Objectives: This section will discuss non-verbal communication, which is that communication which is not spoken. By the end of this section, you should have a sound understanding of:

- the importance of understanding non-verbal communication;
- what comprises non-verbal communication;
- the importance of understanding your own behaviour; and
- cross cultural considerations.
What is non-verbal communication (NVC)?

Non-verbal communication is that which occurs separately to words that may be spoken. It is a very powerful means of communication that always exists within a context, and specifically relates to:

- body language (kinesics) and facial or physical expression
- voice tone, pitch, rhythm
- use of space and environment
- artefacts (objects that convey meaning - clothing, makeup, hairstyle)

Non-verbal communication exists at a personal and cultural level. Personal non-verbal communication relates to an individual’s personal characteristics, while cultural non-verbal communication refers to characteristics that are common to a group (Dwyer, 2002). Some examples of the difference:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal</th>
<th>Cultural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scratching above the eyebrow when nervous.</td>
<td>Meaning of colours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folding arms when talking to someone new.</td>
<td>Shaking hands when meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rolling eyes when impatient.</td>
<td>Proximity/personal space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raising pitch of voice when stressed.</td>
<td>Saluting an officer (armed forces).</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

According to Seiler and Bell (2002), some basic characteristics of non-verbal communication are that it:

- occurs constantly - you are never ‘not communicating’;
- depends on context - meanings can be different depending on the situation;
- is more believable that verbal communication - we tend to believe what we see rather more than what we hear;
- is our primary means of expression - we often act non-verbally before we speak;
- is related to culture - cultural expectations and rules influence our behaviour;
- is ambiguous - behaviour is subject to interpretation.

Non-verbal communication is integral to socialisation. You have been exposed to its meanings since you were born.

Why is NVC Important?

“The nonverbal part of the message tends to be less conscious and reveals the sender's feelings, likings, and preferences more spontaneously and honestly than the verbal part. If the verbal message does not match up with the nonverbal communication there is a tendency to believe the nonverbal part of the message” (Dwyer, 2002, p.71).

From a communicator’s point of view, non-verbal communication is important because it allows us greater understanding of how our audience may be receiving our
message. It can be an indicator of ‘noise’, such as resistant attitude, or can provide immediate positive feedback which will encourage you to keep going. Understanding non-verbal communication also allows us to control our own behaviour, and become accepting and understanding of others.

Social and cultural literacy in an NVC context

Social and cultural literacy are important when trying to understand or interpret non-verbal communication due to the importance of context. The more exposed you are to different groups, cultures, and experiences, the more information you will have to allow you to understand information at a non-verbal level. You may be moving from a male-dominated work environment into a female-dominated workplace. Do you think your behavior may be different in your new environment? You may wear a suit on your first day to work, before realising that everyone else is wearing board shorts. What are you saying to the group if you continue to wear a suit, rather than dress down to the social norm? Should you ask about dress standards before commencing work? As discussed in a previous lesson, literacy is sometimes about understanding what you don’t know. The solution to lack of knowledge is to learn.

Technical professions are very diverse. Working in different environments across the globe is not uncommon, and you should endeavour to find out as much as you can about the social and cultural norms of the community in which you are operating. At the same time, social skills are learned while you are growing up, usually as part of a group. There is a tendency toward technically oriented people interacting more with computers or hardware than other people; this can make life interesting when you are expected to interact with colleagues in a workplace when you have spent much of your spare time in social isolation, albeit maybe as part of a ‘virtual group’. This isolation can be a barrier to experiencing social norms, and you may need to make a concerted effort to ‘learn’ about non-verbal communication.

Cross-cultural communication

A knowledge of cultural issues is important in modern business, and cultural difference is often found in the area of non-verbal communication. Consider, if you are an Australian male of Irish descent, your reaction to being kissed on each side of the cheek when being greeted by a business partner. If you are female, how would you react if your business colleague did not at any stage of a face to face meeting, make eye contact with you? Your reactions in these cases may prevent you from being receptive to any further communication from the other person. In both cases, the actions of your colleagues may be perfectly acceptable from their own cultural perspective. An understanding of other perspectives will reduce the risk of misunderstanding.

What’s your personal space? Ask a friend to help you establish your personal space. They should come as close as they can to you in normal discussion until you feel uncomfortable. That distance is your personal space. For some people, it is a few centimetres, for others, it is metres. Western cultures tend to have a larger personal space. Intruding on someone’s personal space can be intimidating - if they are walking backwards or trying to leap over a wall, you’ve hit their limit!
The importance of ‘listening’

Hearing and listening are different. Hearing is a physical ability, while listening is a mental skill. You can also ‘listen’ to non-verbal communication by reading ‘signs’. Listening to oral and non-verbal communication can be difficult, and your aim as a communicator is to enhance comprehension and reduce the risk of misunderstanding. Ultimately, very few people are good listeners.

Try to think of someone you know who is a good listener. Why do you think they listen well? Now think of someone who is a bad listener. What is the difference between them? Write down your notes in two columns and compare...

Robert Bolton, in *People Skills*, suggests that 75 per cent of oral communication is ignored, misunderstood, or quickly forgotten. Non-verbal communication is also likely to be misunderstood if you do not understand the context.

So why is listening important? Responsive listening will encourage a speaker to continue. It will work towards ensuring that the message you receive is as close to meaning as possible that was intended by the sender. It reduces the possibility of misunderstanding.

You can work on being a good listener. There are a number of skills that can help you:

- wait for someone to finish speaking before you start to speak;
- paraphrase to ensure that you have understood what has just been said;
- focus on the speaker, and try not to let your mind wander too quickly ahead on to what you want to say;
- make eye-contact and face the speaker, and respond by nodding or using non-verbal communication to indicate that you are listening.

Good listeners often use pauses or silence to their advantage, as it often encourages the speaker to continue. If you interrupt, or speak too quickly in response, you may discourage the speaker and therefore miss some vital information or move in a different direction before the issue is fully resolved.

Bad listeners will generally:

- continue with what they are doing (reading paper, working on computer) when you are talking to them;
- interrupt and change topic to discuss their own opinion;
- make distracting gestures (fold arms, tap on table, fidget).

While a bad listener may have heard everything you have said, they have not created an environment in which you feel comfortable, which can ultimately affect the way you are sending your message.
Understanding yourself and others...

In adventure training, where you are under extreme stress and usually working within a team environment, you are often asked to identify your ‘stress indicators’. The theory is that by understanding your reaction to extreme stress, you are then in a position to manage it. Some people go quiet, some become aggressive, and others become overly talkative. Imagine those three personalities all facing the same task. Is it a potential scene of conflict? Absolutely. By understanding your own reactions to situations, you are better able to manage your own environment.

For example, you are aware that you frown or stick your tongue out when concentrating. You do this in a meeting, and realise that your colleagues are looking at you somewhat strangely. You explain, “Oh, don’t mind me - I always do this when I’m listening and concentrating.” Your colleagues laugh, and the meeting continues. If you do not explain this, colleagues may walk away from the meeting thinking that you were disagreeing with what they said, when in fact that may not have been the case.

Do you have any habits that may interfere with communication with others? Do you fold your arms, not make eye-contact? Write these down, and in another column, identify how this may be interpreted by your audience.

Understanding non-verbal communication and the importance of listening are important to being effective team members. We will look at teamwork and associated issues in our next lesson. You should now complete the readings and the required exercise as part of this lesson.

REFERENCES


TEXTBOOK: Business Communication: Building Critical Skills

1. Module 3 - Communicating Across Cultures p.44 - 68.

EXERCISE 7

On your CD, you will find a series of video clips. You should watch the clips and identify (in point form) the differences between:

Scenario 3 and 4 - Impromptu Discussion with Colleague

Scenario 5 - Meeting in a Doorway

You should write no more than half a page for each scenario, identifying (in point form) examples of non-verbal communication and how it affects communication in the scenario.

Internal students should submit this exercise to their tutor in class. External students should submit this with Assignment 2 in Week 12.

Note that at this stage, punctuation and grammar is increasingly important, and your submissions will be failed/discounted if they do not meet basic grammatical standards. If you are having problems, you should contact your tutor (internal students) or the Course Coordinator (external students).

VISIT THE WWW SITE

You should now visit the course website to access web-based links and readings, and to discuss any thoughts you have on this lesson. The website address is in your course profile, or can be accessed via http://e-courses.cqu.edu.au