

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

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Time was when decoding the non-verbal simply meant watching other people's expressions and interpreting the meaning by saying, for instance, 'If they cross their arms, *that means* they are closed to what I am saying... If they scratch themselves there, *that means* they are lying, etc.' These interpretations assumed that any expression, whether verbal or non-verbal, conveyed a message with explicit or hidden content, and that an informed observer, such as a shrewd detective, could decode it. These interpretations of non-verbal language as conveying a message or intention have been shown to be without any basis¹. They have now been abandoned and replaced by much more enlightening discoveries.

To avoid any confusion, we need to make a distinction. In part, body language can be an extension of verbal language, such as the non-verbal equivalents of certain words or verbal messages (yes, no, it's okay, please come in, etc.), the signs used by each culture, sign language for the deaf, and visual demonstrations that illustrate our verbal descriptions. This non-verbal communication is a form of language that uses the same rules and the same decoding methods as verbal language. The form of non-verbal language that interests us today is spontaneous physical expression transmitted directly without the construction of a coded message.

A special language

This spontaneous body language expresses completely different content from that of verbal language.

Recent discoveries have shown that:

- From birth, infants are fascinated by facial expressions and connect with others by imitating their expressions.
- Throughout their lives, humans practise these 'conversations' by continuing, unconsciously, to imitate the person they are talking to.
- Facial expressions and all body language spontaneously externalise our internal states and emotions. Body language is a precise, flexible, reliable, nuanced and universal language. However, to a certain extent, we can deliberately block or divert some of this spontaneous expression.
- Anyone who observes the person they are talking to carefully and mirrors their body language – deliberately or unconsciously – will, in so doing, be able to reproduce and feel the emotions and internal states of the other person. The exchange is physical and direct. Expression is transformed into impression. However, direct access to this method of sensing requires the cessation of any analysis or decoding, which can interfere with reception.
- Over the last 10 years, cerebral imaging has made it possible to discover and document a phenomenon that confirms and reinforces these exchanges of internal and emotional impressions: 'mirror neurons'.

To understand each other, two people talking to each other must speak the same language. Because expression is with the body, the best receiver and decoder has to be the body. The body has its own language. Its expressive repertoire is as vast as its range of emotions and internal states. Messages are exchanged through expressive movements; one person's body expresses an internal state or an emotion, and the person they are talking to receives and feels the expressed state using their body. They feel what the other feels.

We can therefore really get into '*someone else's skin*', through non-verbal synchronisation. Look at two people who have a good relationship. What do you notice? Their facial expressions and body language match and mirror one another, and their tones of voice adjust to each other. This unconscious phenomenon is the first method of human communication. Used consciously, it allows exchanges to be very revealing. If we want to feel what another person is feeling at a particular moment – while we are with

¹ See the video conference by Dr Janet Beavin Bavelas: <http://juno.sfg.uvic.ca/esgreal/Debunk.ram>

them or later on – we just have to imitate their expression and be aware of what we are feeling at that particular moment. The more faithful the imitation is, the more similar the emotions will be. Fortunately, we have been developing these receptiveness and decoding skills unconsciously since infancy. We just need consciously to switch on the full potential of body language.

Verbal and non-verbal language

'Inhabiting your message'

Body language accompanies the verbal message. It can reinforce it, weaken it or sometimes even neutralise it. Because the body conveys our internal states and emotions directly, in a way it is giving an emotional commentary all the time we are talking. It uses intensity and various emotional methods to support the content of our speech. Just as the person we are talking to can unconsciously feel the emotional variations accompanying what we are saying (look at the phenomenon of unconscious imitation revealed by 'mirror neurons'), they can also detect the harmonisation of or contradictions between our verbal and non-verbal communication. This decoding cannot be done using intellectual analysis. We just notice whether the message is getting across or not getting across, as if the words and body language should form a coherent whole to be properly received. The phrase that best expresses this rule for transmitting a quality message might be that the messenger must '*inhabit his message*'. In other words, an authentic message is easily recognised and is received as such. Conversely, an insincere message, where someone tries to hide things or convey feelings they do not really feel, has little chance of registering as a credible message. Authenticity cannot be manufactured, except by talented actors who can '*get into a character's skin*' to the point where they become that character and express it congruently, as much in the content as in their emotions. Then we believe in the person and the message.

Or...

Insincere messages

Here, you manufacture the message for the sake of achieving a particular result. You want the person you are talking to register the specific content you have decided on. To achieve this, you choose the ingredients you want to include in the message, the things you want to underline and the things you want to hide. In short, you manufacture the message as if you could implant it the way you want in the head of the person you are talking to. Here, you are assuming this person is passive, prepared to receive and accept the message you have manufactured to suit your purposes. Yet this practice does not take account of the skill of the person you are talking to at detecting incongruence with your body language. It is more difficult to get an insincere message accepted than an authentic message.

Active listening

People often talk about the importance of active listening in communication. How does non-verbal communication work when it comes to active listening? We have already seen how body language expresses our internal states and how those we are talking to tend to mirror these states. Can I put myself in a particular internal state that would encourage the person I am talking to to open up? Can I therefore choose certain internal states for their relevance to and usefulness in a situation? If so, what internal state is best for active and effective listening? In this particular case, I would choose a state characterised by interest and curiosity. It is not about choosing the right interview techniques; it is a matter of getting into an internal emotional state characterised by interest and curiosity. Do you remember times when you were in a state like this, how you felt, what your posture was, what kind of attention you gave to the other person? It is a matter of switching on this particular internal state of attentiveness and recognition, which is conveyed to the person you are talking to and makes it easier for them to express themselves, much more than using techniques you do not inhabit.

Illustrations

Strategies for image in the public and political arena

Advisers and politicians can take one of three different strategic approaches when it comes to communication. Either they can see 'image' as a result, as the effect produced by the behaviour, attitudes and method of expression of the person they want to present with all their attributes, or they can see 'image' as a goal, a result to be achieved in terms of the image the person has to leave in the minds of the target audience (certain attributes are transformed, amplified or camouflaged so the person can project the image defined by the strategists, which will be appreciated by this audience), or they can combine these two approaches.

What contribution does body language make to this type of operation? We already know that the person the politician is talking to is very good at recognising (albeit unconsciously) any lack of congruence in what is being said. In other words, the person will disengage from a message where the verbal and non-verbal communications are not in harmony. For example, if the politician has decided to project a combative image to impress but does not really feel combative, those watching will recognise this 'fraud' in the politician's body language and the message will lose much of its credibility. Conversely, the politician who can inhabit his or her message in terms of both content and emotional expression will be recognised as credible. Some people will disagree, saying that you can make a gullible audience believe anything you want. Remember what was required for someone to give credibility to a manufactured message? The 'actor' wanting to make a character credible manages to 'get into the character's skin' by integrating the different dimensions of the character: beliefs, perceptions, intentions and emotions. By doing this, the actor makes us believe in his 'reality' and his message. It is not hard in some public debates to see that these conditions are not always met by the various 'actors'.

Harassment at work

Albert Jacquard said of the child constructing its own identity: 'It is through the "you" that the "I" is built'. The recognition of its capabilities, skills, qualities, strengths and so on, underlined and acknowledged by its parents and others around it later on, enable the child to build its identity, the 'I' it will use as the basis for all its future developments, hence the importance of this construction, which structures the whole of its personality.

In the case of harassment in the workplace, we see this process being reversed. The other person's attention is not used to construct the unique 'I' but, on the contrary, to attack the very roots of this identity and the self-esteem on which it is based. The process is one of identity deconstruction, whether intentional or unintentional. To begin with, attacks may relate to how certain jobs were done or to certain capabilities, but fairly quickly the attacks are directed at the victim's personality and identity. Each new attack is violent, coming on top of previous attacks in a process of destruction. The process gradually destroys the victim's sense of self-worth as a human being. Defence, challenge and reconstruction become more difficult as the victim is unable to count on capabilities and strengths they no longer feel they have as part of this new identity, which has been wounded, weakened or in the worst cases destroyed.

What is the role of non-verbal communication in this process? Remember some of the features of this form of communication. Firstly, the nature of the message: what body language communicates is the emotional content or internal state. The method of communication and reception is direct and physical. In addition, this dimension of the message is mostly not acknowledged as an important part of the communication, though it is often the part that wounds most directly.

Some people's stories speak volumes about the role non-verbal communication plays. Victims very clearly distinguish body postures that ignore them, single them out and isolate them. They experience the opposite of personal and professional recognition: neglect, isolation or disdain. '*Just from his look, I feel he despises me.*' And what about the '*looks of veiled criticism*', the '*disdainful tone of voice and scornful eyes*', the '*thinly disguised aggression*'? As people's stories reveal, body language is experienced directly, without a protective filter. Moreover, it is very difficult to give these looks, facial expressions, sighs and tones of voice as evidence of harassment. People are afraid they will not be believed or worse, they will be accused of making it up – another form of attack on their credibility and sanity. But words and equivocal tones of voice come with the upsetting expressions and gestures. Gradually victims are isolated and start

to doubt their own perceptions, sanity, value and identity. And there we are! The deconstruction has worked.

What possible action can be taken at the end of this process? You need to defend yourself and go to court, people tell the victim. But does he or she still have the resources? One thing is certain, a process of reconstruction is needed. Before this can be done, however, recognition of the harassment people have suffered is essential to remove any feelings of guilt and shame that are still contributing to their feelings of worthlessness as a person.

The process of reconstructing their identity will go through these well-known stages in which new, positive 'yous' will be valuable in reconstructing a solid 'I', hence the importance of support from others, both to remind people of the traps of negative judgment, whether from themselves or others, and to regain their destroyed self-esteem. Let us remember what a positive effect an attitude of interest and curiosity has on these unique human beings in the process of reconstruction.

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On popular misconceptions about non-verbal language

A video conference by Dr Janet Beavin Bavelas:

On the web: <http://juno.sfg.uvic.ca/esgreal/Debunk.ram>