Verbal vs. Non-Verbal Communication

We communicate with much more than words: when we interact with someone, our body has a language of its own. The way we sit, the gestures we make, the way we talk, how much eye contact we make—all of these are non-verbal ways of communicating that impact the messages our words are sending.

Managers who are adept at dealing with negative emotions in the workplace are mindful of how and what they communicate verbally and non-verbally. They are also receptive to the verbal and non-verbal messages of others. Perceptive managers can go beyond the words to discover the fuller meaning of a statement by observing non-verbal communication.

Our verbal messaging is communicated via the words that we use. The verbal message is of course an important part of our communication, but the way we communicate nonverbally is equally, and sometimes more, important.

Nonverbal communication includes the following:
- Tone of voice
- Rate and volume of speech
- How we articulate our words
- Rhythm, intonation and stress placed on words
- Facial expression
- The amount of eye contact we make
- Gestures/touch
- Body language and posturing

Research shows that when we communicate feelings and attitudes, only a small percentage of our overall message comes from the words we use.
- 55% of our message comes from body language (especially from movements of the small muscles around the eye which can convey shock, disbelief, doubt or disgust)
- 38% of our message comes from tone of voice
- Only 7% of our message is conveyed by the words we use (Mehrabian, 2007)

It’s not what we say, but how we say it that often matters most, especially when we communicate feelings and attitudes. Tone of voice alone can convey anger, frustration, disappointment, sarcasm, confidence, affection or indifference.

Often our verbal and non-verbal messages are consistent, but they can sometimes be inconsistent. If someone’s words conflict with their tone of voice and/or non-verbal behaviours, we often mistrust the words and tend to believe the non-verbal clues instead. It’s not very convincing, for example, when someone tells you they’re not angry at you, but they avoid eye contact, have an angry expression on their face, can barely force out the words, and slam their fist on the table while saying it.
Barriers to Sending Consistent Messages

We sometimes send confusing or negative non-verbal signals without knowing it. Many things can compromise our ability to communicate effectively:

- **Our stress level:** When we are experiencing personal or work-related stressors, we may be more likely to misread other people’s messages and to send inconsistent or negative non-verbal signals. This may make it more likely for us to display inappropriate behaviours (e.g., yelling, blaming or impatience).

- **Our well-being (psychological and/or physical):** If we are not feeling well physically or emotionally, we can be more likely to focus on the negative aspects of a conversation and we may be more likely to send negative or uncaring non-verbal signals.

- **Distraction:** If we are distracted by thoughts or our environment (e.g., looking at emails on our computer screen while speaking to a worker) our non-verbal signals almost certainly convey disinterest. We may give people the impression that we don’t care or are not listening, even when this may not be true.

Effective Non-Verbal Communication

To be able to communicate effectively (and accurately), we must be aware of our own emotions and also understand the non-verbal signals we’re sending to others. Here are some tips that can help you communicate more effectively:

- **If you’re feeling stressed or unwell, defer having important conversations.** Reducing your own stress levels can help you interact more positively and effectively with others.

- **Be aware if your mind is jumping to conclusions or if your face may be giving away your thoughts.** To keep yourself from being distracted by or reacting to your own thoughts, try keeping your mind focused on being open and curious about what is being said, and may be said next by the person in front of you. This can prevent some of the eye movements that give away your doubt or discomfort with what is being said.

- **Be attentive to inconsistencies.** Your non-nonverbal signals should reinforce what you’re saying. Make sure your verbal and non-verbal messages match.

- **Give full attention to your communication partner.** Show people you speak to that you are ‘present’ and eager to understand them. Convey attentiveness by:
  - Leaning slightly toward the other person
  - Facing the other person squarely
  - Keeping eye contact
  - Maintaining an open and relaxed posture (with arms uncrossed)
- Give signals that express understanding. Indicate that you understand, acknowledge and care with the following non-verbal signals:
  - Appropriate head nodding and facial gestures
  - Sounds such as “ah”, “hm”, “oh,” expressed with matching eye and facial gestures

The ability to use non-verbal signals appropriately can create trust and transparency, and therefore can have a powerful influence on the quality of our relationships at work.

References