

Nonverbal Strategies for Success

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the importance of nonverbal communication when you are speaking, and how to improve this type of communication between you and your audience. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Importance of Nonverbal Communication

Recall that **nonverbal communication** involves physical gestures or visual displays, or the portrayals of a person's words. As such, it is an important aspect of business communication, from the context of an interpersonal interaction to a public presentation.

It is a dynamic, complex, and challenging aspect of communication. We are never done learning and adapting to our environment and context, and improving our understanding of nonverbal communication comes with the territory. Employers appreciate individuals who recognize this need to be flexible and to continue to strengthen their **self and social awareness skills**.

When your audience first sees you, they begin to make judgments and predictions about you and your potential, just as an employer might do when you arrive for a job interview. Your skills as an effective business communicator will be called upon when you contemplate your appearance.

As a speaker, your goal is to create common ground and reduce the distance between the audience and yourself. You want your appearance to help establish and reinforce your credibility.



TERM TO KNOW

Nonverbal Communication

Communication using physical gestures or visual displays; the portrayal of a person's words.

2. Movement in Your Speech

At some point in your business career, you will likely be called upon to give a speech. It may be to an audience of one on a sales floor, or to a large audience at a national meeting.

You already know you need to make a positive first impression, but do you know how to use movement in your presentation?



THINK ABOUT IT

Who would you rather listen to: a speaker who moves confidently across the stage or one who hides behind the podium; one who expresses herself nonverbally with purpose and meaning or one who crosses his arms or clings to the lectern?

Audiences are most likely to respond positively to open, dynamic speakers who convey the feeling of being at ease with their bodies. The setting, combined with audience expectations, will give a range of movement. If the stage allows you to explore, closing the distance between yourself and your audience may prove effective.

Novice speakers are often told to keep their arms at their sides, or to restrict their movement to only that which is absolutely necessary. If you are in formal training for a military presentation, or a forensics (speech and debate) competition, this may hold true. But in business and industry, "whatever works" rules the day.

You can't say that expressive gestures - common among many cultural groups, like arm movement while speaking - are not appropriate when they are, in fact, expected.



HINT

Movement is an important aspect of your speech and requires planning, the same as the words you choose and the visual aids you design. Be natural, but do not naturally shuffle your feet, pace back and forth, or rock on your heels through your entire speech. These behaviors distract your audience from your message and can communicate nervousness, undermining your credibility.

2a. Gestures

Gestures involve using your arms and hands while communicating. Gestures provide a way to channel your nervous energy into a positive activity that benefits your speech and gives you something to do with your hands.



THINK ABOUT IT

Watch people in normal, everyday conversations. They frequently use their hands to express themselves. Do you think they think about how they use their hands? Most people do not. Their arm and hand gestures come naturally as part of their expression, often reflecting what they have learned within their community.

This is also true for professional speakers, but deliberate movement can reinforce, repeat, and even regulate an audience's response to their verbal and nonverbal messages. You want to come across as comfortable and natural, and your use of your arms and hands contributes to your presentation.

We can easily recognize that a well-chosen gesture can help make a point memorable or lead the audience to the next point.



STEP BY STEP

1. **Anticipation:** As professional speakers lead up to a main point, they raise their hand slightly, perhaps waist high, often called an anticipation step. The gesture clearly shows the audience your anticipation of an upcoming point, serving as a nonverbal form of foreshadowing.
2. **Implementation:** The implementation step, which comes next, involves using your arms and hands above your waist. By holding one hand at waist level pointing outward, and raising it up with your palm forward, as in the "stop" gesture, you signal the point. The nonverbal gesture complements the spoken word, and as students of speech have noted across time, audiences respond to this

nonverbal reinforcement. You then slowly lower your hand down past your waistline and away from your body, letting go of the gesture, and signaling your transition.

3. Relaxation: The relaxation step, where the letting go motion complements your residual message, concludes the gesture.

2b. Facial Expressions

As you progress as a speaker from gestures and movement, you will need to turn your attention to facial expressions. Facial expressions involve using your face to display feelings and attitudes nonverbally. They may reinforce, or contradict, the spoken word, and their impact cannot be underestimated.

As in other body movements, your facial expressions should come naturally, but giving them due thought and consideration can keep you aware of how you are communicating the nonverbal message.

Facial expressions should also reflect the tone and emotion of your verbal communication.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you are using humor in your speech, you will likely smile and wink to complement the amusement expressed in your words. Smiling will be much less appropriate if your presentation involves a serious subject such as cancer or car accidents.

Consider how you want your audience to feel in response to your message, and identify the facial expressions you can use to promote those feelings. Then practice in front of a mirror so that the expressions come naturally.

2c. Eye Contact

One of the most important facial expressions is eye contact, which refers to the speaker's gaze that engages the audience members. It can vary in degree and length, and in many cases, is culturally influenced. Both the speaker's expectations and the audience members' notion of what is appropriate will influence normative expectations for eye contact.

When giving a presentation, avoid looking over people's heads, staring at a point on the wall, or letting your eyes dart all over the place. The audience will find these mannerisms unnerving. They will not feel as connected, or receptive, to your message and you will reduce your effectiveness.

To practice effective eye contact, move your eyes gradually and naturally across the audience, both close to you and toward the back of the room. Try to look for faces that look interested and engaged in your message.

Do not focus on only one or two audience members, as audiences may respond negatively to perceived favoritism. Instead, try to give as much eye contact as possible across the audience. Keep it natural, but give it deliberate thought.

3. Tips for Practicing Nonverbal Communication

In order to be a successful business communicator, you will need to continually learn about nonverbal communication and its impact on your interactions. You must take the time to understand how your actions impact those around you and how your reactions to them could be interpreted.

Below are two ways to practice effective nonverbal communication.

3a. Enroll an Observer

Most communication in business and industry involves groups and teams, even if the interpersonal context is a common element. Enroll a coworker or colleague in your effort to learn more about your audience, or even yourself.

They can observe your presentation and note areas you may not have noticed that could benefit from revision. Perhaps the gestures you make while speaking tend to distract rather than enhance your presentations.

You can also record a video of your performance and play it for them, and yourself, to get a sense of how your nonverbal communication complements or detracts from the delivery of your message.

3b. Focus on a Specific Type of Nonverbal Communication



THINK ABOUT IT

What is the norm for eye contact where you work? Does this change or differ based on gender, age, ethnicity, cultural background, context, or environment?

Observation will help you learn more about how people communicate; looking for trends across a specific type of nonverbal communication can be an effective strategy.

Focus on one behavior you exhibit on your videotape, like pacing, body movements across the stage, hand gestures as you are making a point, or eye contact with the audience.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the **importance of nonverbal communication**, which strongly influences how your audience perceives you and your message. One way to improve your nonverbal communication is to introduce **movement in your speech**, including **gestures**, **facial expressions**, and **eye contact**. You also learned some **tips for practicing nonverbal communication** before you go live. **Enrolling an observer** and **focusing on a specific type of nonverbal communication** are good ways to become more aware of and at ease with your use of nonverbal communication.

Best of luck in your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

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