

speaking without words

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An Extension agent is conducting a training workshop for a group of volunteer 4-H leaders who look bored.

The chairperson of the Extension Agricultural Advisory Committee greets a new Extension agent with a handshake. The agent's hand is so limp the chairperson looks toward his hand to make sure the agent's hand is in it.

Both of these Extension agents have created an impression of themselves with their clients. The opinions were formed not based on spoken words, but on signals or cues communicating information. These cues are a form of communication.

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is communication without the use of words. Important as both written and spoken words are to the process of communication, they certainly don't represent all aspects of communication.

As Galloway has indicated, nonverbal communication is used extensively whenever human beings communicate:

Nonverbal communication consists not only of facial expressions and body gestures but also of the way a person uses space and time. Nonverbal behaviors are the primary vehicles for expressing emotion. Behaviors, better than words, convey hate, fear, anger, and anxiety. What is difficult to put into words often finds its way through facial expression, gesture, and movement.¹

When we communicate nonverbally, we use signals and cues that don't have precise definitions. With nonverbal communication, a greater tendency exists to be less conscious of our communication. Because we're less conscious of our nonverbal communication, we tend to be more honest while using it.

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Using Nonverbal Communication

Extension educators use nonverbal communication in presentations, group interactions, meeting people, and organizing the office.

Presentations

There are several methods for communicating nonverbally while making presentations to a client group.

Gestures. Gestures represent an effective method of reinforcing points made by oral communication. Pointing out words written on a chalkboard or overhead projector is helpful. Drawing "air figures" while illustrating major points can help get a group's attention. On the other hand, agents can "turn off" groups by having their arms crossed or hands on their hips while making presentations.

Facial. Much nonverbal signalling is transmitted by the face.² Humans have an almost unlimited range of facial expressions. Extension educators can make clients feel comfortable or uncomfortable simply by smiling or frowning. An entire group can be made to feel the same way by a speaker's facial expression. The speaker who smiles frequently will be perceived as being more positive and, consequently, more effective.

Space. Each of us is quite conscious of the space surrounding us. Miller has identified four categories of body space: (1) intimate, (2) personal—1½ feet to 4 feet, (3) social—4 feet to 12 feet, and (4) public—12 to 25 feet.³ Most group presentations are made in the social and public ranges. A speaker who enters listeners' personal space (1½ feet to 4 feet) will be able to get their attention. However, staying in their personal space for an extended period of time can create feelings of insecurity on the part of the group participants.

Body Orientation. A speaker's body orientation indicates to a group how alert he/she is. The speaker who stands erect and alert appears ready to make important points. The speaker who sits behind a desk or slouches appears more likely to go to sleep than to make important points. Also, some members of the audience may find it difficult to see a speaker who's sitting behind a desk.

Eye Contact. Human beings use their eyes to communicate a great deal of information nonverbally. Wiemann and Wiemann indicate that people use their eyes to: (1) seek feedback, (2) exercise control, and (3) convey specific relationships,

such as dominance/submission and liking/disliking. They further point out that a speaker can use eye contact in one other important way.

Looking at a person also indicates that the communication channel is open and that the person looking is ready to send and receive messages. Avoiding letting another "catch your eye" is an effective way to avoid interactions.⁴

Head Nod. People who nod their heads "yes" for a response to comments from the group's participants greatly reinforce such activities. The group member who's answering a question and is receiving a head nod response from the Extension educator who asked the question is much more likely to give a more complete answer and to respond more readily the next time a question is asked. Educators who use a head shake, with its negative connotation, will create the opposite effect of the head nod.

Tone of Voice. An Extension educator's tone of voice indicates a great deal about the points being made. A negative tone of voice gives a completely opposite meaning to a generally positive statement, such as "I really like that." Tone of voice is so universal in its use that even pets can understand its meaning. Variety in voice tones can be used to get and hold an audience's attention.

Nonverbal communication is a silent but powerful form of communication—an effective method for reinforcing oral communication. When used correctly, nonverbal communication can help make an Extension client or group feel comfortable.

Group Interactions

Extension educators speaking to a group can monitor that group's reaction in many ways. When members of the group maintain steady eye contact with the speaker, they're probably paying close attention to what's being said. When members of the group sit in an alert and erect position, they're generally paying attention and learning a great deal. Certain members of the group will also nod their heads unconsciously when they agree with what's being said.

Meeting Clientele

The initial impression made on clientele by Extension educators is a crucial one. Nonverbal signals can greatly help

make the first impression a good one. A good firm handshake along with a friendly smile always make a good impression. The Extension educator who meets people with an erect body along with a positive eye contact will make a good impression. The entire process of making a favorable impression should be capped off with a favorable tone of voice that indicates real pleasure in meeting the clientele.

Organizing the Office

Extension staff communicate a great deal to clientele by their office organization and arrangement. An organized office hints at an organized program. The office arrangement should minimize the use of desks and space as barriers. Clients who have to sit with both a desk and space as barriers will quickly develop feelings of inferiority and feel uncomfortable. Clients will feel much more comfortable with an arrangement that emphasizes a peer relationship, such as chairs facing each other without a desk as a barrier. An office arrangement that emphasizes organization and minimizes barriers will leave a good impression and make others feel comfortable.

Summary

Nonverbal communication is a silent but powerful form of communication—an effective method for reinforcing oral communication. When used correctly, nonverbal communication can help make an Extension client or group feel comfortable.

Extension staff who are conscious of their use of nonverbal communication will be more effective in working with their clientele. Furthermore, nonverbal signals are useful in making the first impression a good one. Four prominent uses of nonverbal communication are in making presentations, monitoring groups, meeting people, and organizing the office.

Footnotes

1. Charles Galloway, *Silent Language in the Classroom* (Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappan Educational Foundation, 1976), p. 10.
2. Desmond Morris, *Manwatching: A Field Guide to Human Behavior* (New York: Henry N. Abrams, Inc., 1977).
3. Patrick Miller, *Nonverbal Communication* (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1981).
4. Mary O. Wiemann and John M. Wiemann, *Nonverbal Communication in the Elementary Classroom* (Falls Church, Virginia: Speech Communications Association, 1975), p. 12.