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How Nonverbal Communication Can Help You Be Seen As A Leader

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Let's say that you join a group. You're the newest person there, however, you quickly realize that the group is a bit lost. They are having trouble staying on track and can't seem to get things accomplished on time... You notice they don't actually have a *leader*. But it's ok, you've been a group leader numerous times before, and you know you have the skills to get this group back on track! So you decide that you would like to aid by helping lead the group.

You may have some great leadership skills, knowledge, and may even be well-practiced in strong and effective verbal communication... but something's off. Perhaps you've found yourself excluded from conversations or interactions. Maybe people started avoiding you for some reason or look at you with

confusion, and as a result, don't make an effort to engage in conversation with you. While you may make an excellent choice as a leader for the group, it very well could be the case that you're giving off mixed signals or bad signals through your own Nonverbal Communication.

Definition: Nonverbal Communication –

Communication behavior that does not rely on written or spoken words.

Nonverbal Communication includes the use of body posture and movement, eye contact, facial expression, seating arrangement, spatial relationships, personal appearance, use of time, and even tone of voice.

Nonverbal communication is perhaps one of the hardest, trickiest, and most confusing forms of communication to both understand and employ, however, research makes it clear that it is the most predominant form of communication we use. More time is spent communicating nonverbally than verbally, and nonverbal messages are usually more believable to others than verbal messages are. In seeking a leadership position within a group, nonverbal communicational behaviors send key signals to others of your *potential* in their minds. Beebe and Masterson (2015) make an important note that, "No dictionary has definitive meanings for nonverbal behaviors" (p. 157). This means that there is no exacting standard of nonverbal behaviors, and that what may be considered positive behaviors in one situation, group or culture, may not be looked upon the same in another. Therefore, it is best to exercise caution when attempting to make assumptions of any kind on the possible results of any specific behavior.

Regardless, let's say it has become your goal to understand how nonverbal communication can affect your potential chances at gaining a position of leadership within a new group. You know you would be a great fit for the job, however, despite your own knowledge and skills, your nonverbal communication sends the wrong signals. Therefore, we will touch on seven nonverbal communicational areas, and discuss how each area can either work for you, or work against you.

Ready? Great! Let's begin...

Body Posture and Movement

To be seen as a potential leader within a group requires purposeful use of emblems, illustrators, affect display, regulators, and adaptors. However, at the same time, you must be careful not to engage in movements or gestures that may be perceived as threatening or insulting.

Emblems offer nonverbal cues that send a message to others. But, while using emblems such as placing a finger across your lips to indicate a message telling others to be quiet, or even using your index finger to signal someone to come closer, may be acceptable in many western cultures, in many south Asian, pacific, oceanic, and eastern cultures, such things are highly insulting.

The use of body movements and hand gestures may be used to add meaning to accompanying verbal messages, however the over use or exaggerated use of such things can be seen as unprofessional. Furthermore, exaggerated or overly excited movements within closer proximities to other individuals may come across as intimidating or even threatening. So while it's ok to use your hands, the important thing to remember here is to keep these movements to a minimum.

Being calm, cool, and collected in thought and expression is nearly a universally considered leadership trait, but so is your body posture. Sitting up straight in your seat or standing tall instead of slouching or leaning

over or against an object sends a message of professionalism. More professional behaviors send signals of leadership capability, which is the goal in mind.

Finally, check your own bad habits. People who feel pressured, nervous, or even scared typically express such things with a variety of facial expressions, body postures, and gestures. These actions can potentially send mixed signals of confusion, annoyance, incompetence, ignorance, boredom, and more, to other group members. It's perfectly ok to be nervous – for example – when talking out loud to a large group, but if you want to be seen as a potential leader, learn to control the bad habits that come out when you're put on the spot.

Eye Contact

To be seen as a potential leader within a group requires that your own understanding of contact initiation or attentiveness isn't seen as being overly assertive, pushy, or aggressive. Strong eye contact can send mixed signals of intent and possibly lead others into a state of discomfort. Depending on culture, individuals may equate a lack of eye contact with a sense of dishonesty or lack of integrity, while in other cultures, looking at someone directly can be uncomfortable or even rude. What's important to understand is that eye contact is culturally dependent as well as individually depended. Despite what some research has indicated, eye contact or lack of eye contact does not always indicate thought, agreement, attention or solicitation of involvement, nor the inverse. Therefore, it's best to exercise caution here, as well as reserve judgement, until you get to know individuals on a more personal basis.

Facial Expression

To be seen as a potential leader within a group requires that you not judge people prematurely based on emotional expressions, while at the same time, learning not to send confusing messages with your own facial expressions. As Beebe and Masterson (2015) point out, "Not all people express emotions in the same manner" (p. 169). Therefore, it is important to understand that facial expressions should not always be taken at face value. Just because you think someone may feel a certain way based off of their facial expression in no way means that is the case. Furthermore, even your own facial expressions can send misleading signals as to your actual emotions. Instead, verbal communication should always back up what you actually feel. It's ok to be expressive, *be you*... but communicate honestly how you feel about something instead of expecting others to try to figure it out based on your facial expressions alone. They might get your message wrong, and likewise, you might misinterpret theirs as well.

Vocal Cues

It's not what you say, it's how you say it... goes the old adage.... So it goes without saying that even your own use of language carries nonverbal context with it that communicates a message all its own. If you want to be seen as a potential leader within a group, learn to gather your thoughts prior to speaking them. Again, here we must stress the importance of remaining clam and collected. Finally, remove *filler words* from your language (things like "um", "uh", and the universal expression indicating a complete lack of intelligence, "o.m.g.", are prime examples). These words and common expressions serve no purpose in language and only mislead others into thinking you might not understand something, are not very intelligent, or are incapable of leadership. If you want to be taken seriously, take the time to understand what is being said, understand the message, think about what you want to communicate, and then calmly express your thoughts, opinions, and/or ideas. Otherwise, you stand a very good chance at leaving the wrong impression.

Personal Space, Territory, and Seating

If you have a choice when selecting a seat within a group, pick one near the front (but not at the front), in the middle (but not the exact middle), and close to others (but not too close). Sounds complicated? It is. Everyone values their personal space, but not all cultures define personal space the same. Additionally, everyone claims territory as their own once they've occupied a space, but being territorial only wards

potential contact away. To be seen as a potential leader within a group means to make yourself available socially – to occupy a social space – but no closer and no further away. Your goal is not to lead people into the impression that you're clingy or needy, bossy, aggressive, or overly assertive and controlling, nor that you'll violate their own personal space or territory, but also not to isolate and alienate yourself either. If given the choice between an intimate zone, a personal zone, a social zone, or a public zone, stay in the social zone. It's no less complicated to figure out – because all cultures define this zone differently – but this area says *I'm here for you* and *I'm approachable* without being too close or too far away.

Personal Appearance

Look in the mirror. Now, remember that what you see in it is often what society wants you to see. There are some things about your physical appearance that you cannot change, and many things that you should never allow society demand you to change, conform, or adapt too... however, it is true that people who take care of themselves are thought of as being more *leadership-like* than those who don't. The lesson here? Maintain good hygiene and a neat, professional, clean appearance, and others will see you more as a person capable of being a leader. Furthermore, don't judge others based on appearance alone either. We all have our bad days, we all have our situations too.

Environment

You don't have control over everything in life... in fact, you have very little real control over the majority of things in life. In fact, the only actual thing you can seriously count on maintaining any form of control over, is yourself. Learn that, and life will be a whole lot easier. You may not always be able to control the environment your group must work within, but as with all things, they are either as good or as bad as you choose to make them. To be seen as a potential leader within a group, learn to accept the things you cannot change, help to change the things you can, and don't go making a bad situation worse by complaining about it. Instead, seek all challenges as opportunity, and you stand a much higher chance for success.

Body posture and movement, eye contact, facial expressions, vocal cues, personal space, personal appearance, and environment, are just a few things to think about. However, these seven areas of emphasis are key areas where your own nonverbal communicational habits can either make or break your opportunity to be seen as a leader within a group. Understanding nonverbal communication is essential for leaders because it is the most predominant form of communication we use as human beings. People often pay more attention to what you do than what you say, and if you want to avoid any misunderstandings, as well as avoid misunderstanding others, it is imperative to understand the messages you may be sending, even without saying a word.

SOUND OFF!

What do you think?

Have you ever discovered that someone had the wrong impression about you, and that their impression was the result of what they thought about you based on what they *saw*? Have you ever been misunderstood by others based off of nonverbal communication alone? Have you ever misjudged someone else because what you perceived from the nonverbal communication signals they sent was a misunderstanding?

Consider how your own past experiences with nonverbal communication have either helped you or held you back in a group, then let us know what happened, and how you have or might be able to improve your nonverbal communication skills in the future.

Let's discuss our thoughts in open forum. Let us know **YOUR** thoughts in the **comments below!** Open discussion helps everyone learn and grow.

References:

Beebe, S., and Masterson, J. (2015). *Communicating in Small Groups: Principles and Practices*. Eleventh Edition. Pearson.

About the author



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AJ is a retired U.S. Army NCO who served in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army. He is a combat veteran, and has participated in contingency operations around the world. AJ is the Owner of Veteran Leadership Solutions, the Founder and Editor in Chief of The Warfighter Journal, and is a published Sociological Analyst, Researcher, Guest Lecturer, and Public Speaker. He is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University with a focus on Sociology and a science degree in Organizational Leadership, and is published in the field of sociology. AJ is an inductive analyst; public figure; researcher/writer; aviator; a certified advanced operational diver; professional instructor, trainer, mentor, and adviser; snowboarder; motorcycle rider; world traveler; he enjoys long distance endurance events, and much more.