

CULTURE AND BODY LANGUAGE - DECODING NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Communication is a natural phenomenon which is generally inbuilt in all forms of life of animals and human beings. While animals communicate with one another making peculiar sounds, human beings can communicate in numerous ways; they can wink, wave, smile, and tap someone on the shoulder and so on. Communication is sharing of information or providing entertainment by speaking and writing. It is the exchange of ideas and views between two people. Language is an important element of human culture. It is the primary abstract by which culture is transmitted extra genetically. Most transmission of knowledge, ideas and values that make up a given culture, from Ten Commandments to this entry, is done through language. Language is more than just words; it is the position of one's body, the look on their face, and their body's motion. An important aspect of communication skills is body language.

Culture is the intellectual and artistic lifeline of a society. All cultures differ, but their differences stem from variations in universal themes, such as language, religion, economy, law, technology. It is important to note that cultures are not static. They change and the sources of change may be varied. Many changes originate in ideas gained from other cultures, from intellectual discussions and communication. A country cannot be harmed or helped by one single interest group, politicians, professionals or workers. Its intergroup relationship is organic in nature. One group or another cannot go up or down without affecting the interest of other groups. This organic analogy may well be extended to economy. The concept of work culture is discipline. It refers to the ability of workers to adapt to the environment of work. Work culture, especially its ethical aspect is to be viewed as part of excellent human relationship. This excellence is rooted in mutual respect of the workers, managers and employers. When the worker feels that his genuine needs are recognized and respected by the management or bureaucracy and the employer, he tries to give his best and most.

The basic system for communication is the human body; not only the organs of speech and hearing, but eyes and facial muscles, hands and arms brain and in many respects the entire body. Caressing, embracing and holding hands are as much ways of communicating as human speech. Body language is the communication of personal feelings, emotions, attitudes thoughts through body movements- gestures, postures, facial expressions, walking styles, positions and distance – either consciously or involuntarily, more often subconsciously, and accompanied or unaccompanied by the spoken language. For example, when two people meet for the first time, their initial reaction is to size up each other by observing appearance , attire, facial expression, hand shake and posture. Body language can include any reflexive or non- reflexive movement of a part or all of the body to communicate an emotional message to the outside world.

You say more than you know without even thinking about it. What you say is actually interpreted three ways: what you say, how you say it, and your body language. Body language accounts for about 90% of the message you are sending, and a first impression is made in the first 10 seconds. This makes nonverbal communication extremely important. In business, you can learn to use body language to your advantage. Understanding what messages you are sending and learning to read the messages sent back to you can change the whole dynamic of a business relationship. It is important to note, however, that body language is complex, and some gestures can have multiple meanings. Learning just a few aspects of nonverbal communication can take you a long way in developing successful business relationships.

Key words: *communication, first impression, kinesics, work culture, touch,- non -touch oriented society.*

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Introduction

Communication is a natural phenomenon which is generally inbuilt in all forms of life of animals and human beings. While animals communicate with one another making peculiar sounds, human beings can communicate in numerous ways; they can wink, wave, smile, and tap someone on the shoulder and so on. Communication is sharing of information or providing entertainment by speaking and writing. It is the exchange of ideas and views between two people. Language is an important element of human culture. It is the primary abstract by which culture is transmitted extra genetically. Most transmission of knowledge, ideas and values that make up a given culture, from Ten Commandments to this entry, is done through language. Language is more than just words; it is the position of one's body, the look on their face, and their body's motion. An important aspect of communication skills is body language.

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Essence of Culture

Noted economist and diplomat Abid Husain defines culture as 'a sense of ultimate value possessed by a particular society as expressed in its collective institutions, by its individual members in their dispositions, feelings, attitudes and manners as well as in significant forms which they give to material objects. Culture is the intellectual and artistic lifeline of a society. All cultures differ, but their differences stem from variations in universal themes, such as language, religion, economy, law, technology. It is important to note that cultures are not static. They change and the sources of change may be varied. Many changes originate in ideas gained from other cultures, from intellectual discussions and communication.

When sub-cultural groups exist within a society, each functioning by its own distinctive standards of behavior, we speak of sub cultural variation. The degree to which subcultures are tolerated varies greatly from one society to another. Consider, for example, the following case from the *Wall Street Journal* of May 1983: Salt Lake City: Police called it a cross cultural misunderstanding. When the man showed up to buy the Shetland pony advertised for sale, the owner asked what he intended to do with the animal. "For my son's birthday", he replied and the deal was closed. The buyer thereupon clubbed the pony to death with a two-by-four, dumped the carcass in his pickup truck and drove away. The horrified seller called the police, who tracked down the buyer. At his house the found a birthday party in progress. The pony was trussed and being roasted in a luau pit. "We don't ride horses, we eat them", explained the buyer, a recent immigrant from Tonga.

A country cannot be harmed or helped by one single interest group, politicians, professionals or workers. Its intergroup relationship is organic in nature. One group or another cannot go up or down without affecting the interest of other groups. This organic analogy may well be extended to economy. The concept of work culture is discipline. It refers to the ability of workers to adapt to the environment of work. Work culture, especially its ethical aspect is to be viewed as part of excellent human relationship. This excellence is rooted in mutual respect of the workers, managers and employers. When the worker feels that his genuine needs are recognized and respected by the management or bureaucracy and the employer, he tries to give his best and most.

Dr.R.K.Mukerjee, a great scholar of sociology, economics and ideology observes, "Between man and society, the floating wick and the deep oil, there is a never ending give and take, producing the bright, steady flame of value experience that eternally radiates light and warmth on our bleak, dreary universe. Man, society and values cannot be understood separately..... That perception of this unity would also accompany a reorientation of methods of study that should combine scientific and empirical with normative and philosophical approaches integrated together for the adequate interpretation of man and society.

The importance of Communications Skills:

The inhabitant of London can now watch events around the world as they happen, thanks to live television; he can travel by air to virtually anywhere; and he can seal business deals in an instant, via the Internet and Fax machine. All these advances are part of globalization which at its simplest, means crossing borders. Capital crosses the borders; companies cross the borders; whole industries cross borders, people, ideas , diseases even governments cross borders. This immediacy and larger term impact of these major forces of change aare enormously enhanced by the growing interconnections

By successfully getting your message across, you convey your thoughts and ideas effectively. When not successful, the thoughts and ideas that you send do not necessarily reflect your own, causing a communications breakdown and creating roadblocks that stand in the way of your goals – both personally and professionally. In a recent survey of recruiters from companies with more than 50,000 employees, communication skills were cited as the single more important decisive factor in choosing managers. In spite of the increasing importance

placed on communication skills, many individuals continue to struggle, unable to communicate their thoughts and ideas effectively – whether in verbal or written format. This inability makes it nearly impossible for them to compete effectively in the workplace, and stands in the way of career progression. Getting your message across is paramount to progressing. To do this, you must understand what your message is, what audience you are sending it to, and how it will be perceived. You must also weigh-in the circumstances surrounding your communications, such as situational and cultural context.

Body language is an important parameter for judging a candidate in an interview. A candidate's attitude, confidence, enthusiasm, and energy levels are reflected in his body language. Body language cannot be learnt or doctored- it comes naturally. Students can be made aware of the positive and negative interpretations of certain gestures, facial expressions, postures, and body movements. When a student is aware, he may start focusing on it and try to rectify it.

Kinesics

Linguists refer to all of these auxiliary communication methods as **paralanguage**. Paralanguage refers to such verbal behaviors as rate of speech, pitch of voice, hesitations and silences – speech without words. The most obvious form of paralanguage is **body language** or **kinesics**. This is the language of gestures, expressions, and postures. In North America, for instance, we commonly use our arms and hands to say good-bye, point, count, express excitement, beckon, warn away, threaten, insult etc. In fact, we learn many subtle variations of each of these gestures and use them accordingly to the situation. We use our head to say yes or no, to smile, frown, and wink acknowledgement or flirtation. Our head and shoulder in combination may shrug to indicate that we do not know something. While the meaning of some gestures, such as a smile, may be the same throughout the world, the meaning of others may be completely different. For example, spitting on another person is a sign of utmost contempt in Europe and North America but can be an affectionate blessing if done in a certain way among the Masai of Kenya. Furthermore, nonverbal cues “say” something better than words ever can. There are times when a hug is comforting than a verbal expression of sympathy. Nonverbal behaviors play an important role in regulating verbal communication such as conversations.

Body Language and Gestures

We are rarely taught about this mostly non-verbal form of human communication in school even though it is very important for effective interaction with others. Growing up in a society, we informally learn how to use gestures, glances, slight changes in tone of voice, and other auxiliary communication devices to alter or emphasize what we say and do.

Tone and Character of Voice

The meaning of speech can also be altered significantly by **tone and character of voice**. In English, the simple sentence "I'm here." can have very different connotations depending on whether it is spoken with a voice that is high, low, quick, slow, rising, falling, whispering, whining, yelling, or sighing. Similarly, the sentence "Are you here?" has a different meaning if

it spoken in a rising tone in contrast to a descending one. Whispering and shouting generally get your attention more than speaking with a normal voice. Children learn this important fact at a very early age. In addition to specifying comfortable interaction distances, culture tells us when and how it is acceptable to touch other individuals. In North America, culture generally discourages touching by adults except in moments of intimacy or formal greeting (hand shaking or hugging). This informal rule is most rigidly applied to men.

Cultural Use of Space

Culture also tells us how to organize space in such a way as to control the nature of interaction. In North American corporate offices, for instance, the boss is usually physically isolated in a very separate private room. This tends to minimize his or her personal contact with ordinary workers. In contrast, Japanese offices commonly are set up with the boss's desk at the end of a row of pushed together desks used by subordinate employees. This maximizes his interaction with them.

A court room similarly alters behavior. In the United States, the judge usually wears a black robe and sits behind an elevated desk. The other desks and chairs in court are positioned so that all attention is focused on the judge. This intentional setting makes those present feel respectful and subservient to the judge, thereby making it easier for him or her to control the proceedings. Culture also guides our perception of space by defining units of it. In the industrial world, space is divided into standardized segments with sides and position. Acres and city lots with uniform dimensions are examples of this in the United States. Our property boundaries are referenced to such segments of space. As the density of population increases, the importance of defined spatial boundaries grows. Land owners in densely occupied neighborhoods have been known to get angry enough to kill each other over disputed fence lines between their properties.

Ethics and Organizational Behavior

The issue of ethics and ethical behavior is receiving greater attention today. Unethical behavior is a relevant issue for all employees. For example, a survey of 1000 senior -level executives revealed that as many as one-third lied on their CVs. May be this result should not be surprising because there are more benefits to lying, such as negotiating a higher salary and stock options and beating the fierce competition for senior management positions. Personal experience of being rewarded or reinforced for certain behaviors and punished for others also shapes the individual's tendency to act ethically or unethically. Perception relates to the process through which we receive and interpret information from our environment and create a meaningful world out of it. Different people may perceive the same situation differently. A manager may make total assessment of a person based on a single trait. A pleasant smile may make a positive first impression. Punctuality alone or loyalty alone may cause a favourable perception in the mind of a manager.

Cultural barriers:

The cultural differences can adversely affect the communication effectiveness, especially multi-national companies and enterprises with multi-ethnic work force. **Some examples are:**

- a. Advertisement about Action Man Soldier toys, where toy soldiers were in tanks holding machine guns were not permitted in West Germany where they were interpreted as promoting violence.
- b. In Austria and France, the children are not permitted to do television commercials.
- c. Most Jewish people will not work on Saturdays and most Muslims will not work on Friday afternoons.
- d. Establishing deadlines to accomplish work assignments is considered rude in most Middle East countries.
- e. Punctuality is not considered important in some countries.
- f. Many important meetings and activities are contemplated after consultations with astrologers in India.
- g. "Coke adds life" may be misinterpreted as a device for long life.

Accordingly management must recognize these barriers as culturally based and identify these cultural differences and attempt to minimize any adverse effects on communication effectiveness due to these differences.

Communicating with Clothes

Putting on certain types of clothing can change your behavior and the behavior of others towards you. This can be the case with a military uniform, doctor's white lab coat, or a clown's costume. For instance, it is likely that the Spanish policemen in the photo are more assertive and aggressive when they wear their uniforms. Likewise, others are more likely to follow their directions. Most uniforms are consciously symbolic so that they can rapidly and conclusively communicate status. For instance, the ribbon, crown, and scepter leave little doubt that the young woman in the photo on the left below is a beauty queen. The ribbons and other insignias on the U.S. sailor's uniform can tell even a stranger about his status, authority, and military experience.

Gestures

As the global village continues to shrink and cultures collide, it is essential for all of us to become more sensitive, more aware, and more observant to the myriad motions, gestures, and body language that surround us each day. And as many of us cross over cultural borders, it would be fitting for us to respect, learn, and understand more about the effective, yet powerful "silent language" of gestures. People all over the world use their hands, heads, and bodies to communicate expressively. Without gestures, our world would be static and colorless.

Common Asian Gestures:

Respect to elderly people, smiling often can cover a gamut of emotions: happiness, anger, confusion, apologies, or sadness. Displaying an open mouth (such as yawning or a wide-open

laugh) is considered rude, especially with women who cover their mouths when giggling or laughing. Try to maintain a balanced posture, stand or sit erectly or squarely. Don't slouch or put on the ground with arms in the lap or on the armrest. Crossing the legs at the knees or ankles is the preferred form rather than with one ankle over the other knee. Silence (listening) is a sign of politeness and of contemplation. During conversations, be especially careful about interrupting.

China: Greetings Gestures

The western custom of shaking hands is the customary form of greeting, but often a nod of the head or slight bow is sufficient. Hugging and kissing when greeting are uncommon. Business cards are often exchanged, and yours should be printed in your own language and in Chinese. Also, it is more respectful to present your card (or a gift or any other article) using both hands. The Chinese are enthusiastic applauders. You may be greeted with group clapping, even by small children. When a person is applauded in this fashion it is the custom for that person to return the applause or a "thank you." When walking in public places, direct eye contact and staring is uncommon in the larger cities, especially in those areas accustomed to foreign visitors. Generally speaking, the Chinese are not a touch-oriented society (especially true for visitors). So avoid touching or any prolonged form of body contact. Public displays of affection are very rare. On the other hand, you may note people of the same sex walking hand-in-hand, which is simply a gesture of friendship.

Korea: Greeting Gestures

Bowing is the traditional form for both greeting and departing. Western and Korean male friends usually greet with both a slight bow and shaking hands. When shaking hands, both hands are sometimes used. Women usually do not shake hands, especially with men, but usually just nod slightly. The senior person offers to shake hands first, but the junior person bows first. However, shake hands with a light grip and perhaps with eyes averted. Avoid hugging and kissing when greeting. Prolonged direct eye contact is considered impolite and even intimidating. Business cards are traded respectfully. Keep the card on the table in front of you as just one small gesture of respect. When saying good-bye, the traditional gesture is the bow, but the younger generation has adopted the western custom of waving good-bye by moving their arm side-to-side.

Koreans are not a touch-oriented society (especially true for visitors.) So avoid touching or any prolonged form of body contact. Public display of affection is very rare. Respect is always shown to elderly people, so it is appropriate to rise when a person-- especially an elderly man enters the room or giving up a seat on a subway. However, an elder may not give up a seat for a young boy. Men generally have priority in Korea: Go through a door first, walk ahead of women, and women may help them on with their coats. Among the Koreans, laughter is used to disguise many emotions: anger, frustration, and fear.

Malaysia, Myanmar and Pakistan

There are three ethnic cultures in Malaysia, Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Thus each culture has its own customs. When a person stands with his hands on his hips, this is a sign of anger. If you

see a prayer rug in a Muslim's office or home, do not stand on it or touch it with your feet. Indians have a unique way of showing their agreement. They move their head from side to side. Many westerners often misread this gesture as signaling, 'No'. It is not proper in Myanmar to show public displays of affection. Buddhism is the main religion in Myanmar. When you see any statue or images of Buddha in Myanmar, do not touch the head of Buddha. It is customary to be greeted with coffee or tea in Pakistan. Accept the offer, or you may offend your host. Women are often separated socially from men. Staring is quite common in Pakistan culture, so don't be offended, if you feel someone is staring at you. A closed fist is an obscene gesture in Pakistan

Conclusion

You say more than you know without even thinking about it. What you say is actually interpreted three ways: what you say, how you say it, and your body language. Body language accounts for about 90% of the message you are sending, and a first impression is made in the first 10 seconds. This makes nonverbal communication extremely important. In business, you can learn to use body language to your advantage. Understanding what messages you are sending and learning to read the messages sent back to you can change the whole dynamic of a business relationship. It is important to note, however, that body language is complex, and some gestures can have multiple meanings. Learning just a few aspects of nonverbal communication can take you a long way in developing successful business relationships.

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