

HELPFUL HINTS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

BODY LANGUAGE*

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Intellectual listeners often listen mostly with their heads; hearing only what they want to hear. Because they are interested in a rational appraisal, they tend to neglect the emotional and nonverbal aspects of the talker's behavior. This means they tune in and out rather than hearing the whole message. This can make them miss the less obvious intent.

Some studies have estimated that 20-55% of the meaning of a message comes from body language. One study estimated approximately 7% for words, 27% for vocal (tone of voice) and 55% for facial expressions, posture, eye contact, and gestures.

Silence can be interpreted different ways. It can indicate withdrawal, avoidance, distraction, disinterest, or attentiveness. When we stop listening and withdraw within ourselves, our voluntary muscle activity ceases, the interval between eye blinks lengthens, and the eyes take on a staring-glaring look. This may be interpreted as an expression of anger or boredom.

Movement can indicate attention, stimulation, and involvement. Restless, impatient movements, shifts of weight from one foot to another are signs of boredom or impatience. Non-movement or lack of reaction can signal withdrawal.

Critical behaviors: raising an eyebrow, frowning, looking away, rigid body posture, scowling, folding your arms across your chest, narrowing your eyes. People often respond belligerently or apologetically toward the talker.

Influencing others: You can get others to listen to you by the way you listen to them. Even if you don't say anything, your non-verbal behavior shows your receptivity to the speaker.

Suggested nonverbal listening approach:

- Assume a "leveling posture" by looking straight at the listener, maintaining eye contact 60% of the time and squaring the head and face so you exhibit an open, relaxed posture and a straightforward attitude.
- Be vocally attentive by using acknowledging words such as "I see," and expressions such as "Uh huh." People prefer vocal stroking to silence.
- Use positive movement by leaning forward, arching your neck forward, nodding your head in agreement, and when appropriate, touching the speaker's arm.
- Facial expressions have a large effect. Smiling, looking interested, and other positive expressions are very motivating. They must be sincere. People quickly recognize a false front.
- Minimize negative behaviors.
- Use active, empathetic listening whenever appropriate.

*adapted from Burley-Allen, M., *Listening--the forgotten skill: a self-teaching guide*, 2nd Ed., New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1995

Areas of body language**

Appearance - clothing and hair style, symbols of wealth, power, group membership

Time - arrive late or early, rush to greet people or hold back

Touch - shaking hands, hugs, slapping on the back

Body Movement - facial expressions (e.g., sneering, not listening), eye contact, walking style, posture, gestures

Personal space - how close you stand to another

Voice - how you say it, including tone, speed of delivery, stress on certain words

Cultural influence: Different cultures interpret body language differently. For example, Anglo-American culture has a norm that people will stand about 20" apart when talking. In other cultures people feel more comfortable standing closer or further apart. In some cultures touching the head of a child or using the left hand is taboo. In many cultures, women are restricted and even making eye contact is threatening.

**Schwarz, Roger M., *The Skilled Facilitator*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994