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## What are non verbal communication skills

Julia MartinsSeptember 17th, 2021•6 min readJump to sectionTry Asana nowNonverbal communication is everything other than spoken words. This can include your body language, facial expressions, vocal inflections, and more. There are nine types of nonverbal communication, and understanding them helps you encode and decode nonverbal signals more effectively. In this article, we take a look at the nine nonverbal cues, plus get 10 tips on how you can improve your nonverbal communication in the workplace.A lot of times, when we say nonverbal communication, we think of body language. And it's true that body language is an important part of nonverbal communication. It's arguably the most visible part, and it's one of the easiest to learn to manage. Body language, however, is only one type of nonverbal communication. There are in fact nine types nonverbal cues you communicate with every day—and only paying attention to body movements restricts your understanding of nonverbal messages. In this article, we'll dive into all nine nonverbal signals, and take a look at how you can improve your nonverbal communication in the workplace.First thing's first: How culture impacts nonverbal communicationBefore we get into the nine types of nonverbal communication and how you can improve your nonverbal skills, it's critical to mention that these signals aren't the same in every culture. Something standard or even expected in one culture may be off-putting or offensive in another. In today's distributed world, we have the privilege of working with more and more global colleagues. Even colleagues who grew up in a different part of the country or are from a different culture may have different nonverbal communication signals. For example, in Western cultures, you're often expected to shake hands when you meet new business partners. But that isn't the case for every culture. The same action might have different meanings depending on which culture someone is from. So before going into a situation, familiarize yourself with what's acceptable and appropriate—and what isn't. In particular, pay attention to any culture-specific nonverbal cues that you should expect or avoid when speaking with coworkers. Understanding and being mindful of your nonverbal communication makes you a better communicator and a better team member—and a big part of that is understanding the cultural impact of different nonverbal cues. As you develop your nonverbal communication skills, make sure you're also devoting an equal amount of time to developing your cultural intelligence. The 9 forms of nonverbal communicationNonverbal communication helps you effectively communicate and connect with others. When you understand the different types of nonverbal cues, you can tailor your message to avoid miscommunication. Understanding the nonverbal signals your team members are sending can help you identify if a coworker is uncomfortable or ill at ease. In general, improving your nonverbal communication skills can make you more confident, more aware of your body, and more effective at conveying what you want to convey.The nine types of nonverbal communication are:Body language: This nonverbal cue refers to the position your body is in. This can include your posture—are you slouching or sitting at attention? Things like fidgeting, crossing your arms, picking at your nails, and crossing your legs all make up the body language form of nonverbal communication.Gestures (kinesics): Gestures and body language are slightly different—gestures tend to be more purposeful, but are also significantly more culturally coded. These include hand gestures like the thumbs up or ok sign, as well as common mannerisms like shrugging your shoulders.Facial expressions: Like gestures, many facial expressions are purposeful—things like smiling, nodding your head, shaking your head, frowning, etc. However, we also exhibit unconscious facial expressions when we're stressed or worried, for example your eyes widening when you're surprised or flinching slightly when you hear a loud noise.Eye contact: Eye contact makes up a huge part of how you communicate nonverbally. That being said, the meaning of eye contact differs between cultures. In some cultures, lack of eye contact signals disinterest—in others, too much direct eye contact might make people uncomfortable. Tone of voice (paralinguistics): Your paralanguage is composed of your voice, tone, volume, speed, and speaking cadence. For example, you may have noticed that you speak faster when you're nervous (most people do). Alternatively, you might unconsciously begin whispering if you're sharing a secret. Personal space (proxemics): Nonverbal communication isn't just centered around your body movements—it also includes how you interact with the space around you. The physical distance between you and someone else, for example, may reveal something about that relationship. This nonverbal cue is also highly culturally applicable—so try to mirror what your coworkers do to avoid making someone uncomfortable. Touch: You might not think of touch as a form of communication, but it definitely is! For example, a lot of business people claim to tell a lot about a person based on how they shake hands. In the same vein, you probably wouldn't high five your company's CEO—but you'd probably high five your high school best friend. Appearance: Clothing is a big aspect of how we show up every day. Everyone has their own unique style, so if one of your coworkers starts wearing clothes they don't typically wear, that could be an indication of something having changed in their lives. Objects: Like clothing, objects give you insight into what a person is like—without them having to speak. Imagine a coworker who carries their personal planner with them everywhere they go. You automatically have a sense that this person is organized, simply based on the object they're carrying. In a virtual world, a lot can be said about a person's Zoom background. What objects did they intentionally place behind them for everyone to see?10 tips to improve nonverbal communication in the workplaceThere are two elements of unconscious communication that impact your workplace experience: encoding and decoding. Encoding refers to how you display nonverbal cues. These can be purposeful or unconscious signals—like emotional expressions you might not intend to display or body posture you aren't thinking about. Decoding, on the other hand, is the process of interpreting someone else's nonverbal messages. This helps you become a better communicator and pick up on nonverbal cues your coworkers drop. It's also important to remember that nonverbal communication in the workplace—in particular decoding different messages—varies from culture to culture. These 10 tips help you build a framework for encoding and decoding behaviors, but every team situation is slightly different. Encoding your own nonverbal behavior Oftentimes, encoding your nonverbal cues seems like a huge hurdle to overcome—but you actually do this all the time. It's true that some of our encoded nonverbal behaviors are accidental, but many gestures and movements are purposefully encoded. Think of head nods, rolling your eyes, or even tapping your foot if you're impatient. To practice encoding your nonverbal behavior more purposefully, try these five tips: Pay attention to your own communication style. There are four communication styles, which describe how different people communicate. At Asana, we believe strongly in learning how to use the assertive communication style, so you aren't coming across as aggressive or passive—even unconsciously. Practice being in the present. Increasing mindfulness is part of encoding your nonverbal cues. When you're more aware of yourself and your surroundings, you're more in control of the signals you're sending off—both verbally and nonverbally. Reduce stress. Often, we unintentionally encode nonverbal cues due to emotional stress. When you're tired, overworked, or burnt out, you have less mental energy to be aware of how you're communicating. Essentially, you're in fight-or-flight mode, which reduces your ability to purposefully communicate. Address any underlying conditions. You may be encoding nonverbal cues without realizing it because of underlying or unconscious feelings. For example, people who feel impostor syndrome at work may distance themselves from their coworkers without even realizing it. Before you can improve those behaviors, you first need to understand the root cause. Prioritize face-to-face interaction if possible. One of the disadvantages of asynchronous communication is that you aren't able to encode nonverbal cues. This increases the likelihood of miscommunication or misunderstanding. Where possible, aim for an in-person conversation—especially if you're offering constructive criticism or discussing a difficult topic. Read: Feeling overworked? Strategies for individuals and teams to regain balanceDecoding nonverbal cuesThe second part of nonverbal communication is decoding other people's nonverbal signals. Accurately decoding your team members' nonverbal cues can help prevent miscommunication and increase your rapport. To improve your ability to decode others' nonverbal signals, practice the following: Build your emotional intelligence. The first step to decoding any type of message—verbal or otherwise—is to build your emotional intelligence skills. Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize, regulate, and understand emotions—both in yourself and in others. Develop active listening skills. Active listening is the practice of listening to understand what someone is saying—without planning your response. When you practice active listening, you're more engaged and present in the moment, which can help you pick up on small nonverbal cues. Look for discrepancies between their true feelings and conversation. One of the most important things about nonverbal communication is the ability to pick up on signals the other person isn't saying. For example, if a team member claims they're excited to get started on a project but they look away and cross their arms, they may not be as excited as they're saying. Picking up on these signals can help you dig further—for example, are they worried about the project, and is there anything you can do to help? Strengthen your cultural intelligence. Developing your cultural intelligence increases your awareness of different signals your team members are sending. This is particularly important if you're a manager, since you don't want to decode and misinterpret someone else's nonverbal cues. When in doubt, ask. The biggest risk of decoding nonverbal communication is coming to an assumption that isn't true. The Conscious Leadership Group calls these facts vs. stories—facts are the objective truths that anyone can pick up on, whereas stories are the assumptions you make based on those facts. We all tell ourselves stories, but identifying and clarifying whether or not those stories are true can help prevent misunderstanding. Read: The best conflict resolution strategy you're not usingBetter nonverbal communication = better workplace communicationNonverbal communication is a skill you can use in everyday life, as well as in the workplace. Once you develop these skills, you'll notice you're increasingly aware not only of everyone else's nonverbal cues, but of your own signals. Being aware of your nonverbal cues can help you communicate more effectively in the workplace. To learn more, read our article on how effective workplace communication increases collaboration and boosts leadership.

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