

Diversity Tip Sheet

Cross-Cultural Communication

Translating Nonverbal Cues

Introduction

Communication is far more than an exchange of words. Facial expressions, hand gestures, posture, eye contact, even silence... all these are constantly sending messages about our attitudes, our emotions, our status, our relationships.

When we meet a person who speaks only Swahili, we know we need an interpreter to translate our words in order to communicate. But what happens when you meet, say, a German woman who happens to speak very good English? No problem, right?

But her words only tell half the story. Body language and other nonverbal cues vary as widely as spoken language among different cultures. If you smile at the German woman, and she doesn't smile back, what does that mean? Is she angry? Bored? Lost in thought? To really understand what the German woman is saying, you'll need to understand German body language.

Nonverbal cues are critical in the workplace. These cues can tell you whether your staff understands your instructions, whether your customer is interested in buying, and much more.

The nonverbal language we learned while growing up seems natural. Normal. And while some facial expressions, such as fear or disgust, are universal biological reactions, most other nonverbal cues are learned behavior with no universal interpretation.

This tip sheet will give you a brief overview of a few nonverbal signals and their cultural significance. You'll never learn the meaning of every sign in every culture. Even in our own country, typical nonverbal "language" can vary by region, race, or generation. And individuals within a culture also vary—every group has people who are shyer, louder, bolder, or more smiley than the norm. But learning a few of the basics can open your mind to the differences that are possible and alert you to miscommunications. Greater sensitivity to nonverbal differences is a beginning step toward successful cross-cultural communication in your workplace.

Personal Space

Personal space is the distance two people keep between themselves in order to feel comfortable. If the amount of space is too great, the person approaching you will seem cold, shy, or unfriendly. If the amount of space is too small, the person approaching will seem aggressive, rude, or intrusive.

- Personal space is influenced by gender. Two women will naturally stand closer than two men or a man and a woman.
- Personal space is influenced by status. A person of high status is normally instinctively granted more space. This distinction will be more pronounced in cultures that have a greater consciousness of status and social class, such as Asian cultures.
- Personal space is influenced by the degree of intimacy in a relationship. Good friends stand closer than two people whose relationship is strictly business. A romantically involved couple stands closer yet. Many Latin American and African cultures place heavy emphasis on personal relationships in their business dealings, which will shrink the personal space bubble down from “business size” to “personal size.”
- Personal space is influenced by the space available. Colleagues may be comfortable standing right next to each other in a crowded elevator, but not in an empty room. Most people will cope with this collapsing of personal space by facing outward, rather than toward the other person, and avoiding eye contact.
- The standard personal space of a culture is also strongly influenced by available space. People from crowded places, such as India or New York City, will be accustomed to a smaller circle of personal space. People from empty places such as Mongolia or Montana will generally have a much larger personal space bubble.

Eye Contact

The duration and frequency of eye contact communicates a great deal—honesty, respect, shame, interest—but the rules governing eye contact and what it means differ widely among cultures.

- Among Latinos, it is respectful to avoid direct eye contact with authority figures.
- For Muslims, direct eye contact between members of the opposite sex is considered bold and flirtatious.
- Arabs have greater eye contact than Americans among members of the same gender.

- Among Asians, direct eye contact is very brief, with the gaze then sliding away to the side, especially with superiors or members of the opposite sex.
- Southern Europeans generally engage in more eye contact than Americans.
- Britons generally engage in less eye contact than Americans.

Speaking Volume

The volume at which we speak says nearly as much as the words themselves, communicating shyness, uncertainty, anger, enthusiasm, and more by the degree to which it varies from a baseline. But normal baseline volumes also vary among cultures and among individuals.

- White Americans typically interpret raised voices as a sign of anger or hostility. Among non-white Americans and other ethnic groups such as Latin Americans or Africans, raised voices may simply signify an exciting conversation.
- Baseline speaking volume is generally lower among Asians and Western Europeans. American tourists in these parts of the world are often seen as rude and thoughtless.
- In some African cultures, whispering is a signal of witchcraft, plotting, or malicious gossip. Good manners dictate speaking loudly enough for everyone present to hear what you are saying.

Touch

- Compared to other cultures, Americans rarely touch each other, limiting ourselves to handshakes and occasional pats on the shoulder or arm in business relationships, or hugs in closer friendships.
- Latin Americans and Middle Easterners touch with much greater frequency. In these cultures, it is not uncommon for two men to hold hands, signifying nothing more than friendship.
- Certain other groups, such as the Japanese, touch less than Americans and may be uncomfortable being touched in a casual relationship.
- People from cultures with conservative customs regulating inter-gender relationships may be extremely uncomfortable being touched by someone of the opposite sex.
- Touching someone on the head is offensive to most Asians.

Miscellaneous

- **Smiling:** For Americans, a smile is used with frequency to communicate friendliness and goodwill. Northern Europeans as a group smile with much less frequency, reserving the expression to show felt happiness. While this may cause Europeans to appear grim or unfriendly to Americans, Americans often appear childish or flippant to Europeans. Asians, in contrast, smile with greater frequency than Americans, using the expression to smooth over awkward or embarrassing situations, which may appear inappropriate to Americans.
- **Facial control:** Researchers have found that Americans display the least control over facial expressions, likely because our culture places high value on individual expression. Russians exhibit the most control over facial expression, followed by Japanese and Koreans. A higher degree of control may make people from other cultures appear unemotional or inscrutable to Americans.
- **Time:** The way we use time also sends messages without a word being spoken. In American business culture, respect is communicated through punctuality. In Latin and Middle Eastern cultures, which place high value on interpersonal relationships, respect means continuing a meeting or conversation until it reaches a natural conclusion, even if it makes you late for the next one.
- **Silence:** Americans are generally uncomfortable with silence in conversations. In other cultures, silence may signify respect, disdain, thoughtfulness, or seriousness.
- **Agreement:** “Yes” does not always mean “yes” among Asians. In order to avoid conflict and maintain smooth, pleasant relations, Asians rarely say no directly. “Yes” may mean “maybe” or “I’ll consider it.” A negative reply is generally communicated indirectly through hints and suggestions that your request is unlikely to be fulfilled. The “no” will come across clearly to someone from the same culture, but will probably be missed by an American.

What Now?

Suppose you suspect that although you and a coworker are both speaking English, you are not really communicating. What can you do?

- **Ask questions.** Ask follow-up questions to make sure they understand what you are saying. Ask your coworker about their culture.

- **Explain.** Explain your wishes, feelings, and intentions verbally. If you can't understand their nonverbal language, it's equally likely that they can't understand yours. Translate the elements of nonverbal culture. If it's frustrating for you to encounter miscommunication with an immigrant coworker, put yourself in the shoes of the immigrant, who faces the same frustration every single day.
- **Recruit a third party.** Particularly in cultures with a high respect for authority figures, giving negative feedback to a superior may be extremely difficult. Asking an uninvolved person from that culture to help you understand a situation can be helpful for you and a relief for the employee who is involved.

Conclusion

The world is filled with countless cultures, each with its own ways. Individuals also vary widely within each culture. While the information in this tip sheet can help you move toward a better understanding of your coworkers from other cultures, the most important principle you can learn is that nonverbal behavior **does** vary, and that the interpretation of nonverbal cues that seems obvious to you may not be accurate. A skilled cross-cultural communicator does not necessarily know all the rules of the other culture. Successful communication depends on getting to know people as individuals, asking questions, and seeking to understand their perspective before drawing conclusions about their attitudes and intentions.

“Other cultures are NOT failed attempts at being you: they are unique manifestations of the human spirit.” ~Wade Davis