

8 Ways Nonverbal Messages Can Torpedo Your Career

By Rosa Chillis

“What you are speaks so loudly I cannot hear what you say.”
-- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Verbal communication means the words we use; nonverbal communication means everything else: gestures, body language, facial expressions, and non-word vocalizations (tone of voice, quality, pitch, volume, inflection, etc.). These vocal characteristics speak to your emotional state and personality.

Nonverbal communication also includes pronunciation, articulation, and enunciation that can speak to your credibility or intelligence in the minds of others.

It’s impossible to not send nonverbal messages. Silence, for instance, can communicate powerful messages. It can mean you are so comfortable and contented, you don’t need to talk. Or it can mean “Leave me alone! I’m not speaking to you!”

Although many nonverbal codes are universal, the way you use them depends to a large extent upon your culture and gender. Nevertheless, because nonverbal communication is so pervasive, you should want to develop competence, or skill, in this area so as not to give the wrong messages in the workplace and thus torpedo your career.

In this article, I discuss 8 mistakes you should avoid if you want to get ahead.

Mistake #1: Time. For most Americans, time is valuable. Consider these phrases: “Don’t waste time,” “Lose time,” “Spend time,” “Save time,” “Borrowed time,” “Time is money,” and so forth. The approved behavior at a job is to arrive early rather than late.

Mistake #2: Clothes. People dress to define themselves. Clothing conveys all types of messages: social background, trustworthiness, level of success, moral character, economic level, and so forth. The way you dress can make a difference in the way others perceive you.

Mistake #3: Posture. Stop now and notice how you’re sitting. What does your posture say nonverbally about how you feel? What about those people sitting around you? Someone who slouches could be saying “I’m not very sure of myself.” The crossed arms: “Don’t bother me.”

Mistake #4: Face and eyes. Studies have shown the face alone is capable of more than a thousand distinct expressions. For instance, eyes can shoot daggers of anger, issue challenges; show feelings of warmth and love. Your face can show disapproval (scowls) or admiration (warm gazes). No wonder poets call the eyes “the mirrors of the soul.”

Mistake #5: Gestures and bodily movement. Social scientists claim that a language of gestures was the first form of human communication. The meanings of gestures and bodily movement can change from one culture to the next and interpreted depending on the context; but they reveal a lot of information about a person. For example, at a job interview, tension and rigidity could reveal fear, anxiety and nervousness.

Mistake #6: Voice. Vocal cues are non-words such as pitch, rate, volume, enunciation, and so forth. People reveal personality characteristics through vocal cues. Shouting conveys anger. Sneering and ridiculing by tone of voice communicates dissatisfaction. Poor enunciation ruins credibility.

Mistake #7: Intentionality (intended purpose). Example: when you hug a friend, the hug is nonverbal; the perceived message: “I’m so glad to see you.” However, misunderstandings can occur when you touch areas such as arm and back of another person, which can be aggressive.

Mistake #8: Personal space. There are cultural differences with the amount of space with which people feel comfortable; but for most Americans, personal distance ranges from 18 inches to 4 feet. To go inside the comfort zone without permission is an invasion of the other person’s territory.

Because others interpret your nonverbal behaviors, effectiveness in this area is critical to ensure your career success. In this article I have outlined 8 areas where you must exhibit nonverbal competence – skill. You must monitor your nonverbal communication if you want to get ahead and stay ahead.

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