

Putting Power into Your Presentations Using Nonverbal Communication

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Experienced trainers and presenters know that nonverbal communication can be a powerful tool in sending messages and in reading an attendee's response to what they have heard or experienced. When coupled with verbal responses from learners, the nonverbal element of communication can say volumes and is important to note. In some cases, learners will respond that they have no questions; however, their facial expressions say that they are confused or unsure. Rather than accept what was said or embarrass them by asking "Are you sure?" an alert facilitator will either repeat a concept in a different manner or have learners somehow regurgitate what you said so that they know that key points were understood. This regurgitation from learners might be in the form of an activity in which they demonstrate what they learned, or might be a small group activity in which they discuss ways in which they can apply the concepts. In the latter instance, by having learners share with each other, you not only reinforce concepts but also enhance the opportunity for those who had a weak understanding of concepts to more firmly grasp them by hearing others describe the concepts in different terms. Such repetition is often helpful because of poor learner listening skills or inattention that can result in some aspects of a point getting lost when a trainer only presents them.

Much research has been done on nonverbal communication that can apply in any learning environment. Noted researchers and authors such as Albert Mehrabian, Roger Axtell, John Gray, Deborah Tannen, Desmond Morris, and Julius Fast have written excellent books on the topic. The key is to take the research and apply it appropriately in the classroom or in a group setting.

Eye Contact

Many people in Western cultures have been taught the importance of direct eye contact since childhood. While this is an important indicator that someone is interested and listening to what is being said, it is not an absolute. In a multicultural world it is also necessary to recognize that in certain cultures (e.g. Asian and Hispanic) many people are taught not to make direct eye contact. In some subcultures such behavior is actually viewed as challenging, arrogant, or threatening. Typically, most trainers do not have to worry that these negative impressions will occur if eye contact is made. Also, on a positive note, eye contact with a learner can indicate that the facilitator is talking directly to someone and making personal contact, especially when coupled with a smile. Eye contact is also a good control technique when several learners are having aside conversation. By simply slowly moving toward those participants as the trainer speaks, standing near them and making direct eye contact while smiling, the message of "You're distracting others; pay attention" can be sent without saying a word.

Many researchers believe that the human brain memorizes information as it processes actively. While this is happening, the eyes move to a known area while the person is

reflecting on the stimuli received. By observing such eye movement, a trainer might be able to determine whether a person is actively processing or is thinking of something else or daydreaming. As with any other aspect of nonverbal communication, it is important to remember that eye movement is just one indicator or behavior and not an absolute determinant. It is always better to verify impressions received through observation by interacting and talking with a participant. The following are typical eye positions that might occur as someone processes information, based on a right-handed learner (reverse for left-handers):

Eyes to right:	Creating new auditory messages/information
Eyes to left:	Accessing stored auditory messages/information
Eyes up and right:	Creating new visual messages/information
Eyes up and left:	Accessing stored visual messages/information
Eyes down and right:	Self-talk is occurring
Eyes down and left:	Experiencing emotions/feelings

Movement

Each time you change locations, you should do so for a reason. Continuous walking from one point to another can appear as nervousness; planned movement can actually aid facilitation. Experienced trainers have known for years that you can control your audience and the quality and amount of discussion by moving closer or farther from participants throughout a session. For example, if you want to emphasize a point or engage a specific individual in your group, you might casually move forward toward the person as you continue to talk.

From a learning standpoint, consider that for the brain to maximize potential, it needs a continual stream of new information or input. If you stand in one place, the brain gets bored. This accounts for refocused attention on the part of many participants. They then look elsewhere – doodle, work on or read other material, or start mentally processing material outside of the program content (daydream).

Another point to remember is that a good facilitator always faces his or her audience. Since your participants are the reason for you being in the training room, give them your full attention. Not just because it is the polite thing to do and because caregivers likely taught you to look at someone when you're talking to them, but because you want them to get your message. If you turn away they might miss or misinterpret what you said. Also, if someone has a hearing deficit, they cannot see your mouth to get the message.

When in front of a group, face them, stand with your weight evenly distributed over both feet, and shoulders to the front. Keep your head up and shoulders relaxed as you smile (depending on your topic) and use other open nonverbal gestures. Also, when writing on a surface, write, then turn and talk to your participants. Do not attempt both actions simultaneously.

Gestures

Some presenters gesture a lot; others hardly at all. One big challenge for new and experienced trainers is what to do with their hands as they speak. Some people clasp them behind their back, others in front. Some cross their arms, others rest them on a lectern or the arm of an overhead projector (a big no-no since it can bend the arm and make future adjustments of images onto a screen difficult). Still other trainers put their hands in pockets, on hips, or simply let them hang limply by their sides. A good stance is facing your learners with your elbows bent and hands at about waist level in front of you. From this position you can easily gesture left, right, or in unison to emphasize a point or attract attention. For example, if you asking a question from the group, you might simultaneously spread your arms and hands out, palm up, toward learners in a gesture indicating that you are giving them the floor or putting them in control. You are verbally and nonverbally eliciting a response. When asking for feedback or encouraging input of ideas, you might say something like, "I would like to hear what you think about this" while gesturing with open arms toward your learners then sweeping them inward toward you in a gathering motion.

As a general rule, gestures are done to highlight (similar to training aids) your vocal presentation of information. When used properly, the hands can add punch or impact to a speech or message. Movements should appear natural and spontaneous, rather than forced or artificial. Do not wring your hands, keep fingers interlaced or clasped, crack your knuckles, pick your fingernails, play with rings, or repeat other nervous hand gestures. Use gesturing correctly to clarify or emphasize. One thing to remember about using nonverbal gestures is that some cues have different meanings in various cultures. Some of the common gestures in Western cultures (e.g. thumbs up, forming a circle with the thumb and index finger or motioning for someone to come to you palm up while bending joined fingers back and forth toward you can actually offend in other cultures (see Resources for Trainers). Be familiar with possibilities and use gestures appropriately.

As mentioned earlier in this article, nonverbal communication is powerful. Read about the topic, study human behavior in others and practice making your nonverbal messages more meaningful in order to become the best trainer or presenter you can be.

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