

## Non-Verbal Communication: The Part it Plays in Interpersonal Communication

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**Abstract:** *Life was not going to be what is without communication. Communication plays a great role in making this world a better place to live and it makes it possible for people to work properly as well as make contributions to this world. Communication is enhanced by non verbal communication. Non verbal communication can make people even who do not speak the same language understand each other. However, the non verbal communication can vary from place to place due to cultural differences.*

**Keywords:** *Communication, Nonverbal communication. Interpersonal communication, culture, cultural differences, information.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

You cannot not communicate (Grossman, 2012). Everything one does or does not do is actually a way of communicating. An important part of interpersonal communication is nonverbal communication (Robbins and Coulter, 2009:333). The issue of communication is paramount in the day to day business operations and social interactions. This article explores non-verbal communication and establishes the part that non-verbal communication plays in interpersonal communication. It demonstrates the approaches of different cultures when it comes to distance between people, eye contact, time and touching.

### II. WHAT IS COMMUNICATION

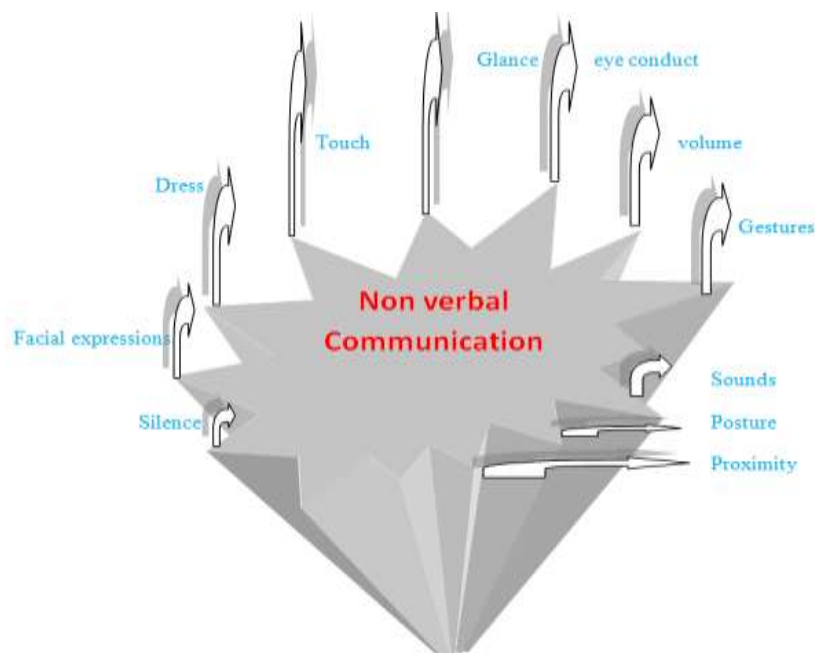
Communication is the transferring of information and understanding from one person to another (Kinicki and Williams, 2011). Jones and Gorge (2011) aver that communication is the sharing of information between two or more individuals or group to reach a common understanding. Cole (2002) defines communication as the process of creating, translating and interpreting ideas, facts, opinions and feelings. It is the process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs or behaviour. Communication is therefore a process of creating, transmitting and interpreting messages. One is regarded as good communicator if she/he is able to transmit the message accurately. Thus there is need for the right medium of communication in the least time.

### III. NON VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Non verbal communication means all communication that occurs without words. (Pettit 2006: 648). Giddens (2009:252) posits that “social interactions require numerous forms of non-verbal communication- the exchange of information and meaning through facial expressions, gestures and movements of the body”. It consists a large proportion of communication and assists in how people form our impression or other people’s impression.

### IV. TYPES OF NON VERBAL COMMUNICATION

There are many different types of non verbal communication as illustrated in the following diagram:.



**Figure 1:** Non Verbal Communication

As illustrated in figure 1 above non verbal communication include but not limited to touch, glance, eye conduct (gaze), volume, proximity, gestures, facial expression, silence, dress, posture, smell and sounds.

## V. INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Interpersonal communication is the process, through which people exchange information, feelings and meanings through non verbal communication and verbal communication. However, this article is only focusing on non verbal communication in interpersonal Communication.

## VI. USES OF NON VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Non verbal communication is often used to make an expression and plays different roles in interpersonal communication. It emphasizes a point in interpersonal communication. It involves those nonverbal stimuli in a communication setting that are generated by both the source [speaker] and his or her use of the environment and that have potential message value for the source or receiver [listener] (Samovar et al, 2000). Basically it is sending and receiving messages in a variety of ways without the use of verbal codes (words). It is both intentional and unintentional. Most speakers or listeners are not conscious of this. Nonverbal details reveal who we are and impact how we relate to other people. There are two basic categories of non-verbal language which are nonverbal messages produced by the body and nonverbal messages produced by the broad setting (time, space, silence).

Non verbal communication plays different roles in interpersonal communication. It helps people to know the intentional and unintentional of our behaviour. People's emotional states are also best known through their non verbal actions. People attend more to what they are saying than to what they are doing with their bodies which may lead to non verbal leakage or emotions leak out when a person tries to conceal them. It is also used together with verbal communication to emphasis a point. For example when one says "no" at the same time shaking his/her head then it sends the signals that the "no" is serious. People also use non verbal actions to present themselves to other people and in most of the time to change the way people think about themselves. Non verbal communication also facilitates a cross cultural interaction. Body movements and posture also play a part in interpersonal communication. The way people move and carry themselves communicate a wealth of information to the world. Eye contact is also important in maintaining the flow of conversation and for gauging the other person's response. There are different ways of which these non-verbal communication are used:

**Repeating** – using non verbal behaviour to say what you are saying in words.

**Substituting** – is when a non verbal behaviour replace a verbal message for example nodding

**Complementing** – behaviours that reinforce the verbal message. Illustrators – nonverbal behaviours that accompany and support spoken words.

**Accenting** – non verbal used to put emphasis on oral messages for example pointing a finger

**Regulating** – non verbal messages are portrayed to control verbal interactions or communication for example increasing eye contact and looking at someone may mean to say stop what you are doing.

**Contradicting**- using to detect deception. One cannot anomalies of what one is saying and the non verbal actions for example sympathy with a smile. Micro expression – a brief involuntary facial expression shown on face according to emotions experienced. Micro expressions express anger, disgust, fear, surprise, sadness and happiness.

## CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND NON VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Cultural differences must be considered in determining proper eye contact. Eye contact is crucial to establishing a connection and a sense of trust between the individuals involved and regular, eye contact actively shows the other person that one is interested in him/her or what is being said. It also shows attention and involvement. However different cultures have different approaches towards eye contact. Euro-American cultures feel that eyes show interest and involvement and no eye contact shows avoidance. On the other hand other cultures feel that eye contact shows disrespect and no eye contact show respect. Culture variations can affect the way people communicate non-verbally. Actions that are not seen as offensive in South Africa may be deemed so in Zimbabwe. Touch is culturally determined. But each culture has a clear concept of what parts of the body one may not touch. Traditional Korean and many other Asian countries do not touch strangers, especially between members of the opposite sex. However this can be viewed as discrimination in other countries.

### 6.1 Eye contact

The eye contact has also different cultural connotations. These involve looking, staring and blinking. There are numerous messages that can be sent with the eyes. In some cultures one does not have to stare at another person but one stares at things. Therefore, a stare can have a devastating effect because it reduces a person to nonhuman status. However in a classroom situation a teacher can stare at a child making noise which is an indication that he/she has to keep quiet. In a love relationship one can stare at his/her lover to show emotional love. In USA, eye contact indicates: degree of attention or interest, influences attitude change or persuasion, regulates interaction, communicates emotion, defines power and status and has a central role in managing impressions of others. If you make prolonged eye contact, some people might feel that you are trying to stare them down, which is an aggressive behaviour in most contexts. Too little eye contact, on the other hand, might give the impression that you have something to hide, or perhaps that you dislike the other person and want to avoid closer interaction. It is suggested that if you want to find out whether a person is lying or not look directly into his/her eyes. If he/she does not want to face you then it means he/she is lying.

### 6.2 Time emphasis

Time can also be depicted in non verbal communication in different ways by different cultures. It is particularly important for people in North America. The history of the North American business society reveals a time emphasis (Pettit 2006: 655) North American culture teaches that being on time is virtue. These people are monochromic cultures because they pay attention to clock time and do one thing at a time. They are always on time and very time oriented and organised. Those of polychromic cultures pay attention to relational time and may be involved in many simultaneous activities. They feel time is ambiguous, they do not feel; the need to follow exact times and they do not care if late to an appointment. The Africans are mostly known by failing to keep time. The time one takes to reply an email can be depicted to mean that the person is not interested. The time taken to answer back also sends some signals. If a person is always late for work or for school, it might suggest that he/she is not interested or it may mean that he/she is always delayed by other issues or is stressed.

### 6.3 Touch

People communicate a great deal through touch. A firm handshake, a timid tap on the shoulder, a warm bear hug, a reassuring pat on the back, a patronising pat on the head or a controlling grip on your arm can all be examples of non verbal communication through touch. A frown on someone's forehead is sometimes interpreted to mean worry. But could it be that the person has a headache? Or is the person in deep thought? No, doubt, there could be numerous meanings given to the facial expression. The number of possible meanings given is multiplied even more when we consider the cross cultural side of communication. Culture teaches us about body positions, movements and various factors that affect human relationships for example, intimacy, space, time. Thus, the meanings we give to nonverbal symbols will vary depending on how our culture has conditioned us. Because of these numerous meanings, one needs to be sensitive to what others intend with nonverbal communication and to make some allowance for error in the meanings one receives from nonverbal symbols.

#### 6.4 Distance between people

In non verbal communication distance between people can be culturally viewed differently. There are different approaches when it comes to distance between people from different cultures:

- **Intimate distance**, a distance for love, comfort, whispering secrets and the like,
- **Personal distance**, a distance that enables personal – to casual conversations to take place and in which people carry and invisible “space bubble” surrounding them for example everyday interactions,
- **Social distance**, a distance reserved for formal business transactions or formal social interactions for example in a meeting,
- **Public distance**, a suitable distance for public lectures or performances.

There is the issue of space meaning that one must leave a space when talking to someone. If people are too close them it means that they are lovers or close friends. The distance between you and another person may affect the reception of directly transmitted information by the receiver’s inputs. For example, if you are too far apart, you may not be able to hear each other’s speech clearly. One’s position relative to a customer or client also sends quite a few messages of its own. Talking to a patient who is in bed, from the corridor, may be interpreted to mean that normal proximity is not desirable. It can also mean that that the communication is considered unimportant, the patient is thought to be infectious, or the prognosis is so terrible that one cannot bear to face them. Being too close to someone can also suggest confrontation.

### VII. CONCLUSION

Non verbal communication plays a vital role in enriching communication concept. It is of paramount importance to note that one cannot not communicate. There is need for assertiveness and people should have a wider understanding of non verbal communication in different cultures for effective communication.

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