

A Way Without Words

The Importance Of Nonverbal Communications

By Kenya McCullum

The old adage tells us that “silence is golden.” What it doesn’t tell us is that what we do with our silence is invaluable, especially in the workplace. Although we don’t think much about our nonverbal communication, it is saying a lot about us, and not always good things.

The importance of nonverbal communication can be summed up by the phrase “We cannot not communicate.”

All of our gestures can potentially tell on us in some way, particularly if our nonverbal communication does not match our words. In these cases, people will believe what they see—which can make us seem dishonest, unprofessional or uninterested in our work.

Becoming aware of some of the basic ways that our nonverbal communication can be misinterpreted will help us to truly communicate what we mean—and mean what we communicate.

The Accidental Flirt

If you’re a woman in the workplace, chances are that at some point at least one of your male colleagues has mistakenly thought you were being flirtatious with him. According to Carol Kinsey Goman—author of *The Nonverbal Advantage: Secrets and Science of Body Language at Work*—this is a common problem for women because of the way they naturally communicate.

For example, when women want to soften the blow of something they say, they tend to smile, which can be construed by men as flirting. Other common nonverbal cues that can be interpreted as flirtatious are actually helpful outside of the office. When we agree with others, we tend to tilt our heads slightly to signal approval. But when a woman does this at work, the gesture can be seen as unprofessional, coy, and cutesy. Likewise, women will sometimes look at someone’s mouth to avoid too much eye contact which can be a sign of aggression. But in a business setting men

may erroneously assume that they’re interested in them romantically when they’re actually just averting their gaze to reduce eye contact.

Time Is Of The Essence

Whether we like it or not, our society moves fast and instills values in us about making the most of our time. A phrase like “time is money” is one example of how we’re taught to take time seriously.

But what does this have to do with our nonverbal communication?

When we don’t respect time, especially other people’s time, we are viewed as unprofessional. Being five minutes late to a meeting may not seem like a huge deal—we’re all really busy after all—but what it can communicate to others is that you don’t care about what’s going on. And a person that always seems to be running late is seen as highly disorganized and somewhat scatterbrained.

This emphasis on clock watching can become particularly problematic for people from other cultures working in the United States. While we value moving fast, people in other countries are taught to slow down and smell the roses. This difference can create a lot of false assumptions about someone’s work ethic, when really they have a stronger sense of work-life balance than our culture encourages.

Your Space Or Mine?

Proxemics, or the amount of space between people, is another nonverbal cue that speaks volumes about us and can scream like a siren when we violate it. There’s a reason why we want to be physically close to our loved ones; it is an expression of the closeness we feel toward them. But in the office, standing too close to someone—generally about eighteen inches or less—can make them feel uncomfortable. A more appropriate distance for the workplace is at least

arm’s length, or three to four feet away. For more formal business interactions, the best amount of distance to maintain from your colleagues is about four to twelve feet. When people violate these proximity rules, we assume that they are either showing aggression toward us or they are socially inept.

The importance of proximity rules does not end with our bodies, however. We also expect that our belongings will be given their own space as well. When others don’t respect that, by touching something on our desks without permission for instance, we become just as uncomfortable as we would if someone were hovering too close to us.

Talking The Walk

Nonverbal communication is not just about gestures, it can also be about words. No matter how convincing we think our words are, if our paralinguage—the way we say our words—is incongruent, it will only undermine what we say. If you’re telling your boss how excited you are to work on a project, but your voice sounds flat, your words will seem disingenuous. Other paralinguage that we should be aware of in the workplace is how well we enunciate when we speak—no one takes someone who mumbles all the time seriously—and the amount of verbal pauses that we use, such as “ahs” and “uhs.” When we violate the rules of paralinguage, people assume that we don’t know what we’re talking about or that we’re flat out lying.

Watching what we say is only a small part of how we communicate. To make sure you’re “saying” what you want to, watch not only your words, but your actions.

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