

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Tone of Voice and Body Language

One of our subscribers who responded to the last article, [Interpersonal Communication – Encoding The Response](#), asserted that e-mails effectively can convey *tone of voice* and *body language*. Let's explore this proposition.

In interpersonal communication, the two-way channel implicitly means that the Sender wants to “*imply*” something and that the Receiver needs to “*infer*” this identical thing. In the most effective of interpersonal communications, the *implication* and the *inference* are one and the same. The manner and degree to which these diverge, however, reduce the effectiveness of the communication and, at the extreme, results in absolute miscommunication. How do *tone of voice* and *body language* contribute to this?

Tone of voice is said to represent 35% of an interpersonal communication. When one can hear the speaker, all the elements of voice can be apprehended. These elements include volume, pitch, inflection, emphasis, irony, intonation, emotion, pausing, modulation, excitement, passion, boredom, hesitation, etc. In a written communication, it may be possible to infuse some *tone of voice*, although this is quite difficult and generally incomplete. As a result, it is fraught with potential misunderstanding.

This is particularly true of e-mails. E-mails tend to be short and, most often, are written quickly, and then sent immediately. Generally, the element of tone is overlooked. Even if one focused on tone and edited the e-mail extensively before sending it, the communication inevitably would be deficient in *tone of voice*, when compared to an interpersonal communication. Actually hearing something has enormous impact.

Body language accounts for 55% of an interpersonal communication. It encompasses an extensive array of traits: nodding, smiling, frowning, shrugging, winking, eye contact or movement, folded or open arms, leaning, gesturing, posture, hand movement, yawning, raised eyebrows, gawking, rolling eyes, sneers, etc. These are attributes that have to be seen in order to be recognized and processed.

There are many situations, however, where interpersonal communication occurs through *body language* alone – there are no words and no sounds. Mimes do entire routines, using only *body language*. Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin were virtuosos in the silent films era (yes, there was a time before movies had integrated speech).

Another example of this is people walking through a mall. If viewed from on-high, it would look quite similar to an anthill. There is much scurrying about in a seemingly random manner, but no one is bumping into others. How do we negotiate, co-ordinate and manage all this without speaking to one another?



Much of this action occurs on the sub-conscious level utilizing a range of subtle indicators. Intent of direction often is signalled by little eye movements or other facial expressions. One also might lean toward the desired direction. Pre-emptive action may be taken to occupy a space or one may slow down to vacate a space.

This all occurs in real time with everyone sending and receiving messages. The next time you're in a mall, pay attention to how we communicate using *body language* and you'll conclude that we're having a big non-verbal conversation.

By definition, *body language* must be seen to have effect. When reading an e-mail, one cannot see the sender and, therefore, cannot determine the *body language* that might accompany it. This returns us to the conclusion of the last article – an e-mail, at best, can have only 10% of an interpersonal communication, because it lacks both *tone of voice* and *body language* – all it has are the words.

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