Nonverbal Factors in Influence

In this program, we focus on specific influence behaviors. An important aspect of using these skills effectively has to do not only with the behaviors selected, but also with how these behaviors are applied. To cite the old adage, it is not just what you say but how you say it that affects the way that others respond to your use of influence behaviors. Tone of voice, body language, and force of expression in delivery all create impressions that may or may not be consistent with the impact you wish to have on the other party. For example, you may choose to use a receptive behavior to show openness; however, if your tone of voice seems severe, your expression and your body language tense, thus failing to indicate receptivity to the other person’s ideas, the other will receive a confusing message. The lack of congruence between words and behavior may create distrust or resistance. The same will be true if you choose to use an expressive behavior to present views or express needs, and your tone, nonverbals, or vigor of expression do not indicate confidence in your argument or in your legitimate right to expect your needs to be met.

It is important to have congruence between the choice of influence behavior and the manner of expression. It is often difficult to judge objectively the degree of congruence of one’s own behavior. An opportunity for feedback, such as you have in this program, can be very helpful in getting a clearer picture of how others are responding to you. You can also keep in mind some basic concepts about nonverbal communication.

Tone of Voice

Some aspects of tone include:

- highness or lowness of pitch
- pace and rhythm
- loudness or intensity
- amount of inflection

“When the eyes say one thing and the tongue another, a practised man relies on the language of the first.”

R. W. Emerson
1860
It is important, especially when communicating in a diverse cultural environment, to realize that the messages derived from nonverbs are based on cultural assumptions.

- speed of delivery
- resonance of the voice

Speaking at a moderate rate can indicate confidence, for example, while speaking at a quicker rate or louder can indicate excitement or agitation. Speaking slower and with less volume may convey a more serious or somber impression.

Your use of voice is very individual; the important issue in influence is whether your tone is consistent with your influence message and that the response you get back from the other party is the desired one. In general, a resonant tone with clear enunciation which uses appropriate pitch, volume, and inflection and avoids a monotone quality will achieve a positive result.

What constitutes “appropriate” pitch, volume, and inflection can be a function of the kind of message you are sending, the kind of environment or culture in which you are participating, and your own vocal qualities. Effective use of voice can be enhanced by matching aspects of the vocal qualities of the person you wish to influence. (For example, slowing down your speech to match the pace of someone who speaks more slowly than you do.)

**Facial Expression and Body Language**

The way you use your body communicates messages that may or may not be consistent with your intention. It is important, especially when communicating in a diverse cultural environment, to realize that the messages derived from nonverbs are based on cultural assumptions. For example, leaning forward with an open body stance and nodding indicate receptivity to most people in European and North American cultures, whereas holding arms and legs tightly crossed indicate a defensive posture. Eye contact is often seen as an indication of honesty, confidence, and interest in the other person in some cultures, yet in others may be seen as rude or aggressive rather than confident.

Nonverbal messages can also be ambiguous in isolation. Confidence and energy can be communicated by sitting forward in a chair but so can nervousness. Smiling can indicate happiness or embarrassment. Nodding can indicate agreement or just acknowledgment that a message was heard and understood. Yawning can indicate boredom or an all-night marathon to complete a project.
In making your influence message congruent, consider how to make each aspect of your nonverbal communication match with the impression you wish to convey. When you are aware that you may be perceived as incongruent, it can be helpful to disclose your awareness of the contradiction and explain the reason for it (e.g., “I know I don’t seem angry about this but it’s an issue I find very difficult to discuss.” “I am interested in what you are saying but I’m a little preoccupied with those lab results.”)

**Vigor of Expression**

Vigor of expression involves the intensity of expressive or receptive communication perceived by the other. One can communicate one’s own ideas or interests with greater or lesser degrees of enthusiasm or passion; equally, one can have greater or lesser degrees of interest in or receptivity to the views of others. These are conveyed through a combination of influence behaviors, tone, nonverbal indicators, as well as in the actual choice of words (e.g., “I need you to do this” versus “I would prefer you to do this,” “I’m convinced this proposal will turn our business around” versus “I have a sense this is the right direction to take,” “What do you think about doing this?” versus “What are the pros and cons of the two approaches I suggested?”)

**Proxemics**

The way you position yourself in relation to the other person can have a powerful impact on the way your influence message is received. First of all, there are many cultural rules about polite distance that vary widely around the world and within diverse organizations. Northern Europeans, North Americans, and some Asians tend to prefer greater distance between those who are in conversation (and experience closer distances as crowding, or even as aggression). Southern Europeans and those from the Near and Middle East, many African and Hispanic cultures, and some Asian cultures find that distance cold and unfriendly.

Proxemics has to do with vertical as well as horizontal distance. Cultural rules about status can create situations of great discomfort when, for example, a person perceived to be of lower status sits down (or doesn’t stand up) in the presence of someone with higher status.

Understanding and using proxemics effectively will subtly aid your influence attempt. Ignoring it will often cause the other person to be so distracted, confused, or upset by the nonverbal message being conveyed that s/he will be unavailable for influence.
As an example, in the United States height is often equated with power. Thus, if you want to have more impact when you are influencing someone taller than you are, you might want to find a good reason to stand up while they sit. (Use a flipchart to demonstrate your idea, etc.) On the other hand, if you want to establish a trusting relationship with someone who has information that is important for you to know, you will be sure to sit at eye-level with the other, especially if you are taller, so you are not perceived to be intimidating.

Seating arrangement can also be important. Sitting corner-to-corner or side-to-side can indicate a cooperative intent; sitting across the table from each other creates a more competitive, adversarial dynamic.

In summary, nonverbal communication can either help or hinder your effectiveness as an influencer. Gaining awareness of the impact of your own nonverbal behavior through feedback is a good first step. Developing your observational skills so that you notice cultural and individual differences in the use of and response to nonverbal behavior will serve you very well.

**From Matching to Leading**

Ironically, successful following or matching, as it is called in neurolinguistic programming (NLP), creates a greater possibility of actually leading or influencing the other. Matching means mirroring the behaviors of the other person, primarily nonverbal behaviors. Mirroring does not mean an exact impersonation of the other but rather an approximation. (If the imitation is too exact, the other may experience your behavior as ridicule.) Behaviors to mirror include the other party’s

- tone of voice or tempo of speech
- breathing
- body posture
- movement rhythms
- representational system of perception (whether the other party prefers visual, auditory, or kinesthetic language, learning or ways of looking at the world. For example, a person who learns and perceives best visually would say “I see what you mean;” a person who prefers auditory modalities “I hear what you are saying.” Someone who responds best to a kinesthetic
approach might say, “I get a feel for what you mean.” To match each, you would use the type of language preferred by the other party.)

• kind of language or jargon used by the other party (organizational, professional, or technical)

• use of turn-taking. Some people prefer each party to take turns without being interrupted or interrupting and are offended or distracted if interruptions occur; others see interruption (or cross-talk) as an indication of interest.

• degree of direct or indirect communication

• use of silence. Some see silence as non-communication to be avoided. Some see it as a valuable opportunity for reflection, or a sign of good listening behavior.

• interpersonal distance zones. Physical distance preferences can be different for different people and cultures. A mismatch causes discomfort and awkwardness.

When you use matching effectively, you establish a comfort zone for the other that will enable him or her to be much more receptive to your influence.