



# Strictly Classified

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## Nonverbal Communication: Hearing What Isn't Said



Nonverbal communication is perhaps the most powerful form of communication. While a lot of attention is paid to the words we speak, frequently a look or a gesture can say a great deal more. Facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, posture, and the tone of our voice convey our interest, comfort, sincerity and mood. These unspoken signs can impart feelings of trust and inspire a connection. However, they can also communicate nervousness, disinterest and disapproval thus causing doubt, confusion or uneasiness. Frequent or exaggerated gestures, speaking quickly or loudly, standing too close to someone, folded arms, slouched posture or a raised eyebrow can prompt a negative reaction. On the other hand, a firm handshake, a pat on the back or a confident stride can be reassuring. As a supervisor, knowing how to read nonverbal cues is an important skill. It is also important to be aware of the messages that you may be sending to others through body language. Ultimately, it will help you make better hiring decisions, as well as help you to better understand and communicate with your staff.

### Nonverbal Communication

- **Posture and Movement:** Are you sitting straight up or slouching? Is your head held high or are you looking down? Are you walking with purpose or are you sluggishly moving along? All of these things say a lot about confidence, enthusiasm and comfort.
- **Gestures:** Pointing, waving, moving our hands while speaking. Often times we do these things without even realizing it. These types of non-verbal signals can help to reinforce our words, but they can also be interpreted differently across cultures. Try to avoid misunderstanding. Additionally, excessive gesturing can be distracting.
- **Facial Expressions:** A smile, a smirk, a frown, a dropped jaw, a roll of your eyes. With our face we are able to convey a myriad of feelings and emotions that can be universally understood. Shock, joy, frustration, confusion, sadness and disinterest can all be communicated without uttering a single word.
- **Eye Contact:** Making eye contact can signal that you are listening attentively and that you are involved and interested in what is being said. Eye contact can also convey things like warmth, aggression or intensity.
- **Space:** Some people react negatively when they feel their personal space is being invaded. Depending on the context, it can be interpreted as intimidating or aggressive. Some may simply find it bothersome if someone is a "close talker."
- **Voice:** It is not just about what it is said but how it is said. Tone, pitch, and inflection can express excitement, irritation, sarcasm or confidence. The speed with which one speaks is also significant. A slow, monotone speaker may be perceived as boring. While a fast or frantic speaker may be difficult to understand or make listeners nervous.
- **Touch:** A pat on the back, a firm handshake, a hug. Touch can reinforce good work and communicate care. However, it can also spark fear or resentment. Holding onto someone tightly can be intimidating. A pat on the head can be read as condescending. Touch is a powerful nonverbal cue that can occasionally be misinterpreted. If you are unsure how a hug or a pat will be received, it is better to refrain from this type of communication.

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### **Reading Cues**

- Repetition: Nonverbal messages can reinforce what the speaker is saying with words. For example, you tell someone that they are doing a good job and you reinforce that message by delivering it with a smile and patting them on the back.
- Contradiction: Body language can suggest that what someone says is not really what he/she feels. For instance, after a workshop you tell the speaker you found the session engaging and interesting. However, during the seminar you didn't make eye contact with the speaker, you were fiddling with your phone and you kept checking your watch.
- Substitute: Nonverbal communication can be used in place of words. An example of this would be if an employee enters your office and indicates that he/she would like to talk to you. However, you are on the phone so you gesture that you will be a minute.
- Accent: Body language can underscore a feeling or point that the speaker is trying to convey. Snapping your fingers to indicate urgency is an example of this.

### **Suggestions for Effective Communication**

- If stressed, angry or overwhelmed, try to compose yourself before communicating. Speaking when you are stressed or upset can lead to misunderstanding.
- Are your words matching your nonverbal signals? In order to avoid confusion or misinterpretation, it is a good idea to pay attention to both the words and body language you are using.
- Don't make vast assumptions based on a single nonverbal sign. If someone is nervous they may speak quickly or fidget. That alone should not determine whether a job candidate is hired or whether an employee can be trusted. Try to pick up on other spoken and unspoken cues that the individual may be sending.

### **Sensitivity to Cultural Differences**

- When communicating, it is important to be aware of cultural differences. Different cultures have different norms regarding personal space, facial expressions, gestures, etc. Be sensitive to that.