



How to Communicate Without Words

Twitchy. Petulant. Sneering. Condescending. Eye-rolling. This long string of unflattering adjectives appeared recently in a Philadelphia Inquirer story dissecting the body language of Presidential candidate Sen. John McCain. "His demeanor, not policies, likely cost him the debates," Inquirer columnist Dick Polman wrote.

Without a doubt.

During my work as corporate training consultant, I frequently discuss one of the most startling facts about human communication. Words account for only 7 percent of messages. Nonverbals, which include body language, vocal qualities, spatial arrangements, overall timing, and physical appearance, convey 93 percent of meaning.

The lessons: It's not what you say; it's how you say it. Talk is cheap. A picture is worth 1,000 words.

The principle has impacted Presidential campaigns for decades, beginning in 1960 when television viewers watched a profusely sweating Richard Nixon debate a coolly confident John F. Kennedy. Pancake makeup helped.

Remember the elder President George Bush glancing at his watch during the 1992 debate with then unknown Bill Clinton? Pundits universally said the time checks gave the impression that Bush thought he was far too important to share the stage with the Arkansas governor.

Similarly, in 2000, former Vice President Al Gore's repeated sighs during debates with the current President George W. Bush cut into his votes. Gore was widely criticized for seeming to look down intellectually on his opponent. And now GOP candidate McCain is losing points, and perhaps votes, via his awkward nonverbal signals.

The same thing happens every day in the work place with average people like you and me. In my view, nothing will destroy your career faster than your failure to control negative nonverbals such as losing eye contact, speaking in a whiney voice, invading others' space, missing deadlines, and dressing unprofessionally. Like it or not, in this visual age, style has become substance.

Here are some tips to make your nonverbals work for, rather than against, you:

- **Stop resisting.** Over the years, I've encountered hundreds of professionals who resent being told they need to speak with more enthusiasm or stop wringing their hands. Why, they ask, can't they focus just on the verbal content of their communication? I tell them that if they work only on their words, they'll miss 93 percent of their opportunity to influence others. Enough said.
- **Get a baseline.** As early as possible in your career, you should arrange to be videotaped while making a toast at a wedding or speaking at a meeting. The results probably will surprise you. Every time I watch a DVD starring me, for instance, I find a new and distracting mannerism to work on. My ongoing goal is to slow down – once and for all -- my fast, Northeastern rate of speech.
- **Pay attention.** Whenever you go to a gathering, analyze the speaker's nonverbal signals. Does the presenter smile at the group, speak loudly enough to be heard, show confidence by stepping out from the podium, stick to the schedule, handle audio-visual equipment effectively? If not, what's the reaction of the listeners? Can you say annoyed, unimpressed, and bored?



- **Solicit feedback.** People in your personal and professional life undoubtedly know that you tend to use overly authoritative gestures such as standing over people, raising your voice, or pointing your finger at them. Unless you ask, however, those in your inner circle are unlikely to share their observations. A related idea is to ask a good communicator to be your nonverbal mentor.
- **Create a plan.** If I were you, I would work on a single issue for five minutes every day for a month throughout the next year. All totaled, you'll develop 12 new nonverbals. Say you have realized that you have fallen in the lazy habit of dropping the final letters in words ending in "ing." Make a list of commonly used examples such as "working," "completing," and "making." Then practice reading the words aloud without cutting off the final sounds.
- **Update your image.** Clothing, hairstyles, and other physical attributes convey messages. Just ask Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin, who for the past few weeks has been wearing an attractive new wardrobe purchased at Neiman Marcus and Saks. You might argue that her Republican public relations staff should have been savvy enough to get her clothes from lower-prices K-Mart or Target. But I give credit to Palin's handlers for understanding that wearing apparel is a substantial element of nonverbal communication.
- **Learn from the experts.** Much to my delight, I recently fell upon and looked at a program called "The Secrets of Body Language" on the History Channel. Featuring current public figures such as President Bush and entertainer Oprah Winfrey, the show was so good that I went online immediately after watching and pre-ordered my own copy. It will be available Dec. 11. What good timing for me! By Christmas, I should be an expert in telling holiday dinner guests to go home in nonverbal ways such as putting on my pajamas or turning off all the lights.

Dr. Kathleen Begley is a communications trainer and owner of Write Company Plus . The author of seven books, she has been involved in adult education for almost 20 years. Currently, Dr. Begley specializes in communications topics relating to diversity. You can read her blogs at www.writecompanyplus.com and contact her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com.