

The Communication Process

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READING ASSIGNMENT

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Your interactions with others are never limited to words. The old saying “Actions speak louder than words” contains a lot of truth. In interpersonal relations, your body language, or *nonverbal communication*, is often as important—if not more important—than verbal communication. In fact, according to some communications experts, 7 percent of any message we send is conveyed through our words, 38 percent comes through our tone, and 55 percent is communicated through our body language. You read that correctly—55 percent!

The Messages You Send



Effective communication is a large part of the office professional's job.

As an office professional, your job requires you to *communicate*, or relay and receive different types of information, in many types of situations. You'll interact on a daily basis with executives, coworkers, new and established clients, and more. You'll also handle incoming and outgoing telephone calls as well as written and electronic correspondence.



Cultural norms dictate nonverbal behaviors. Keep this in mind when interacting with people from different cultures.

Although you might not be aware of it, you're constantly sending messages to others. Your posture, your style of dress, the position you take in a room, and the tone of your voice are nonverbal ways to convey a

message about what you're thinking and what you're trying to say. In this lesson, you'll learn how to interpret a number of nonverbal behaviors. As you read, keep in mind that nonverbal behaviors don't always mean the same things to different people. Cultural differences often color the translation. For example, in North America, a nod of the head means *yes* and a shake of the head means *no*. In other cultures, such as Greece and Bulgaria, a nod means *no* and a shake means *yes*.

KNOW YOURSELF

Before you can understand others, you must understand yourself. The following quiz will help you take a good, hard look at your interpersonal skills. Answer each question as it applies to you. Be honest. If you're uncomfortable with your answers, you'll know which areas of interpersonal skill you need to work on.

1. Do you find it easy to start a conversation?
2. Are you able to hold up your end of a conversation?
3. Do you ask good questions? (Good questions are usually open-ended, requiring detailed answers rather than just "yes" or "no" answers.)
4. Are you able to talk about topics other than yourself?
5. Do you listen to the speaker?
6. Do you use appropriate body language when speaking?
7. Do you draw others into conversations when they aren't contributing their share?
8. Do you avoid exaggerating facts when speaking to others? (Tall tales don't count.)
9. Do you remember names of people when introduced?
10. Do you avoid using dialect, bad grammar, slang, clichés, or jargon in professional or formal situations?
11. Do you enjoy learning about people, their interests, hobbies, and ideas?
12. Do you keep others interested in what you're saying?
13. Do you give others an opportunity to express their views?
14. Are you able to discuss controversial matters without getting angry or upset?
15. Do you pay attention to the conversation without having your mind wander?

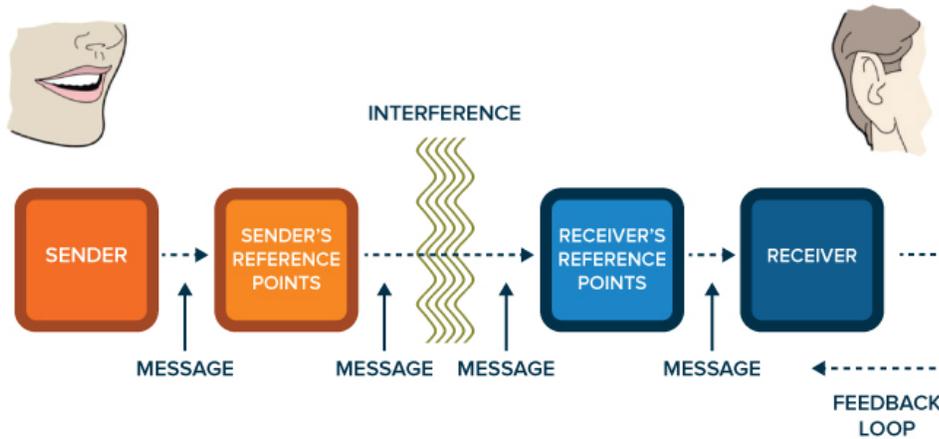
If you answered "yes" to at least 10 questions, your interpersonal skills are probably quite good. But try to work on any weak areas so that you can change "no" answers to "yes."

Communication Components

The communication process has five essential elements:

1. *Message*—information that needs to be communicated to another person
2. *Sender*—the person sending out the information
3. *Channel*—method used to convey the information (verbal, nonverbal, written, or electronic)
4. *Receiver*—the person receiving the information
5. *Feedback*—the receiver and sender reverse positions

Take a look at the communication feedback loop to better understand the role each element plays.



The Communication Feedback Loop

Notice the wavy lines in the middle of the figure that indicate interference. *Interference* is anything that gets in the way of clear communication between two or more people. It can come in a number of forms. In writing, an author's style can be confusing or a reader's comprehension level not high enough for the material. In conversation, a speaker's word choice may be unclear. Interference can also take the form of outside noises or other distractions. Regardless of the type of interference, its presence disrupts communication. To be effective, communicators must keep their listeners' needs, expectations, and comprehension abilities in mind.



Our educational levels and life experiences are just two of the factors that affect our understanding of communication.

When we communicate, whether sending or receiving, we have *reference points* that determine how we express and understand messages. These points, which include education, life experiences, social and cultural expectations, and religious beliefs, color the way we communicate with others.

One of the most influential reference points is a listener's language abilities. For example, if this lesson included a number of words with which you weren't familiar and that the text didn't define, you would most likely struggle to understand the message within it. The same holds true when you communicate with someone. If you use vocabulary, phrases, idioms, or expressions that are outside your listeners' realm of experience, it's unlikely that your message will be understood. For this reason, when working in an office, you should be sure to use your words wisely.

Common American Idioms		
Take your pick	On the right track	Pearl of wisdom
Be that as it may	A baker's dozen	As clear as mud
Get a head start	Heads will roll	Solid as a rock

Up to their necks	A tight ship	A knight in shining armor
Stay out of my hair	Down in the dumps	Par for the course

Effective Listening

A Turkish proverb states, “If speaking is silver, then listening is gold.” To be a successful communicator, one of the most important skills you need to develop is *effective listening*. This is the ability to accurately absorb information and then provide feedback to the speaker. By listening effectively, you can

- Obtain more information
- Increase people’s trust
- Reduce the risk of conflict
- Motivate others
- Encourage commitment

For example, picture this scene. Your coworker, Joe, is slumped over his desk. His head is in his hands. You ask, “Joe, are you okay?” He picks up his head but doesn’t look you in the eye as he replies, “Yes, I’m fine. Just tired.”



When words are at odds with body language, the message being sent with the body is generally more reliable. It’s obvious this office professional is growing impatient with his supervisor.

Clearly, his verbal and nonverbal responses aren’t in sync. Joe may say he’s fine, but there’s something wrong beyond being tired.

Listening to what others say is an important part of the communication process. However, listening isn’t complete without *observation*. Good listeners hear exactly what another person says, and they compare that message with the person’s facial expressions and other body language.

When communicating with others, pay as much attention to their nonverbal clues as you do to their words. When a person’s words seem at odds with his or her actions, you can usually trust the person’s actions to be a much more reliable indicator of what that person is thinking or feeling. Listening involves the eyes as well as the ears!

Becoming an effective listener takes time and effort. Here are some of the best ways to learn and practice the skill:

- *Prepare yourself to listen.* Clear your mind of other thoughts and focus only on the person speaking. Stop any other activity that might distract you.
- *Look at the speaker.* Eye contact displays your interest and also makes it more difficult to let your attention wander while the person is speaking.
- *Concentrate on what's being said.* Focus on the speaker's words, not on what you'll say in response to those words.
- *Listen with empathy.* Understand what the speaker is saying and why he or she feels that way.
- *Listen not only to what is being said, but also how it's being said.* Remember, actions speak louder than words. Is the person's body language or speaking voice contrary to the message?
- Demonstrate to the speaker that you're listening by nodding your head, leaning forward and saying appropriate responses such as, "Yes," "I see," "Okay," and so on.
- *Don't attempt to guess or predict what the person is going to say.* This interferes with your ability to hear what's actually being said.
- *Don't interrupt or cut off a person's statement.* Try waiting three to five seconds after someone is done talking before responding.
- *Avoid thinking about a solution to a problem while the person is still talking.* You can easily get so caught up in your own thoughts that you stop listening.

Paraphrasing

One of the foundations for developing listening skills is *paraphrasing*, or repeating a person's message back to that person, using different words to express the same idea. To paraphrase, you listen to a speaker and then repeat his or her message in your own words, without changing the meaning. Read these examples:

Speaker: I work so hard all year long, it doesn't seem that I'd be out of line to expect decent accommodations and good weather for two lousy weeks!

Paraphrased: When you finally take a vacation, you want things to go well.

Speaker: Lisa told me that she would take care of the final details. She didn't do it, and now it looks like I was the one who didn't follow through!

Paraphrased: Lisa didn't do what she was supposed to, and now you have to deal with the blame.

Notice that neither example repeated the speaker's words *verbatim*, or word for word. Doing that doesn't guarantee that you understood what the speaker said. It could just mean that you, like a well-trained parrot, have a knack for repeating what you hear. Besides, repeating people's words exactly could be quite annoying. Rephrasing helps people feel like you truly were paying attention and are fully engaged in the conversation.

Paraphrasing allows you to test whether or not you've heard the message correctly and have understood the speaker's intentions. Hearing the message reflected back lets speakers know they got their points across correctly. It gives everyone involved the opportunity to catch any misunderstandings and clarify or correct them.

Effective Observation

Remember how we said that listening is using your eyes as well as your ears? This is known as *effective observation*, and it's defined as the ability to recognize and understand nonverbal communication, or the body language that reveals a great deal about an individual.

Nonverbal Signals

It may sound simple, but communication experts have determined that there are more than 100,000 nonverbal signals. The eyebrows alone have almost two dozen! Take a look at this list for some key examples:

- Facial expression
- Gestures
- Eye contact
- Posture
- Tone of voice
- Touching
- Physical proximity (Too close—pushy or aggressive? Too distant—aloof, angry?)



Body language is usually unconscious. This office worker may not realize that he's projecting an aura of (possibly) sorrow, anger, or confusion.

Can you see why learning how to read nonverbal communication is so important? Often people's body language is a more accurate indicator of what they're thinking than is anything they say. This is because most nonverbal communication isn't under our conscious control. Certain habits—nail biting, finger tapping, hair twisting, and so on—reveal our inner emotions without our even realizing it.

Nervous habits are easy for an observer to recognize, but other types of nonverbal cues aren't quite so obvious. In fact, the same gesture or facial expression may mean one of several things. For example, sitting with your arms folded over your chest could mean that you're

- Trying to protect yourself from somebody or something
- Hugging yourself as a form of comfort
- Feeling self-conscious about your physical appearance
- Cold and trying to warm up

Which one of these is accurate? You can't be sure, and that's why it's essential that you not jump to any conclusions about the meaning of any particular nonverbal communication. This is especially true if you work in an office setting where coworkers and clients are from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Each culture has its own meanings attached to nonverbal communication. Here are just a few examples:

- Many Asian cultures believe eye contact to be rude.
- The "O.K." gesture in America means "worthless" in France.
- The "V for Victory" sign here means "Get lost!" in some countries.

Personal Space

Proxemics is the study of what people consider comfortable personal space. How close is too close? It depends on your cultural background, as shown in the following table.

Culture	Distance between Speaker and Listener in Inches
Middle Eastern	8 to 12
Western European	14 to 16
North American	19
British, Scottish, Irish, Welsh, Korean, Chinese	24
Japanese	36



Eye contact sends the message that you're interested in what the other person has to say.

Eye Contact

One of the most powerful nonverbal tools you can use is eye contact. Looking someone in the eye says, "I'm interested in speaking with you and hearing what you have to say." On the other hand, if you look away from someone when he or she is talking to you, you may give the impression of disinterest or even disrespect. Of course, it's important not to overdo it and stare at people. This can be disconcerting and even project hostility.

Other Body Gestures and Expressions

Other body gestures can enhance your interaction with others. A welcoming or parting handshake, for example, is a sign of friendship in American culture; so is patting someone on the back or shoulder. Smiling virtually always conveys friendliness and approachability, two very important qualities for the office professional.

What are some other body expressions and their common meanings?

- Looking upward and to one side: "I'm thinking about something."
- Tapping the hands and/or feet: "I'm getting impatient."
- Stretching the arms backward or upward: "I'm ready to leave."
- Holding the stomach in: "I'm feeling anxious and need to get control."

- Leaning in toward the speaker: “I’m very interested in what you’re saying.”
- Leaning away from the speaker: “I’m not remotely interested in what you’re saying,” or “Get out of my personal space.”

KEY BODY LANGUAGE TIPS

1. Face your listeners as they speak so you can maintain eye contact.
2. Stand up straight and avoid slouching.
3. Keep your facial expressions relaxed, or match the other person’s expression.
4. Speak in a moderate, clear vocal tone. Don’t whisper or shout.
5. Avoid fidgeting or any other nervous behaviors.
6. Hold your arms at your side or gently folded.
7. Stay an average of one arm’s length away from the person to whom you’re speaking.
8. Remember that as you’re observing a person’s body language, he or she may be doing the same.

One method for interpreting body language is to “turn the volume down” on a person’s words and “turn the volume up” on the person’s facial expressions and gestures. Concentrate on facial expression, body posture, placement of limbs, and so on. You can practice by watching a video with the volume turned off. Can you figure out what people are saying and feeling just by watching them? It can be quite challenging, but will get easier as you practice.

Another way to practice body language analysis is to spend time in front of the mirror mimicking facial expressions and movements you’ve seen other people make. Exaggerate them and see how you feel as you do them.



Facial expressions are another example of nonverbal communication.

Interpreting Nonverbal Communication

If you're dealing with a person and wish to confirm your understanding of a particular nonverbal communication, discuss it with him or her, but remember not to be rude or judgmental. Use *tact*—consideration for others' feelings. "Say what you mean, mean what you say, but don't say it mean!" Avoid playing amateur psychiatrist, and don't invade the person's privacy. Here's an example:

Rude: You don't have to cross your arms over your chest, Mr. Somers. None of the other interviewees were a bit nervous!

Tactful: Mr. Somers, you seem anxious. Would you like to sit at this desk and review your materials before your interview?



What nonverbal communication is this worker expressing?

Observing and interpreting nonverbal behavior is especially important when the body language contradicts the individual's words. In this case, the individual may be expressing through nonverbal communication what he or she is unwilling or afraid to say out loud. For example, observe the nonverbal behavior in the next figure. What do you think his behavior is saying?

Along with watching and interpreting other people's nonverbal communication, you need to monitor your own. How can you do this? Ask a friend to record you on video. Have someone take a series of photos of you. Check each one for evidence of nonverbal habits. What can you change or improve?

Traits for Successful Interpersonal Relations

Relating to people means making a connection between you and another person. If you have the following personality traits, or if you take the time to develop them, you'll find it easier to form positive connections. You must have

- Patience
- Tact
- Courtesy
- Empathy
- Consistency
- Respect
- Honesty

- Sensitivity

Patience is an important interpersonal skill that allows you to deal effectively with other people. It means allowing others to work at their own pace or in their own style, even when that differs from your own. It means not getting irritated or annoyed when things don't go your way.

Tact means doing and saying the right things at the right time. If you're tactful, you maintain good relations with others by avoiding needless offenses. You need to be perceptive in recognizing your own feelings and those of others. Often, it's not *what* is said but *how* it's said that causes offense. Take care to use an appropriate tone, inflection, and style of speaking.

Courtesy means putting the needs of others before your own. It means cooperating, sharing, and giving. You should treat all people in a polite manner—courteously, professionally, and impartially. *Please, thank you, you're welcome, excuse me, and may I help you?* should be standard phrases in your vocabulary. Courtesy is intertwined with common decency; you must be careful never to play favorites. Don't do favors for one coworker that you wouldn't do for another. Doing so breeds ill will and dissent in the workplace.

Empathy means being able to recognize and understand what another person is feeling. When you empathize, you can make the other person aware that you understand his or her feelings. Empathizing is more than just paraphrasing; it involves both the basic message and the emotions behind it. In empathizing, the listener not only understands the content of the message but also brings out and labels the speaker's underlying feelings.

Consistency means being reliable and predictable in how you respond to others. If people know what to expect from you, they're more likely to trust you and communicate freely with you. Your coworkers and the executives you work with on a daily basis need to know that they can count on you to do a job well and follow through when you say you will.

Respect: No matter whom you're dealing with—your employer, your coworkers, or your clients—it's essential to be respectful in your manner and speech. Treating others with respect, and remembering to respond rather than react to them, will inspire people to communicate in the same way.

Honesty: Being honest is very important in all of your workplace dealings. Telling a lie of any sort is only going to lead to more trouble. Keep in mind that it's okay to tell a client or coworker that you simply don't know something, as long as you immediately offer to find the information elsewhere. Bluffing doesn't belong in the office.

Sensitivity: Staying aware of people's needs and feelings will help guide you in determining how to respond to them. Most likely, people will appreciate your awareness and reflect it back to you as well. Taking the time to congratulate a coworker on a job well done, for example, improves his or her morale and can make work a more pleasant place for both of you. Taking notice of a coworker who has a problem and offering to help can do the same.

Defense Mechanisms

Psychologists and psychiatrists have identified a number of *defense mechanisms*, which are unconscious adjustments we make in our behavior in response to people and situations. Defense mechanisms make interpersonal communications difficult. Because you'll be working with so many different people in so many different situations, it's important that you recognize and identify these mechanisms in yourself and in the people around you.

- **Repression.** Socially unacceptable or painful desires or impulses are pushed out of the conscious mind into the unconscious, without our being aware of it. These feelings may crop up in dreams or in subtle behaviors.
- **Displacement.** Emotions about one person, idea, or situation are transferred to another, seemingly more acceptable or easier target.
- **Projection.** One's own ideas, feelings, or attitudes are attributed to someone else. For example, a habitual liar is convinced that everyone else is constantly telling lies.

- **Rationalization.** Justifying your actions for “logical” reasons, without really examining the true motives of behavior.
- **Intellectualization.** Again, reasoning is used to avoid the truth, as a way of denying strong feelings that may be socially unacceptable or difficult.
- **Sublimation.** An instinctual desire or impulse is diverted into a socially acceptable activity.
- **Temporary withdrawal.** Finding ways to avoid dealing with painful or difficult situations by avoiding them.
- **Malingering.** Deliberately pretending to be sick when healthy to escape an anxious situation.
- **Denial.** Failing to accept and deal with a traumatic, stressful situation by refusing to admit or acknowledge that the situation exists.
- **Regression.** Returning to an earlier mental or behavioral level during times of stress.

If on occasion you recognize some of these defense mechanisms in yourself or someone else, don't worry too much. These behaviors are the mind's natural way of coping with stress. However, habitual use of such defense mechanisms can indicate a need for counseling. Chronic dependence on defense mechanisms can point to interpersonal communication problems that might be solved if they're faced and analyzed.