Nonverbal Communication

Inquire: What are Nonverbals?

Overview
Many people have heard the phrase "nonverbal communication," but what does that mean? This lesson will explain the kinds of nonverbals, how they differ from verbal communication, and how to make use of nonverbals to effectively send messages. Often, nonverbals are thought of as sarcasm, or facial expressions that are uncontrollable and unintentional. Not all nonverbals fit this mold. Some nonverbals serve beneficial purposes, or can help someone better understand a message that is being sent.

Big Question: How important are nonverbals to a message being successfully received by an audience?

Watch: The Use of Nonverbals
Everyone knows someone that seemingly only ever talks with their hands, or wouldn't be able to hold a conversation if their arms were taped to their sides. This greatly exaggerated way of talking is a form of nonverbal communication.

Nonverbal communication is how we send messages that do not rely on words. Some of the things we do are automatic and unintentional. Some of them hold meaning only for certain people, while some are understood by everyone. Nonverbals can serve either to hammer home messages that we send or can undermine those messages.

Mastering nonverbal communication is an important step toward mastering effective communication. The first step toward mastering nonverbals is being able to identify them in others.

Take a look at this image:
What are some of the nonverbal cues you see here? What do they mean? How do you know?

Now that you are able to spot nonverbals in a still image, let’s move onto something a bit more challenging. Imagine a conversation you have recently had with a friend.

During that conversation what are some of the nonverbal signals you sent and received. Did one of you stand closer than the other at first? Were you louder than your friend? How much eye contact did you make? Did you touch them? Did the conversation last a long time or was it brief? Where did the conversation take place? All these factors are nonverbal communication, and all these factors can have subtle and unintended impacts on a message. Alternatively, they can also have large impacts, or can be done very intentionally. All this will be covered in the content to come.

As you read along, keep in mind the conversation you just imagined and try to figure out what kinds of nonverbals you used, and what effect they had on you now that you are aware of them existing. Even if you were aware of some nonverbals before this lesson, keep an open mind as you learn about what other kinds exist, and the uses they can have in conveying messages.

Read: Nonverbal Communication

Overview

Nonverbal communication is a big area. Communication is a continuing act of sending and receiving messages, and those nonverbals are often the messages that are being sent and received. According to some researchers, nonverbals make up more of the communication process than the verbal signals we send. This lesson will look at what nonverbal communication is, what it is composed of, how it influences verbal communication, and how to control nonverbal messages.

What is Nonverbal Communication?

Nonverbal communication is the part of communication that does not include the actual words themselves. These nonverbals include things like the speed of words, pitch, tone, volume of speaking, gestures, facial expressions, body language, closeness to audience members, eye reactions, dress, appearance, cultural background, and situational history. These different nonverbals can have a large impact on how communication happens, and on whether the message achieves its intended effect. For instance, take the sentence “I didn’t say you were stupid.” Nonverbals, such as tone and inflection, change how messages are conveyed. Placing the emphasis on any given word of that sentence changes the meaning. Instead of being a simple statement of an action you did not take, emphasizing the word “say” implies the message that you typed it, whispered it, yelled it, anything other than simply saying it. Similarly, changing the inflection of the word stupid changes the meaning to imply a different word, maybe “dumb” or “silly” rather than “stupid.”

What Makes Up Nonverbal Communication?

Nonverbal communication is made up of several elements. It uses multiple channels, is continuous, is conscious and unconscious, and certain nonverbals are universally understood. When talking to someone, the communication uses channels to to convey a message. Verbal communication, according to the linear model, uses a single channel to get the message across: the words being said. In nonverbal communication, the message uses multiple channels to convey a message simultaneously. In one channel, you say, “Take your time.” In your nonverbal channel, you cross your arms, tap your foot, speak
with a tired tone, and roll your eyes, sending a different message over four messages. These multiple channels help to convey the full extent of a message in a way that words alone cannot accomplish.

While using multiple channels, nonverbals are also continuous in that they keep happening even if the verbal components of a message have ended. Some of these continuous messages are intended and some are not. That is what is meant by conscious and unconscious nonverbal messages. A shocked face to surprise news might be an unconscious reaction that sends a message, while a very calm face once you have composed yourself might be a very conscious reaction to send a different message than the shocked face.

Finally, the universally understood nature of some nonverbal elements further sets it apart from verbal communication. Verbal messages require a shared understanding for them to be effective, and language barriers are a prime example of something that prevents effective communication without a shared meaning to unite communicators. However, nonverbals such as smiles and frowns are universal in the general meaning they convey, no matter what culture one examines.

How Does Nonverbal Communication Impact Verbal Communication?

There are several ways that nonverbal communication can be used to either help or hurt a verbal message. Nonverbals can be used to replace, duplicate, or complement verbal messages. Instead of saying “okay” or “sounds good,” you might show someone a thumbs up. That has replaced a verbal message but can still convey the same message to the receiver. Alternatively, you might do both, saying “okay” with a thumbs up to duplicate and reinforce the message you are sending. Finally, complementing verbal messages is using your nonverbal messages in a way that helps your message but does not send the exact message. If you were to use your hands to show how big a burrito is from a restaurant down the road while also telling your friend, “It was as big as my head!” that would be complementary. The nonverbal message does not replace the verbal message, but rather helps to reinforce it in a way that would not make sense without the verbal message you are sending at the same time.

Nonverbal communication can also harm a verbal message by contradicting, or misleading a message. Sarcasm and passive-aggression are excellent examples of this. You might say, “This is great,” but by changing your tone, pitch, and volume you can contradict that message and have it actually mean that it is terrible. Misleading nonverbal communication reinforces verbal messages that attempt to mislead an audience, and it also tells what we look to when trying to determine if someone is misleading us. For instance, shifty eye contact or hunched posture are sometimes great giveaways that someone is sending a misleading verbal communication.

How to Control Your Nonverbal Messages

Understanding the meaning and purpose of nonverbal messages is the first step in controlling those messages. Knowing that nonverbal communication can be continuous, unconscious, and uses multiple channels helps you to know where to focus your efforts. In order to control nonverbal messages you need to focus on one thing at a time. Because messages are continuous, it takes continuous effort and attention to ensure you are sending the messages you want to be sending. This helps to eliminate the unconscious aspect of nonverbal communication to give you more control of your messages. Finally, knowing that multiple channels are employed means you need to be aware of more than one thing. Not only should you be aware of what facial expression you are making as your boss asks you to do a task, you should also be aware of your posture and tone in your response. Mastering these three elements is a great first step to monitoring and regulating your nonverbals. Once you have that down, you can move on to using nonverbals for your benefit based on what message you are trying to send, be it replacing, duplicating, complimenting, or contradicting the message you are sending.
Reflect: The Benefit of Nonverbals

Poll
Do nonverbals tend to be more beneficial or more distracting in trying to send messages?
- More beneficial
- Neither more beneficial or more distracting
- More distracting

Expand: Types of Nonverbals

Overview
There are many kinds of nonverbal communication, but they all fall into eight distinct categories. This section will provide an in-depth look into these categories: kinesics, haptics, artifacts, proxemics, environment, chronemics, paralanguage, and silence.

Eight Kinds of Nonverbals

Kinesics is the study of body movement and facial expressions. Body movement is a way to express social status, relationships, and liking. Eye contact also serves to express social status and liking. Think of what happens when you see your best friend from across the room. How do you react? What does your eye contact and body movement convey about those emotions?

Similar to kinesics, haptics is the study of touch. A gentle touch on the forearm can compliment a sad message by conveying a sense of closeness or comfort. A stern poke to the chest can compliment a threat or a motivating message. A person touching their own neck as they speak conveys a sense of nervousness. Haptics seeks to understand and explain what touch means and how it is used to send messages.

Artifacts, or objects and personal appearance, are types of nonverbal communication used on our body and immediate surrounding to communicate messages to others. Bumper stickers, tattoos, clothing brands, glasses, jewelry: these all carry a message that can complement or distract from a verbal message depending on the situation. A knuckle tattoo might be intimidating on one person, but a knuckle tattoo that says "READ" on the hand of your professor might have a different meaning and purpose.

Proxemics is the study of how we use space. Do you lean in closely to whisper to someone? What kind of message does that send? Does standing several feet away and whispering the same message change the meaning? These are the kinds of questions proxemics focuses on.

Environment are nonverbal acts that make use of a certain space. A meeting taking place in a coffee shop has a different environment than one in an office or a courtroom. The importance of the room or space that a conversation takes place in can be very large on certain verbal messages.

Chronemics is the study of the use of time. Does someone say a message very quickly? Is their speech pattern very slow? What impact does this have on a message? Chronemics seeks to understand this influence on verbal messages and find ways to make effective use of it.

Paralanguage describes vocal qualities such as pitch, volume, rhythm, rate of speech, and inflection. If someone’s voice increases in pitch at the end of a statement, it becomes a question. If someone’s voice
raises in pitch throughout a statement, they might be very excited. Rhythm of a statement can be used to emphasize certain parts of a statement as more important than other parts. All these impact how messages are interpreted.

Finally, silence is a nonverbal where no words or sounds are used to convey a message. Think of when a friend asks an obvious question. Rather than answering, saying nothing and looking at them can still convey the answer even if nothing is said. Using silence as a tool to emphasize, reinforce, or draw attention to something can be a very effective way of sending a message.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Nonverbal Communication

- An article examining different uses of nonverbals and giving tips on how to read and use nonverbals in a conversation
- https://www.helpguide.org/articles/relationships-communication/nonverbal-communication.htm

Take Control of Your Nonverbal Communication

- A short video giving several steps to begin consciously controlling the nonverbal messages you send
- https://hbr.org/video/3541641444001/take-control-of-your-nonverbal-communication

10 Nonverbal Cues That Convey Confidence At Work

- An article providing ten different nonverbals that can help you feel and act more confident in the workplace

Lesson Glossary

nonverbal communication: the part of communication that does not include the actual words themselves
kinesics: the study of body movement and facial expressions
haptics: the study of touch
artifacts: types of nonverbal communication used on our body and immediate surrounding to communicate messages to others
proxemics: the study of how we use space
environment: nonverbal acts that make use of a certain space
chronemics: the study of the use of time
paralanguage: vocal qualities such as pitch, volume, rhythm, rate of speech, and inflection
silence: a nonverbal where no words or sounds are used to convey a message

Check Your Knowledge

1. Nonverbal communication is only used to study the words people say in a conversation.
   A. True
   B. False
2. Artifacts are nonverbals like tattoos or bumper stickers.
   A. True
   B. False

3. An environmental nonverbal would be the room an interview takes place in.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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