

Nonverbal Negotiation Skills

By

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Researchers in nonverbal communication claim that as much as 90 percent of the meaning transmitted between two people in face-to-face communication is nonverbal. This means that little of your verbal communication will have an impact on the outcome of your negotiations! If these figures are even close to reality, the importance of nonverbal negotiation skills cannot be overestimated.

Learning the language of nonverbal communications is almost as difficult as acquiring fluency in a foreign language. In addition to studying your own gestures and the meaning you are conveying, you must also become aware of what your counterpart is conveying.

Gesture Clusters

Many skeptics argue that it is difficult to tell what someone is thinking by singling out one gesture: and they are right. A single gesture is like a single word; its true meaning is difficult to understand out of context. However, when gestures come in clusters, their meaning becomes clearer. For example, while a person's fidgeting may not mean much by itself, if that person is avoiding eye contact, holding his hands around his mouth, touching his face and fidgeting, there's a good chance he is not being totally honest.

As you study nonverbal behavior, you will begin to understand the clustering process. When scanning a counterpart for clusters of gestures, a good formula to follow is to divide the body into five categories:

1. **Face and head.** The face and head truly provide a window into your counterpart's soul. Look for the following signs.
 - Someone who is trying to hide something will avoid eye contact.
 - Someone who is bored may gaze past you or glance around the room.
 - Someone who is angry or feels superior to you may maintain piercing eye contact.



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- Someone who is evaluating what you are saying may turn his head slightly to one side, almost as though trying to hear you better.
 - Someone who is in agreement may nod his head as you are speaking.
2. **Body.** The body also plays an important role in nonverbal communication. Here are some signs to watch for:
- Someone who is interested and in agreement with you will usually lean toward you or position her body closer to you.
 - Someone who is in disagreement with, uncertain about, or bored with what you are saying will generally turn her body away from you and lean back farther in her chair.
 - Someone who feels insecure, nervous or in doubt may move from side to side, shifting her weight.
 - To create a win/win outcome, you should always position your body toward the other party.
3. **Arms.** In general, an open arm position suggests that someone is receptive to the negotiation process. Watch especially for changes in arm position. If your counterpart's arms are lying open on the table where you are both sitting as you start the negotiation, and he takes his arms off the table and crosses them over his chest when you mention that your company has a standard deposit of 50 percent on all first-time orders, that's a good indication that this information was not received well. You may want to clarify your words or, better yet, ask your counterpart whether he has a concern about the deposit.
4. **Hands.** People's true feelings are commonly revealed through hand movements. For example, open palms generally convey a positive message. This goes back to medieval days, when people showed their open palms to prove they were not carrying any weapons.

Involuntary hand movements can be particularly telling. People often touch their nose, chin, ear, arm or clothing when they are nervous or lack confidence in what they are saying.

5. **Legs.** When asked why they cross their legs, most people say they do so for comfort. Although they are being truthful, they are only partially correct. If you have ever crossed your legs for a long period of time, you know that this position can become painfully uncomfortable.

Crossing your legs can have a devastating effect on a negotiation. In a study described in *How to Read a Person Like a Book*, Gerard I. Nierenberg and Henry H. Calero found after videotaping 2,000 transactions that no sales were made by people who had their legs crossed.

If you want your counterpart to perceive you as cooperative and trustworthy, sit with your legs uncrossed, feet flat on the floor and body tilted slightly toward the other party. This posture will give you a better chance of sending a positive signal.

Interpreting Body Language

Studying what you and your counterpart in the negotiation process are not saying is critical to achieving a win/win outcome. The following will help you translate your counterpart's body language, and use your own to say what you really mean to say.

Dominance, Power

- Feet on desk
- Piercing eye contact
- Hands behind head or on hips
- Palm-down handshake
- Steepling of the fingers
- Standing while other is seated

Submission, Nervousness

- Fidgeting
- Minimum eye contact
- Hands to face, hair, etc.
- Palm-up handshake
- Throat clearing

Disagreement, Anger, Skepticism

- Red skin
- Finger pointing
- Squinting eyes
- Frowning
- Turning away
- Crossing arms or legs

Boredom, Lack of Interest

- Avoiding eye contact
- Playing with objects on desk
- Staring blankly
- Drumming on table
- Picking at clothes
- Looking at watch, door, etc.

Uncertainty, Indecision

- Cleaning glasses
- Looking puzzled
- Putting fingers to mouth
- Biting lip
- Pacing back and forth
- Tilting head

Suspicion, Dishonesty

- Touching nose while speaking
- Covering mouth
- Avoiding eye contact

- Moving away
- Crossing arms or legs

Evaluation

- Nodding
- Squinting
- Putting index finger to lips
- Tilting head slightly
- Stroking chin

Confidence, Cooperation, Honesty

- Leaning forward
- Opening arms and palms
- Maintaining great eye contact
- Keeping feet flat on floor
- Smiling
- Moving with counterpart's rhythm



Peter Barron Stark is a consultant, executive coach, speaker and author. For twenty years, Peter's negotiation programs have held the unique distinction of being carefully customized professionals. His consulting firm, Peter Barron Stark Companies, has attracted clients such as the Boston Red Sox, Coca-Cola, Jack-in-the-Box, NFL, Rady Children's Hospital San Diego, Sempra Energy, Wells Fargo Bank and over 200 other leading organizations. He has been published world-wide in over 300 articles and has written nine books, including his best selling, *The Only Negotiation Guide You'll Ever Need*. Mr. Stark may be reached at peter@peterstark.com

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