

NONVERBAL CUES IN THE WORKPLACE: A PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

PROF PRATIMA RANI SARDAR

DEPARTMENT OF BOTANY SHIVAJI COLLEGE UNIVERSITY OF DELHI

Abstract

Nonverbal cues play a crucial role in workplace interactions. Nonverbal cues are more significant in reading someone's personality and communication intention than the words and ways chosen to communicate. The body language of the person communicating speaks volumes about their intention and psyche. It is a general saying that "actions speak louder than words"; therefore, it should be a prerogative to read and fathom the nonverbal cues more seriously in workplace communication than the words. The present study, "Nonverbal Cues in the Workplace: A Psychological Critical Assessment," examines the ways in which much of the oral interactions in the workplace are impacted by nonverbal cues. The study also highlights various aspects and implications of nonverbal cues. Choosing effective body language and other nonverbal cues while communicating or when choosing not to communicate and analysing others' body language is crucial for effective, productive, and professional conversations at work.

Keywords: Body language, workplace, nonverbal cues, communication, organisational setup.

INTRODUCTION

We communicate in professional spaces because, without communication, no work can be accomplished in a business or corporate world. We communicate because of our professional needs and even beyond the needs, as we form relationships which are necessary for maintaining cordiality in the workplace. Communication is generally defined as the sharing of knowledge, emotions, feelings, and information between individuals, communities, and institutions, and it is human communication that makes them distinct. Furthermore, it is our distinct communication skills (that distinguish us from other individuals. Oral exchanges encompass all personal, professional, and mass interactions, and non-verbal communication such as facial expressions, body language, gestures, posture, eye movement and contact, odour, signs and silence, often tells more about us and what we intend to communicate than the words uttered. Meaning can be expressed in countless ways, and only a tiny part of it is done through the use of language.

Nonverbal cues such as tone and tenor of voice, gestures made by hands, eyes, face or other body parts can convey a lot of information. Body language is a nonverbal communication where actions or lack of them, rather than words, express or transmit the meaning or the intention of the speaker. Facial expressions, body movements, touches, distance, attire and dressing, and sign languages are all instances of nonverbal cues which are used along with oral communication or without. Most of us do not give so much importance to our nonverbal cues, as most students and even employees are not given any training in enhancing this skill, which caters to most of our communication needs. In the business or corporate world, actions often speak more than words, and nonverbal communication plays a vital role.

Aligning Nonverbal Cues with Words Uttered

Nonverbal cues need to complement/align with the words uttered or the intended message to make any interaction effective and assertive. If they do not complement each other, the intent and effectiveness of the communication are often lost, and the meaning opposite to what is intended is usually fathomed by the listener. Especially in office or business settings, wrong use of nonverbal cues can be detrimental to one's career or further job prospects. Even business deals can fall apart if nonverbal cues are not used judiciously, as our nonverbal cues convey most of our messages, and language has a very small part to play in our communication needs. But as language is distinctly heard, therefore it is usually given much importance whereas if one is a good speaker, then one should work on the body language and other nonverbal cues; and if one intends to be a good listener then s/he should be focussing on reading and analysing the non-verbal cues more intently as one can mask one's intention while communicating with words, but not in facial expressions, gestures and body language.

Empirical Research of Nonverbal Cues

Empirical research suggests that just 7 per cent of our communication needs are expressed using words, whereas 55 per cent is through physical gestures and postures and 38% through vocal tone. Thus, nonverbal communication consists of about 93 per cent of all human communication (Halder et al. 2012). Nonverbal communication is thus not just significant in general communication but also in professional contexts, whether it is about persuading co-workers, instructing the juniors or expressing one's opinion to the seniors in the workplace.

It is when a person can use the non-effective cues effectively in the professional context that s/he can contribute towards her/his individual growth or realise the organisation's objectives.

Body language as a vital nonverbal cue is increasingly getting the much-needed attention when scholars are pointing out how right body language is necessary in the professional world, or to enter the professional world. Even in a job interview, the body language of the interviewee is of utmost significance as the interviewers, through the body language, are able to figure out more about the interviewee than his or her oral answers to the questions. Thus, studies on appropriate and effective body language are finding more importance in many academic programmes related to communication and also in training programmes. Empirical research on nonverbal conduct is very complicated, as at least three components require attention: the senders' nonverbal cues, the receivers' interpretations of those cues, and the communication between the two based on the nonverbal cues and their manifestation in communication effectiveness.

Nonverbal Cues in Interpersonal and Group Dynamics

Bonaccio et al. (2016) assert that nonverbal cues in the workplace contribute significantly to interpersonal and group dynamics, as people notice the nonverbal cues more intently and judge a person more based on the nonverbal actions rather than the oral presentation. Bonaccio and his coauthor's study offers insights into the importance of nonverbal behaviour in organisational studies where organisational efficiency and success depend heavily on their employees' nonverbal actions. Body language manifests itself in messages which presents the psyche of the individuals working in an organisation and also that of the organisation itself as pointed out by Pease (2006), though it is also true that the interpretations of the body language and other nonverbal cues vary from culture to culture and it can also often be a cause of contention when the workforce is diverse. Some facets of nonverbal cues that Pease's study (2006) speaks about are hand gestures, simile, sign language, proxemics, mirroring techniques and even leg motions. Most employees and other stakeholders of an organisation, as well as the people the organisation communicates with directly, whether the clients or the customers, not just observe the nonverbal cues, but their minds are affected by the nonverbal cues of the people who represent the organisation. Furnham and Petrova's study (2010) is worth mentioning in this context as they too point out how the "silent" signs have more impact on the communication in the workplace.

In other words, being literate, knowledgeable, digitally conversant, emotionally intelligent, and a good speaker is important in today's workplace environment, but one should also be conversant in fundamental body language to make an impact in the workplace. Though people who have great perceptive power and critical thinking skills usually are good at using appropriate body language and also at analysing others' body language, it is a skill that can be carefully crafted into one's personality when one prepares oneself for the professional world. It is so significant in the professional world that in many cases, before hiring an employee, many organisations conduct a thorough analysis of body language to not just figure out if the candidate is proper with her/his body language but also to find out his/her personality. Potential candidates often do not succeed in a job interview if they have a worried or pessimistic vibe during the recruitment process, which the interviewer(s) usually judge through their body language. Direct eye contact of the interviewee while responding to questions often work wonders as it shows the confidence and intent of the interviewee.

Facial expressions often tell us the mental and emotional state of a person, as facial expressions often tell us greater truths than words. Analysing facial cues along with body language is essential for engaging in communication which attains its results. Signs of discomfort, aloofness, indifference, eagerness, happiness, and disagreement are often evident on the face, even though coworkers do not utter a word. And all these need to be recognised to make the communication find its intended results. Great leaders and managers are often very good at reading the expressions, and thus they can mould their words as per the needs of the context. Workplace collaboration is essential today as we are all connected to each other and dependent on others for our professional growth and organisational progress; and collaboration can happen best when we can read the mind (i.e., the nonverbal cues) more intently and thereby communicate.

Hand gestures are equally significant in professional contexts. Often when speaking to seniors or coworkers, responding with hand gestures suggest a brief reply and asking for communication not to be carried on further. Sometimes for illustrations too hand gestures are being made and sometimes to point to something and even in some cases it is used in derogatory way. Often people have habits of twitching fingers, playing with their hair, or fiddling with pen or whatever small objects available – all these hand actions showcase lack of self-assurance or show certain vulnerability depending on the context. However, waving, and flinging one's hands are some other hand gestures which are also very important in understanding a person's state of mind and her/his personality. One should be aware of how vital their hand gestures and postures are in visual communication. When tired, we generally tend to slouch our shoulders, which may often be read by seniors in the professional set up as being unmotivated, dissatisfied or insecure. Therefore, while communicating, the appropriate gestures and postures must sync with the words spoken to have their intended meaning be read in the same way as it was intended.

The action of walking around with one's head held high is generally perceived as sign of confidence, honesty and security. During professional and business presentations, usually the demeanour, and general movement of the presenter also speaks a lot and is crucial to the presentation's success (Halder et al., 2012). Sounding polite, respectful, confident, and sincere, are communicated through effective and appropriate body language which one can often train oneself for and can appropriately use in professional contexts for intended message to have greater

effect. However, the workplace environment and the interactions with your co-workers decide what tone, tonality and other nonverbal cues would be used during interactions. Visual communication should always align with the interactions. Empathetic and active listening and reading body language appropriately prevents one from misinterpretation while trying to understand the intended message (Halder et al., 2012).

Body language conveys one's emotional state, but it can sometimes be misread and can put one at odds with co-workers. When employees from diverse economic, cultural and social backgrounds work together, interpreting visual information can become complicated, as each culture has its own appropriateness of body language, and each culture reads body language in different ways. Therefore, forming an instantaneous opinion about a coworker or senior or junior based on their body language or other nonverbal cues may often be misleading as body language differs from culture to culture.

Individuals' arm and leg movements and postures convey their mental states to those around them. When someone crosses their arms while communicating, it may be a sign of feeling walled off, defensive. Clasp one's hands behind one's back usually signifies boredom, anxiety, or anger. Boredom, agitation, or annoyance with the given context or the person communicating can often lead to fidgeting with something or finger tapping. These are general perceptions of the body postures, but from culture to culture, they vary, and therefore, to fathom the exact meaning of the posture, one should also think about the cultural background from which the person is.

Mirroring is a socio-cultural response where the person communicating usually starts mimicking some of the nonverbal cues of the other person, for example, when one person leans forward while having a serious interpersonal talk, the other person also leans forward. Unconsciously they mirror each other but it also can be consciously done to show one's eagerness for continuing with the conversation. Although mirroring is typically an unconscious action, one can consciously do it to their advantage in workplace situations to engage in conversations to show the right intent. Attire, jewellery, and insignia convey social position and community membership, and therefore each workplace has its own unwritten codes of attire. Someone with unruly and untidy hair usually is being read as someone not so serious in professional contexts, though it depends from profession to profession. Business and corporate environment asks for certain formalities but often in creative professions, formality in attire or in other insignia is not so essential. Dressing as a form of addressing is therefore essential, and in the workplace, therefore, to be in proper attire is essential (Halder et al., 2012).

Edward T. Hall (1966) is credited with coining the term "proxemics" – a term important to understand how the physical proximity or lack of it is important in analysing communication. When the distance between communicators is greater, it speaks about the level of formality between the persons, and when the proximity is lesser, it speaks about intimacy. The "distance", therefore, is a measurable facet through which the nature of the interaction can be measured. For example, in mass communication, the distance between the communicators is the greatest, and in the case of life partners or other family relationships, the distance is less. In professional contexts, too, the distance between the coworkers and other employees suggests the kind of communication culture the organisation follows.

Along with Proxemics, Haptics (the language of touch) is also important in understanding the kind of communication that the organisation or coworkers are involved in – a handshake is very different as a means of communication from a hug. Hall (1966) opines, "Physical contact between two people is often perfectly correct in one culture and an absolute taboo in another." Thus, when studying haptics and proxemics, it is essential also to take into account the culture within which the communication is happening. In other words, the cultural parameters and stereotypes that the organisation and its coworkers engage in are evident through their nonverbal cues of haptics and proxemics. Oculistics, too, like haptics, are culturally contingent. Chronemics (language of time) is also vital in a professional context, as how one values others' time is very important for the efficacy of business.

CONCLUSION

Thus, different facets of nonverbal communication have their own significance in the workplace. Though much of the interpretation of the nonverbal cues depends on the culture in which the interaction is happening, in today's globalised world, where the workforce is usually very diverse, one needs to be extra careful of one's non-verbal cues, especially one's body language, expressions, gestures and postures, as one should not offend the other party when communicating. All words will lose their essence and potency if the nonverbal cues do not align with the cultural context with which one is interacting. For example, if an organisation is doing professional communication with a Japanese team, then it is necessary that some knowledge of the Japanese non-verbal cues should be known to the person who is communicating with the Japanese delegation, so that, due to cultural barriers, the intended results of the interaction are not achieved. When one works on diversity analysis in a professional context and works on the nonverbal cues of the different cultures, one is sure to enhance one's communication efficacy and ensure organisational success and personal growth. Realising the potential of non-verbal cues, thus, should be the roadmap of organisations when they are planning the training sessions for their employees.

WORKS CITED

1. Bonaccio S, O'Reilly J, O'Sullivan SL, Chiochio F. "Nonverbal Behaviour and Communication in the Workplace: A Review and an Agenda for Research." *Journal of Management*. 2016; 42(5): 1044-1074. doi:10.1177/0149206315621146.
2. Furnham, Adrian & Petrova, Evgeniya. *Body language in business: Decoding the signals*. 2010. 10.1057/9780230292291.
3. Halder, Deb Dulal, et al. *Technical Writing and Communication: Theory and Practice*. Book Age Publications, 2012
4. Hall, Edward T. *The Hidden Dimension*. (1966). Knopf Doubleday, 1990.
5. Pease, Barbara. *The Definitive Book of Body Language*. Bantam Books, 2006.
6. Stalter, H. *Employee Body Language Revealed: How to Predict Behaviour in the Workplace by Reading and Understanding Body Language*. Atlantic Publishing Group. 2010.