regulate emotion in oneself and others, and utilize emotion in solving problems.” Your EQ depends on your ability to read body language with acuity.

Your Lips Say Yes, But Your Eyes Say...

Discerning between honesty and deception is a vital business skill, especially in negotiating. People lie for many reasons: to protect themselves from punishment, embarrassment or threat of violence; to win approval; to gain the upper hand; or to take credit. Lying takes three forms. The first is the commonly accepted “white lie,” told to avoid hurting another person’s feelings. The second is the kind of expedient lying associated with the stereotypical car salesman, or lying that misrepresents or excludes information to gain business. The third level of lying, falsifying facts or omitting data altogether, is the most insidious in business.

“Body language helps us quickly to sort out friends from foes, good from bad, and sincere from dishonest words.”

Many people rely on body language to deduce if someone is lying. Liars betray themselves via verbal and nonverbal cues. When dissembling, a person will hesitate between sentences or talk about himself or herself in the third person; speech cadence might vary from slow and uneven to quick and hurried. Liars often are uncomfortable with silences and may explain too much. Nonverbal cues include fidgeting, wriggling in a seat or making too much or too little eye contact. Liars may speak in a monotone to mask their emotions or use more “comfort gestures” such as touching their lips. To detect when someone is fibbing, look for variations outside his or her normal behavior. Consider discrepancies between verbal and nonverbal behaviors.

“Body Language in Business”

In many business situations, fluency in body language is a valuable ability, especially when speaking in public, negotiating or selling. Giving a speech is nerve-racking for most people. Because it is so intimidating, many speakers experience physical reactions: Their heart rate increases, they sweat and even tremble. Deep breathing helps counteract these symptoms.

Good speakers’ nonverbal behaviors include assuming an open body stance and suppressing distracting gestures like moving objects on the podium. Engaging orators inspire their audiences, impart information or persuade their listeners to consider a fresh viewpoint. They rehearse their nonverbal behaviors, such as gestures, eye contact and stage movements. Speaking in front of an audience of any size changes the dynamics of communication. The speaker offers a message, the audience reacts; the speaker receives their feedback and then changes in response.

During negotiations, nonverbal position and dominance clues signal who is in charge and making decisions, and who is the helper. Nonverbal behaviors are less binding than words during negotiations, yet they can suggest agreement, disagreement or the desire for a particular course of action. Nonverbal vehicles for relaying messages

while negotiating include interpersonal distance, nodding and smiling, posture, mirroring and eye contact. In sales, nonverbal communication reinforces various methods of persuasion. In 2007, R. Cialdini outlined six methods of persuasion: “Commitment and consistency, reciprocation, social proof, authority, liking and scarcity.” Certain nonverbal behaviors reinforce each one. For example, a handshake can entice a buyer to enter a conversation. Motions that mirror a customer’s body language are signs of empathy and likability.

Body language will not reveal the depths of your soul, but people who read it well can gain accurate insights from very brief exposure. The main thing to remember is that “the power of body language lies in its subtlety, in its promise of an action rather than the action itself. Body language hints towards a certain disposition or behavior rather than identifies or determines it.”

About the Authors

Adrian Furnham, a psychology professor at London’s University College, has written more than 60 books and 800 articles. He contributes to the *Financial Times* and the BBC. Psychologist, researcher, ballet dancer and scholar **Evgeniya Petrova** has won several Russian literature prizes.
