

# The Importance of Non-Verbal Communication

*Deepika Phutela\**

---

*Non-verbal communication regulates relationships and can support or even replace verbal communications in many situations. Different genders and cultures use non-verbal communication differently and these differences can impact the nature of interpersonal communication. Non-verbal communication can become a barrier or tear down barriers to effective communication. According to researchers, non-verbal rules may differ as per the situation, and each situation determines its set of rules. Different types of people have very different yet distinct sets of non-verbal communication behaviors. This paper is an overview of different types of non-verbal communication such as body language, hand movement, facial expressions, and eye contact. Non-verbal communication involves multiple channels, is continuous and more ambiguous in nature, and often contradicts the spoken word. When non-verbal and verbal communications conflict, individuals tend to rely on non-verbal clues as a means to interpret the true meaning of a communication.*

---

## Introduction

Communication is a process in which people verbally or non-verbally share information and ideas. Non-verbal communication can be best defined as a silent form of communicating with a person or party without using any form of speech to grab the attention of audience or to exploit a message. Non-verbal communication is often used to express a thought or thoughts and make your message more appealing and interesting to the person you are speaking. Non-verbal communication has a great influence over our social environment and the whole communication process. There are four important functions of non-verbal communication. These functions can complement, regulate, substitute for, or accent a verbal message. In addition to these functions, there are many types of non-verbal communication: paralanguage, body movement, facial expressions, eye messages, attractiveness, clothing, body adornment, space and distance, touch, time, smell and manners.

---

\* Assistant Professor, Tanta University, Sri Ganganagar 335002, Rajasthan, India.  
E-mail: deepika.kinger@rediffmail.com

## Categories of Non-Verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication can be divided into four categories: aesthetic, physical, signs, and symbols.

1. Aesthetic communication occurs through creative expression. This would include all the art forms: music, dance, theater, crafts, art, painting, and sculpture. Ballet is an example of this, as there is dance and music, but no spoken or sung words. Even in an opera, where there are words, there are still facial expressions, costumes, posture, and gestures.
2. Physical communication includes a smile or frown, wink, touch, smell, salute, gesture, and other bodily movements. Social conversation uses a lot of these physical signals along with the spoken words.
3. Signs are a more mechanical kind of non-verbal communication and include signal flags or lights, a 21-gun salute, a display of airplanes in formation, horns, and sirens.
4. Symbols of communication are used to build self-esteem. This includes jewelry, cars, clothing, and other things to communicate social status, financial means, influence, or religion.

## Physical Communication

Physical communication is the most used form of non-verbal communication. A person who is aware of another person's non-verbal cues understands that person better. Even the way you are standing and your position in a group of people can communicate.

The amount of distance between you and another person will be interpreted in a certain way, and the meaning will change according to the culture. It can mean either an attraction, or can signal intensity. Standing side-to-side can show cooperation, where a face-to-face posture may show competition. Your posture can communicate in a non-verbal way, whether you are folding your arms, slouching, crossing your legs, or standing and sitting erect. Finally, any actual touching can convey attraction or a level of intimacy, e.g., shaking hands, patting the back, hugging, pushing, or other kinds of touch.

Other forms of non-verbal communication are facial expressions, gestures, and eye contact. When someone is talking, they notice changes in facial expressions and respond accordingly. These include raising your eyebrows, yawning, sneering, rolling your eyes, gaping, and nodding. The meaning of these movements is pretty much the same in all cultures. Gestures, however, are many times an individual's way of communicating as most people gesture when talking. Eye contact is very important in communicating non-verbally. You can read a person's emotion through his/her eyes, and many times it is not the same emotion that their words are trying to convey.

## Effects of Non-Verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication, especially body language, can send a strong message in spite of what your words say. Even the tone of your voice, its pitch, volume, quality, and speed affect what you say. Your body language can:

- Repeat the message your words are saying;
- Contradict what your words are saying;
- Be a substitution for your verbal message; and
- Add to the meaning of your message.

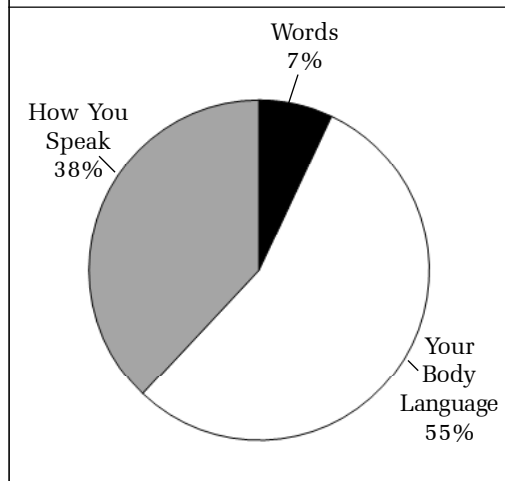
Relationships depend a lot on non-verbal communication for them to be strong and lasting. The quality of your relationships can be improved if you can skillfully read people and understand the emotions behind their words. When one party receives mixed signals, trust can leave and thus damage the relationship. Trust can be created in a relationship by sending non-verbal clues that match your words. The way you respond to someone non-verbally can show that you understand and care about them, and the relationship will grow and be fulfilling to both. Figure 1 shows the formation of an impression, which indicates that 55% of body language works in our interactive communication.

### Importance

Non-verbal communication plays an important role in all communications. It is impossible to communicate without sending out non-verbal clues. These clues help others determine the attitudes and attributes that may not be expressed by the words spoken. One broad area of non-verbal communication involves body position and motion. Referred to as kinesics, this area of non-verbal communication encompasses posture, facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, and body orientation. Individuals use these channels to convey a variety of emotions as well as to display important clues regarding their personality.

Posture is a powerful way in which individuals send non-verbal clues. Posture clues are often very subtle in nature so that individuals have to really look in order to see them. On the other hand, some posture clues are very apparent. For instance, when an individual slumps forward he or she is usually perceived as being bored or extremely interested. A person who sits with his/her arms crossed is sending out a non-verbal message that he/she is closed to information. Posture clues are the easiest to interpret when the receiver notices subtle changes the sender may not be aware of.

**Figure 1: What Makes an Impression**



An individual's posture provides important clues as to how an individual is feeling on the inside. A person who is sitting in a rigid position is usually threatened by something or someone, while a person sitting in a relaxed position appears to be comfortable with his/her surroundings. In addition, posture can often signal real or perceived status. In general, lower status individuals are usually more rigid and tense in posture, while those of a higher status appear more relaxed.

### **Importance of Non-Verbal Communication at Workplace**

At the workplace, effective communication can be used to improve performance and to produce the desired results. There are many non-verbal cues that are used every day at the workplace, most of which are stronger than the spoken language. Professionally speaking, a handshake can make a strong first impression, whether it is positive or negative. Men tend to have better handshaking skills than women; handshakes should be inviting, strong but not overpowering. Workplace touching is often discouraged due to sending out mixed messages, but handshakes are usually accepted and encouraged in most cases. Eye contact is yet another important non-verbal cue that can be used both positively and negatively at the workplace. In the US, eye contact conveys honesty and sincerity; making eye contact is often an invitation to open communication and signifies the need for feedback. In contrast, avoiding eye contact signals distrust, suspicion, or lack of interest; similarly, prolonged eye contact or a stare signifies aggression or flirting. At the workplace, dressing professionally is something most employees need to pay attention to, as it shows confidence in oneself. American businesses value being on time and being conscientious of this is crucial in business. Paying attention to all these non-verbal types of communication can prove successful in almost every business.

Non-verbal communication has the ability to strengthen and develop the existing relationships or it can destroy them. A relationship can be regulated by non-verbal communication because it can support or replace verbal communication. Some of the contributing factors are sending and receiving ability and accuracy, perception of appropriate social roles, and cognitive desire for interpersonal involvement. If the communicators are unaware of the types of messages they are sending and how the receiver is interpreting the messages, difficulties can arise from non-verbal communication. Facial expressions may intentionally or unintentionally cause negative feelings. Introduction and management rely on non-verbal communication in interpersonal relationships. Table 1 presents some tips for effective non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal communication has an impact on gender and cultural differences. The society views males and females differently. Males are portrayed as aggressive, controlling, and having a take-charge attitude. Women are seen as sensitive, emotional, and passive. There is a difference as to how males and females communicate verbally

<b>Eye Contact</b>	Is eye contact being made? If so, is it overly intense or just right?
<b>Facial Expression</b>	What is their face showing? Is it masklike and unexpressive, or emotionally present and filled with interest?
<b>Tone of Voice</b>	Does their voice project warmth, confidence, and interest, or is it strained and blocked?
<b>Posture and Gesture</b>	Are their bodies relaxed or stiff and immobile? Are shoulders tense and raised, or slightly sloped?
<b>Touch</b>	Is there any physical contact? Is it appropriate to the situation? Does it make you feel uncomfortable?
<b>Intensity</b>	Do they seem flat, cool, and disinterested, or over-the-top and melodramatic?
<b>Timing and Pace</b>	Is there an easy flow of information back and forth? Do non-verbal responses come too quickly or too slowly?
<b>Sounds</b>	Do you hear sounds that indicate caring or concern?

<b>1. Repetition</b>	They can reinforce what is already being said.
<b>2. Contradiction</b>	They can contradict the message and make the speaker seem untruthful.
<b>3. Substitution</b>	They can take the place of words.
<b>4. Complementing</b>	They can complement a verbal message, for instance, a pat on the back.
<b>5. Accenting</b>	They can underline a certain point in the message.

and non-verbally. Women are more expressive when they use non-verbal communication; they tend to smile more than men and use their hands more. Men are less likely to make eye contact like women. Men also come off as more relaxed, while women seem tenser. Men are more comfortable with close proximity to females, but women are more comfortable with close proximity with other females. In terms of interpreting non-verbal signals, women are better than men. Table 2 presents non-verbal communication abilities for strong communication.

## **Barriers at Workplace**

Some barriers to non-verbal communication include cultural differences, deceptive gestures, inappropriate touching, negative non-verbal communication, and perceptual filters. The cultural differences include ethnocentrism, stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination along with the hand gestures, touching, and facial expression.

Ethnocentrism means that one culture feels that it is superior to all other cultures. Stereotypes show the distorted or oversimplified views of different races of cultures. When a culture is prejudiced towards another culture or group, a negative attitude is shown based on little or no experience. To avoid another culture discrimination may be shown.

Different gestures often have vastly different meanings to people of different cultures. Non-verbal gestures can lead to misinterpretation. Touching can cause many problems in communicating if it is done incorrectly; for example, a person may touch the other person a lot during a conversation or move much close to him. Some people find touching as an invasion of their personal space. This is a barrier for all communication; people have a hard time communicating when they are uncomfortable. When a person displays negative non-verbal communication, it can also act as a barrier. For example, slouching, rolling of the eyes, moving quickly or slowly, or performing a variety of other negative physical behaviors make it difficult to communicate. This is because the person is creating a negative situation and when people feel uncomfortable they are unwilling to communicate. Facial expression can show frustration, anger, embarrassment, or uncertainty. They can contradict the verbal expression sending the real message that the speaker wants to send.

## Conclusion

Non-verbal communication is crucial in a plain daily communication situation and it is also so for the interpreter. Non-verbal communication can take various forms, each of which illustrates or replaces a certain part of the verbal communication. It includes many more elements than one might think at first. In order to be able to work properly, the interpreters need to make sense of non-verbal cues. This is only possible because a special part of our brain deals with the emotional part of the message. Not only intelligence but also emotional intelligence is needed for interpreting non-verbal elements. Whether non-verbal communication supports business men in their tasks or presents a difficulty depends entirely on them and their actions. In general, as we advance in our careers and even in our life, we tend to have more and be at least better if not the best. Learning the non-verbal language is a very difficult task that takes a lot of time and needs a lot of practice. But it is a very important step that guarantees success in business. If a person can interpret non-verbal language, he can control his own body language and his emotions; this always guarantees success. Not everyone can verbally communicate well, but everyone can learn how to interpret the non-verbal communication of others. (●)

## References

1. Ekman Paul, Friesen V Wallace and Hagar C Joseph (2002), *Facial Action Coding System*, p. 23, Salt Lake City, USA.

2. Pöchhacker Franz and Shlesinger Miriam (2002), *The Interpreting Studies Reader*, Taylor & Francis Group, Routledge, London/New York.
3. [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProjekt\\_Selbstreflexion\\_der\\_Wikipedia/iskussionsseite\\_Kommunikation](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProjekt_Selbstreflexion_der_Wikipedia/iskussionsseite_Kommunikation)
4. <http://tone.udea.edu.co/revista/mar2002/>

*Reference # 50J-2015-12-03-01*

Copyright of IUP Journal of Soft Skills is the property of IUP Publications and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.