EXERCISE #11: Body Language, Paralanguage & Spatial Communication

BODY LANGUAGE (KINESICS)

Body language stands for the way the body communicates without words, through the movement of its parts. The nodding of our heads, blinking of our eyes, waving of our hands, shrugging of our shoulders, etc., are expressions of our thoughts and feelings.

(i) Facial expressions: The face can convey energy, anger, grief, sincerity and a host of other feelings and emotions. A smile means friendliness, while a frown means anger.

(ii) Gestures: Gestures are small body movements that transmit some message. Some gestures maybe conscious while others may be involuntary. Some gestures have an almost universal meaning, such as a headshake for a “no” or a handshake as a “hello” and other gestures that may have regional meanings.

(iii) Posture: Posture is the position adopted by the body to convey a message. Posture includes the angle of inclination and the position of the arms and the legs. A raised head indicates openness, while a tilted head indicates curiosity.

(iv) Clothes: One is often judged by one’s appearance. Shabbily dressed people may cut a sorry figure. It is vital for one to look professional and efficient. Accessories also play a major role in non-verbal communication.

(v) Eye contact: Through eye- contact, the speaker gets signals whether the channel of communication is open. Nervousness results in a brief eye contact; and a long and fixed gaze shows interest. Depending on our feelings, we have smiling eyes, angry eyes, painful eyes, evasive eyes, and so on.

(vi) Silence: Silence speaks louder than words. It lays down the relationship between communicators and their attitude towards each other. Silence shows the inability to converse further.

Indicators of Non-verbal Communication

Positive:

- Smile
- Open posture
- Interested expression
- Moderate eye contact
- Accurate pitch and volume of voice

Negative – Submissive:

- Floundering voice
- Defensive arms / legs
- Slow speech
Fretting expressions
Deceitful looks

Negative – Aggressive:

- Harsh voice
- Wagging finger
- Fast speech
- Supercilious expressions
- Immoderate eye contact

PARALANGUAGE

Paralanguage is used to describe a wide range of vocal characteristics which help to express and reflect the speaker’s attitude. Paralanguage is non-verbal in nature and depends on voice, intonation, pitch, pause, volume, stress, gestures, and signals. Through these, one’s voice can convey enthusiasm, confidence, anxiety and the speaker’s mental state and temperament.

(i) Voice: Voice is the first signal that we receive or use. There are various categories of voices. A voice can be sweet, soft, musical, cultivated, pleasant, nasty, clear or indistinct, among other things. The voice can help reveal a speaker’s background, mental state, education, sex and temperament.

(ii) Intonation: Intonation is the modulation of the voice and the shift in stress. For example, a message with serious content should not be delivered in a high tone, but in a somber tone.

(iii) Pitch: Pitch is the vocal slant of the voice. It reveals the speaker’s frame of mind. An unusually high pitch may reflect agitation. An unchanging pitch maybe boring or monotonous, decreasing the listener’s span of attention. The pitch also helps us understand the speaker’s social position. A person in a position of authority uses a higher pitch than a subordinate.

(iv) Pause: A pause emphasizes a message. A pause is to speech what a comma is to prose. A pause at the wrong place may lead to miscommunication. For example, the difference between ‘fruit trees’ and ‘fruit, trees’ is vast.

(v) Volume variation: The speaker should adjust the volume of his voice depending on the size of the audience. Larger the audience, the louder the voice should be. Volume variation makes the speech effective. Sometimes changing from loud to soft and from soft to loud will have the desired effect.

(vi) Mixed signals: Mixed signals occur when the tone, pitch and facial expressions of the speaker do not match the words that he is speaking. This confuses the listener as to the exact motive of the speaker. For example, praise delivered in a sarcastic tone conveys mockery.

(vii) Proper word stress: Communication can be made more effective by putting proper emphasis or stress on the right words.

(viii) Overall impression: A message is understood by the listener not only by the content, but also by the manner in which the speaker conveys it. The speaker’s attitude, dressing style, physical appearance,
Age, gender, accent and the quality and tone of the voice also affect the message that gets communicated. For a message to be effective, the overall impression given by the individual should be in consonance with the message that he wants to convey.

**Advantages of Paralanguage**

- No oral communication is complete without paralanguage as it is closely connected to language itself.
- To a large extent, paralanguage indicates the position and situation of the speaker, whether in an organization or in society.
- It also reflects the speaker’s personality and background to a great extent.
- Paralanguage is indicative of the mental state of the speaker. A discerning listener can derive the right conclusions from the pitch, tone and speed of a message. This can often be very useful.

**Limitations of paralanguage**

- Paralanguage is ‘semi’ or ‘like’ a language. It is not language by itself. Therefore, not all the advantages associated with actual language can be attributed to paralanguage.
- Paralanguage involves the drawing of conclusions on the basis of a number of peripheral (side) attributes. Such drawing of conclusions need not always be right. In such a case, they may also serve to create undue bias. This, in itself, makes paralanguage misleading or confusing at times.
- Also, as speakers may come from different backgrounds, cultures and situations, the conclusions from paralanguage may be difficult to draw, especially to convey a message in its entirety.

**SPATIAL COMMUNICATION (PROXEMICS)**

Proxemics is used with reference to space or territory. A lot of communication takes place non-verbally through the sheer manner in which we use the space around us. Scholars have also attributed a lot of non-verbal communication to the color, design, layout and utilization of the space around us. This is also Proxemics. The space around us can be broadly classified as under:

(i) **Intimate space:** Most body movements take place within 18 inches around us. It is our most intimate circle of space. Only very close people or family members can enter this space, be it through a whisper, a pat on the back or a handshake. It means that the less the space between the two persons communicating, the more intimate is the nature of communication.

(ii) **Personal space:** Personal space extends from 18 inches to four feet where we have normal conversation with friends, colleagues and associates. It is used in informal talks and impromptu discussions in which one may not be averse to taking important decisions.

(iii) **Social Space:** This can be anywhere between 4 feet and 12 feet. It reflects a formality of relationship. It also reflects a lack of spontaneous behavior. An individual’s responses are more collected and well thought-out. Social space reflects reason, planning and control, usually associated with business communication within a formal relationship.

(iv) **Public Space:** This starts from a distance of 12 feet. One has to raise one’s voice to be heard. There is a lack of personal feelings and an added sense of detachment.
Surroundings: How you organize the surroundings also contributes to the communication. The room where you meet your visitors may be dazzling or simple. It may be gaudy or sober. The decor of the place, the furniture, and the artistic pieces that adorn your office, tell about yourself and your taste.