“ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS” - BODY LANGUAGE IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT: The paper starts from two premises, namely that business communication is a specific form of human interaction, and 70% of our communication is non-verbal. Therefore, relying on the latest findings in the field, our research deals with such basic elements of non-verbal communication as the use of interpersonal space and body language in order to prove their value as social cues, interpretable on the level of the collective unconscious and capable of enhancing or undermining the verbal message.

KEY WORDS: business communication, non-verbal communication, social cues, body language, interpersonal space

1. INTRODUCTION

The publication of Charles Darwin’s The Expressions in Man and Animals in 1872 inaugurated the modern approach to nonverbal communication as a set of symbolic cues comprehensible on the level of the collective subconscious and, therefore, exerting a stronger and a more immediate impact on the interlocutor.

As a mixture of movement, posture, and tone of voice with a strong subconscious layer, body language, including facial expressions, gesture reflects our feelings, thoughts and attitude towards the interlocutor so accurately that it can undermine our verbal discourse. This, corroborated with the statistic detail that over 70% of our communication is done nonverbally (cf. Kinsey Goman), places further emphasis on the importance of acquiring skills pertaining to this type of interaction in order to ensure efficient social and business relations.

Consequently, as a form of human interaction, business communication largely relies on people’s capacity to handle such social cues as the use of interpersonal space and body language in order to support and enhance what we communicate verbally.

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2. THE USE OF INTERPERSONAL SPACE

Proxemics, the study of the communicative aspects of personal space, starts its approach from the premise that every individual is surrounded by an invisible zone of psychological comfort that acts as a buffer zone against any invasive attempt from the outsider.

Research in this sense led to the conclusion that the comfort zone varies depending on the interlocutor and the context of communication, playing a crucial role in the type of relation we initiate with other individuals.

In 1959, anthropologist Edward Hall discovered that humans are strongly aware of their space and territory and, after conducting extended studies and experiments, he concluded that Americans had four distinct comfort distances, and also noted the dramatic variation of comfort zones from one culture to another.

The four comfort zones delineated by Hall for U.S. Americans are:

- 0 - 45 cm - intimate distance, reserved for close, deeply emotional personal relationships such as sexual intercourse or violent physical confrontation;
- 45 cm - 120 cm - personal distance, reserved for personal conversations with friends, family, or associates;
- 120 cm - 365 cm - social distance, reserved for formal interactions such as business meetings or interviews;
- 365 cm - line of sight - public distance, reserved for public speaking and lectures. (Loo 32)

As Hall points out further, individuals tend to feel uncomfortable or even threatened when someone who, for some reason, is perceived as an intruder invades their personal space. Therefore, entering someone’s personal distance without first establishing some level of trust can trigger a defensive reaction, as they will instinctively withdraw to regain the correct level of personal territory.

Besides, the social use of space provides important information about the status, confidence, and power of people, the amount of personal territory being directly proportional to the three elements. Thus, in office buildings, people of higher authority use much more personal space, having their own corner offices meant to put significant distance between them and the rest of the employees, usually crammed together in cubicles.

On the other hand, social experience has made it clear that confident or higher status people are comfortable being at the centre of the attention, while lower status or insecure people prefer to withdraw to the back of the room.

University studies have shown that the students who sit in front or at the centre of the classroom received the highest grades in the class, while those who sat in the back and at the corners of the room got the poorest grades (Loo 105).
Under the circumstances, it becomes obvious that proxemics is one of the most efficient means of conveying or adding emphasis to a message. Specialists in non-verbal communication have outlined the following aspects that should be taken into account to ensure an effective business interaction:

- **Sitting side-by-side fosters cooperation.** By sitting to our interlocutors’ side seems to enhance their cooperative behaviour by displaying a non-competitive attitude.
  
  Another advantage of this position is that it directs everybody to the problem under discussion, such as a report on the table, or research material that needs revision or organizing.

- **Opposite sides fosters competition/threat.** Sitting directly across from someone, such as an employer sitting directly across from a prospective applicant with a table in between them, tends to foster a competing/threatening attitude.

- **Sitting at 90° ensures good conversation.** Experiments have shown that the best seating position for a cooperative exchange is at the corner of the table.
  
  The benefits of this position are that it allows for both parties to enter into each other’s personal space, creating a stronger bond than if they remained distant from each other; it dramatically reduces stress, as the corner of the table provides psychological security for both parties by placing between them a comparatively smaller barrier than in the case of opposite seating.

- **Gender differences should not be overlooked.** A study done by Byrne and Fisher (1975) showed that American men generally chose to sit across from people who they considered their friends and American women chose to sit adjacent to the people that they considered to be their friends.
  
  Additionally, the study showed that men did not like strangers sitting across from them and women did not like having strangers sitting next to them (Bjorseth 58).

Therefore, the way in which we use office space provides such valuable information about our communication style and skills that it would not be farfetched to view office layout as a metaphor for business relationships. For instance an office includes a conversation area, with chairs of equal size set around a small table or at right angles to each other, we can infer that the occupant is most likely informal and collaborative, preferring a more casual communication style than the one possible from behind a desk.

In contrast, the senior manager who conducts meetings in his office by placing a worktable perpendicular to the front of his desk, sitting in a comfortable chair behind it, while the rest of the team sits in armless chairs at the table, attempts to reinforce his role as the authority figure in the room.

Paradoxically, he obtains the opposite effect, as people never fail to perceive imposed distance and react to it (Kinsey Goman 27).
3. BODY LANGUAGE AND FIRST IMPRESSION

Body language is generically referred to as attitude, that aura we generate around us and which is perceived long before we utter a word. Since research shows that we decide whether we like someone or not in the first few moments of interaction, and the first impression is the most difficult to change, it becomes clear that, together with the efficient use of interpersonal space, body language is an element of involuntary behaviour with a dramatic impact on the verbal message.

According to non-verbal communication specialists, the basics of body language include:
- body posture,
- head gestures,
- facial expressions,
- handshake,
- eye contact,
- smile.

Body posture is one of the first things people notice about their interlocutor and, therefore, an important contributor to first impression. Thus, walking and standing with, head up, shoulders back, conveys a message of self-confidence and balance, automatically commanding respect, whereas slouching and drooping shoulders clearly mean the opposite, no matter what the verbal message contains.

Body language researchers point out two basic categories of body postures: open/closed and forward/back. The open posture is considered receptive and involves unfolded arms, uncrossed legs, and exposed palms. The closed posture, in which arms are folded, legs are crossed and the entire body is turned away, is defensive or hostile to interaction.

As this posture usually appears in combination with the forward/back leaning, the non-verbal messages they entail are as it follows:
- Leaning back and closed = lack of interest;
- Leaning back and open = contemplation and cautious interest;
- Leaning forward and closed = potential aggressive behaviour;
- Leaning forward and open = interest and agreement (Boe 15).

In terms of metalanguage, non-verbal message, head gestures fall into the following major categories:
- Head neutral = neutral and open attitude;
- Tilted back = superior attitude;
- Tilted down = negative and judgmental attitude;
- Tilted to one side = interest.

Facial gestures, in their turn, can send out parallel messages, being able to contradict, or even completely undermine the verbal discourse.

Synthetically, this is what attitudes and thoughts they reveal:
- Eye rub = deceitful attitude;
- Eye roll = dismissive gesture that indicates superiority;
- Looking over top of glasses = scrutiny and a critical attitude;
- Nose rub = dislike of the subject;
• Hand or fingers blocking mouth = deceit;
• Chin stroking = making a decision;
• Thumb under chin with index finger pointing vertically along the cheek = negative attitude and critical judgment (Boe 21).

Handshakes are another vital component of interpersonal encounters. As a matter of fact, it has become common knowledge that the few seconds of a handshake can be decisive for building a business relationship. A person who shakes hands by placing his/her hand onto the top is the so-called controller that is someone who wants to be in charge, which is to be kept in mind during any interaction. On the other hand, the sandwich handshake, in which we use both hands to envelop the interlocutor’s hand, is not recommended as it is considered to invade their private space.

The general recommendation is to extend the full hand, in a moderately strong grip, not only the fingers, which would be a sign of insecurity, or even disrespect to the interlocutor, and to avoid, by any means, extending a wet hand, no matter what the reasons of the moist are (holding a cold beverage or anxiety). Since this is extremely unpleasant for the receiver, it is strongly advisable to wipe our right hand before handshake.

Consequently, the elements of an effective handshake, as they have been established by body language experts, are the following:
• Hold the person’s hand firmly;
• Shake three times maximum;
• Maintain constant eye contact;
• Radiate positive aura (Bjorseth 48-49).

Sustained eye contact is an essential element of non-verbal interaction not only because it displays confidence and involvement on our part, but it also helps us understand what the other person is actually saying verbally. Experts are of the opinion that eye contact should begin before the actual interaction, if we are trying to get someone’s attention, and it should be maintained throughout the conversation and while saying “good-bye” in order to leave a positive, powerful lasting impression.

The eye contact area considered socially appropriate during business conversation is delineated by a triangle with its base above the eyes and its sides coming to a point between the nose and the lips.

The recommended eye contact duration is about 80-90 percent of the conversation, because less than that can be interpreted as discomfort, evasiveness, lack of confidence or boredom. The other extreme would fall into the category of staring, making the other person feel dominated and uncomfortable. It is permitted to glance down occasionally, but for not more than a moment, but looking over the other person’s shoulder should be avoided, as it indicates lack of interest and boredom.

Smiles are facial expressions that create a positive business environment by showing interest, excitement, empathy, or concern. Given their effectiveness, we should be aware of their negative impact if overused. Therefore, to gain and increase respect and attention, we should first establish our presence in a business context and, only then, smile. This approach will surely be perceived far more professional than entering a room giggling or “all smiles.”
4. CONCLUSION

Non-verbal communication has a much greater impact and higher reliability than the spoken word, due to people’s capacity to interpret symbols and cues recognizable on the level of collective memory. Since our body language reveals our deepest feelings and hidden thoughts to our interlocutors, over 70% of our communication is perceived nonverbally. Consequently, an effective business interaction is conditioned by the proper interpretation and use of non-verbal cues.

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