

Mastering the Power of Body Language

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One of the most fascinating things about human beings is our sophisticated and elaborate ability to communicate. This ability is not only restricted to speech and the acquisition of language but to every gesture and movement that we make to, to give life and meaning to our words. Moreover, even within the context of language, the way we use our voice, its tonality, inflections, volume, speed and pitch all have a significant impact on the way we send and receive messages. The earliest studies of body language take us back to Charles Darwin's work in 1872. This paved the way to numerous other studies that attempted to understand the role and meaning of non-verbal messages in human beings. Among the most famous is the work of Albert Mehrabian, a pioneer researcher in the field of body language in the 1960's. He concluded that 55% of the impact of human communication is attributable to body language, 38% to use of voice, and only 7% to words alone. Another key contributor to research on non-verbal behaviour was anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell who stated that "all movements of the body have meaning. None are accidental". He concluded that over 65% of our communication is non-verbal. He also estimated that humans can make and recognize around 250,000 facial expressions with our 47 different facial muscles! Since these early studies many researchers have explored this intriguing subject from various angles. Among the most prominent are: Paul Ekman, who focused on the expression of emotion in the human face and came up with the six universal expressions; Michael Argyle, who found that nonverbal communication is twelve times more powerful than language in the communication of interpersonal attitudes; and Gregory Bateson who came up with the term "double bind" to explain the detrimental effect on children receiving contradictory verbal and non-verbal messages.

All studies indicate that for us to become more proficient, accurate, and effective in our communication and relational skills, we need to give non-verbal communication its due attention and importance. Body language, in particular, can be regarded as the external manifestation of our emotional state. Every gesture and body movement can give us valuable insight into how a person is feeling. An important factor in this respect is that because body language is so unconsciously driven we tend to be largely unaware it. Our body therefore, often reveals what our words do not. Furthermore, in our daily interactions, when our body language contradicts our words, people will tend to go with what our body is "saying" rather than the actual words we speak. For example we may be speaking with confidence and certainty while wringing our hands (a sign of tension and anxiety). This contradiction is often visible in politicians' speeches.

Every major part of our body has significant impact on the messages we give out and read in other people. The face is obviously the most powerful non-verbal communicator and it is essential that as we interact we scan people's faces for

the clear and sometimes subtle changes of expression that indicate how the other person is reacting to us or to what they are saying. Our arms and hands are also key players in communication. Indeed, some researchers claim that through hand movements we unwittingly display our inner thoughts and ways of understanding and perceiving the world. Consider for example a person who is saying they have a problem while making large all encompassing gestures with their arms. This may reveal the magnitude of their perception of the problem. Also important are our legs and feet as well as the general orientation of our body. We often unconsciously orient our body towards our intention. For example, if we need to terminate a conversation, we may naturally start to open up our angle to face the direction we want to go. Likewise, in a social group, we may point our leading leg while standing towards the people we are most attracted to.

One of the key tools in neuro linguistic programming (NLP) is precisely the careful study of body language as well as the use of one's voice in order to greatly increase one's power of communication. NLP, for example, uses the concept of mirroring body language and pacing to quickly build rapport with a person. When used ethically, these techniques can be very beneficial in improving the quality of our interactions and relationships with people. It also shows how through harnessing and changing our posture, tonality, facial expressions, as well as our thinking, we can actually shift into more useful and healthy emotional states.

What is important is to be cautious about the conclusions we make from noticing people's body language. It is essential that we keep the verbal and environmental context constantly present and to look at clusters of information rather than isolated signals. Although, non-verbal messages are more reliable sources of information than words, they are still not complete messages and should not be regarded as such. Humans have a tendency to "thin-slice", that is, make snap judgments based on minimal experience. Thin slicing is a way of coping with a barrage of information coming our way. It is a very functional tool, however, it can lead to wrong judgments.

One of the main reasons for misunderstanding non-verbal messages is that our own experiences and associations filter the meaning that is communicated. Everything we perceive is filtered through a series of "perceptual filters" that distort, delete, and generalise meanings. The key is that a nonverbal signal is not a complete message. Watch for a pattern of signals that all have the same meaning. Body language should match the verbal expressions. Look for body language in clusters of signals with common meanings and consider the whole context.