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| Cultural Differences in Nonverbal Communication |
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Nonverbal communication is just as important as verbal communication, if not even more. But much of nonverbal communication in different cultures is beyond our awareness. Lack of such knowledge may arise in misunderstanding and conflicts.

According to *Business Dictionary.com* nonverbal communication is defined as behavior and elements of speech aside from the words themselves that transmit meaning. Non-verbal communication includes pitch, speed, tone and volume of voice, gestures and facial expressions, body posture, stance, and proximity to the listener, eye movements and contact, and dress and appearance.[[1]](#footnote-1) Nonverbal communication has always been important, but today it's even more important for people are so diverse. If you don't speak another person's language, nonverbal communication comes into play. There are thousands of cultural influences in day to day life that frame how you use language, and what meanings that you would assign to the words. Nonverbal communication can classify, modify, and confirm oral language. In addition, nonverbal communication has a more limited range than language for expressing logical, creative, or sophisticated ideas.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This transmission of messages is so powerful. People say that you can’t judge a book by its cover, yet we form first impressions from others through their use of nonverbal communication. Dr. Albert Mehrabian, author of *Silent Messages*, conducted several studies on nonverbal communication. In his book*,* Albert Mehrabian reveals three elements that most influence an audience.[[3]](#footnote-3) According to his research, these three elements make an audience want to buy from you, promote you, hire you, and even want you as part of the team. In addition, Mehrabian ranked these elements in order of importance to the audience:

• Your verbal ability, or your content and knowledge about your topic, counts for only 7 percent of the audience's perception of you.

• Your vocal ability, or how you speak, including your tone, pitch and inflection, counts for 35 percent of the audience's perception of you.

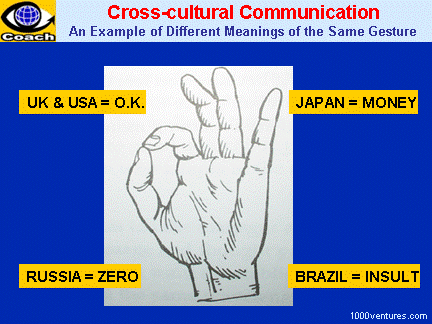
• Your visual presence, or how you physically look while presenting, counts for a whopping 55 percent of the audience's perception of you.[[4]](#footnote-4)

From the statistics above we can tell that nonverbal communication is used at least 90% more than verbal communication. Now that I have established the power of a gesture, or simply someone’s body language, how does this tie in with cultural differences? It is very important to first follow the steps on how the message is sent to and from people. We have a sender this; person is the source of the message, because they send the message. The message goes to receiver. A channel (medium) is chosen. This can be in the form of a letter or face to face confrontation. The receiver gets the message and reacts. This will be either a facial expression or posture of the receiver. Feedback is then sent back from the receiver.

Now with a more diverse culture people are beginning to learn about other cultures and languages. This has mainly impacted businessmen and women. The job they do might require them to travel to all sorts of places and market a product for example. This could be an opportunity for people to travel to a foreign country but one has to be willing to learn the different cultures they come across during the course of their travel. Most of the gestures and the different tones when we speak may come across as insults or may cause conflicts with other cultures. This is why it is important to understand and become knowledgeable on what your potential client is familiar with. As mentioned before, example of nonverbal forms of communication include gestures, touch, eye contact and more. Below are a few examples of nonverbal communication that I have chosen to research the difference in regarding to portraying messages when dealing with different cultures:

Gestures:

Gestures are portrayed by shaping our hands in different forms to form nonverbal communication. Hand gestures have been associated with power and dominance. People must exaggerate their voice, gestures, and body stance to get their message across. Indeed, there is a shift in the nonverbal communication, so that much of it is channeled through hand gestures.[[5]](#footnote-5) Let’s take the word “OK” for example. Below is a chart of the same hand gesture that will mean something completely different in another culture.

[](http://www.google.com/url?sa=i&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&docid=pziD3XCYdhcjaM&tbnid=tSSWeoanhh4i5M:&ved=0CAgQjRwwAA&url=http://www.1000ventures.com/business_guide/crosscuttings/cross-cultural_differences.html&ei=9Iq-UajxKsrSyAHC5oCwDA&psig=AFQjCNEiJQTrt_PhrYlmmE3fw3uIvpg0KA&ust=1371528308758756)[[6]](#footnote-6)

In the United States this symbol will represent that everything is “OK”. Whereas in Japan, Russia and Brazil it means something different. If I were to use this gesture in Brazil in a business deal I probably would never hear from this client again all because I was misunderstood and I was not aware that the gesture was an insult.

Eye Contact:

Eye contact is a big factor for respect in some cultures. According to the *Communicating at Work* textbook, visual contact is an invitation to speak. If the speakers are not looking directly at you then they don’t want to be interrupted. If they are looking at you then it opens the field to questions and discussion.[[7]](#footnote-7) However from my experience and teaching, having too little eye contact can be disrespectful when the person who you are talking to shows little or no interest. In Western countries one expects to maintain eye contact when we talk with people. This is a norm we consider basic and essential. This is not the case in Chinese culture. On the contrary, because of the more authoritarian nature of the Chinese society, steady eye contact is viewed as inappropriate, especially when subordinates talk with their superiors.[[8]](#footnote-8) Just from interaction with Chinese people I have seen these indications. It is very easy to think someone is rude or disrespectful but, if it’s their culture then more people should be willing to learn about these factors so no assumptions are made.

Facial Expressions:

One may think of a smile as the universal signal of happiness, but a new study finds that the way different countries around the world perceive facial expressions isn’t so black and white. Facial expressions are necessarily culture-bound. It is obvious to us that we make certain faces because of our interactions with other people. Certain faces are acceptable in certain situations, and others are not. Additionally, it seems that, at least some of the time, we smile because other people smile or frown because other people frown. Some research has reflected this logical idea that culture helps people learn when and where to make certain facial expressions. However too much of a good thing is not always positive. Research tells us Japanese people may smile when they are confused or angry. In other parts of Asia, people may smile when they are embarrassed.[[9]](#footnote-9) These cultural differences may cause many situations where people of other cultures notice these expressions; it can also cause conflicts.

Guideline for improving nonverbal communication:

According to *International Job Oriented Skills* there are six ways for improving nonverbal communication.[[10]](#footnote-10) The ways listed below can help better the relationship with other cultures:

1. Obtain feedback on your body language by getting comments on your gestures and facial expressions while conversing.
2. Learn to relax when communicating with others.
3. Supplement speech with facial, hand, and body gestures—but not too much.
4. Do not use the same nonverbal gestures indiscriminately.
5. Use role-playing to practice various forms of nonverbal communication. A good starting point would be selling an idea.
6. Use mirroring (subtle imitation) to establish rapport. Two tips here are to imitate the breathing pattern of the other person, or match his or her voice speed. However, do not mock the other person.

The importance of recognizing and interpreting gestures, facial expressions or eye contact in a global economy can mean the difference between success and failure. Non-verbal communication is not only crucial in daily communication situations but also for the receivers. Non-verbal communication can take various forms, each of which illustrates or replaces a certain part of the verbal communication. It includes many more elements than one might think at first. It is very important for both the sender and receiver to know and understand what either of the people are trying to say. If individuals are not knowledgeable of such differences when interacting with various cultures, he or she runs the risk of insult as well as possible business repercussions.

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