CHAPTER 5

Verbal and Nonverbal Communication in Groups

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TWO ESSENTIAL TOOLS

Verbal and nonverbal communication are the means you use to generate meaning in group settings. **Verbal communication** focuses on how you use the words in our language. Communication may be "face to face, fax to fax, over the phone, or through electronic mail, but regardless of the channel used, groups do their work through language."[1] Without spoken and written language, you cannot have a group discussion; you cannot follow an agenda, take minutes, read a report, or interact effectively with other group members. Linguists Victoria Fromkin and Robert Rodman note, "Whatever else people do when they come together— whether they play, fight, make love, or make automobiles, they talk. We live in a world of language."[2]

The other essential communication tool, nonverbal communication, is just as important as language. Without the nonverbal component, it would be difficult to interpret the meaning of spoken language. The tone of voice, directness of eye contact, and physical proximity of group members can reveal at least as much about their thoughts and feelings as the words they speak. Generally, group members use words to express the content of a message and use nonverbal behavior to express the emotional element of a message.[3]

In dialectic terms, effective group members rely on *both* verbal *and* nonverbal communication to generate meaning. For example, as you know from Chapter 3, "Group Member Diversity," people in high-context cultures place emphasis on nonverbal codes and the nature of interpersonal relationships to generate and interpret meaning. In low-context cultures, people generate and interpret the meaning of messages that are clearly and explicitly expressed in words. Thus in a diverse group, African American and Latino members may be more sensitive to the nonverbal components of messages, whereas European Americans may rely on and trust a member's words to convey meaning.[4] Effective groups recognize that this dialectic tension provides a richer basis for effective and ethical communication.

LANGUAGE AND MEANING

Your ability to use language helps to determine the extent to which you successfully express your ideas and influence the actions of other group members. Several basic principles of language address the complex relationship between words and meaning.

Denotation and Connotation

When communicating in groups, you will encounter different meanings for and reactions to words, depending on the type of group, its goal, its history of interaction, and the background and experience of its members. The multiple meanings

of words can be further understood by examining two major types of meaning: denotative and connotative.

Denotation refers to the objective, dictionary-based meaning of a word. However, words usually have more than one definition. For example, the *minutes* taken in a meeting are not the same as the *minutes* it may take to get a meeting started. **Connotation** refers to the personal feelings connected to the meaning of a word. Semanticist S. I. Hayakawa refers to connotation as "the aura of feelings, pleasant or unpleasant, that surround practically all words."[5] We evaluate the extent to which we like or dislike the thing or idea that the word represents.

Connotation is more likely than denotation to influence how you respond to words. For example, the denotative meaning or dictionary definition of a *meeting* is "an assembly or gathering of people, as for a business, social, or religious purpose."[6] However, the word *meeting* can connote hours of wasted time to some members or the best way to solve a complex problem to others. When the word *meeting* comes to mean a dreaded event at which unpleasant people argue over trivial issues, you are letting the word influence your feelings about the event it symbolizes.
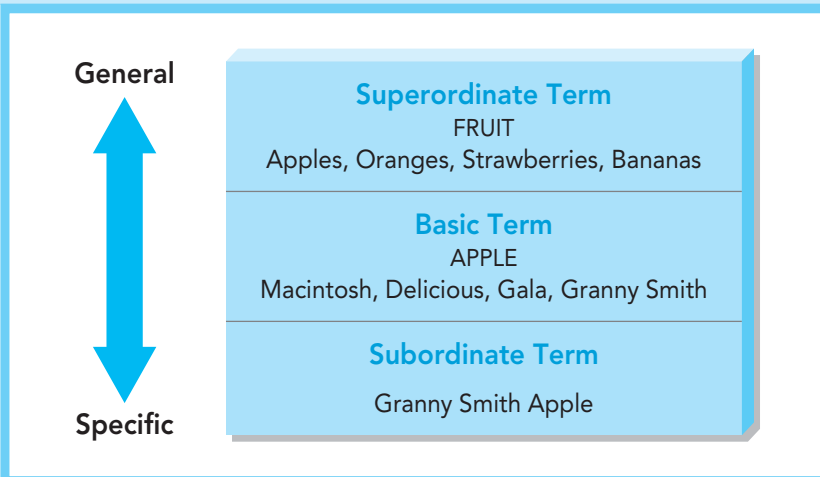
Levels of Meaning

Group members can minimize the misinterpretation of words by recognizing the ways in which different levels of meaning affect communication. Some words are more abstract than others. An **abstract word** refers to an idea or concept that cannot be observed or touched. Words such as *fairness* and *freedom* may not have the same meaning for everyone. Total reliance on abstract words increases the chances of misunderstanding. The more abstract your language is, the more likely it is that group members will interpret your meaning in some way other than the way you intended. **Concrete words** refer to specific things that can be perceived by our senses. They narrow the number of possible meanings and decrease the likelihood of misinterpretation.

There are three levels of abstraction, ranging from the most abstract to the most concrete.[7] **Superordinate terms** are words in which objects and ideas are grouped together very generally, e.g., *vehicle*. **Basic terms** are words that immediately come to mind when you see an object, e.g., *car, van,* or *truck*. **Subordinate terms** are more concrete and specialized. The vehicle parked outside is not just a *car*. It is a *red Mercedes sports car*.

FIGURE 5.1   **Levels of Language**

General — Specific

Superordinate Term
FRUIT
Apples, Oranges, Strawberries, Bananas

Basic Term
APPLE
Macintosh, Delicious, Gala, Granny Smith

Subordinate Term
Granny Smith Apple

Avoid using overly abstract words when working in groups. Use words that refer directly to observable objects, people, or behavior. For example, stating that "Greg's behavior was disruptive" could imply many things. Did he yell at a group member, use profanity, refuse to participate, or insist that his ideas were superior? Stating that "Greg arrived fifteen minutes late to the meeting" is more descriptive. Clarifying what you mean by using concrete words prevents inaccurate inferences and misunderstandings.

TEAM TALK

Team Talk, the title of a book by Anne Donnellon, examines the power of language in team dynamics. Donnellon uses the term **team talk** to describe the nature of the language that group members use as they work together. Not only does team talk enable group members to share information and express opinions, but analysis of team talk also "reveals where the team is coming from and where it is headed. More importantly, talk is a tool for changing a team's destination" and achieving success.[8] Team talk is the means we use to achieve group goals, the stimulus we use to build group relationships, and the evidence we use to assess group work.

Group members should listen carefully for words, sentences, and patterns of speech that are used repetitively during discussions and meetings. By listening to one another talk and analyzing how the group uses language, group members can discover how the group's language fosters or inhibits success. Figure 5.2 illustrates six dimensions of team talk and provides examples of successful and unsuccessful language use.

Language is more than the verbal medium through which groups communicate. Language also "creates thoughts, feelings, and behavior in team members which affect the way the team uses power, manages conflict, and negotiates."[10] Once group members analyze the nature of team talk, they can take steps to modify the way they interact and work with one another. The following suggestions can help produce a stronger and more cooperative group:

- Use the pronouns *we, us,* and *our* when referring to the group and its work.
- Express shared rather than individual needs: "We need to . . ." rather than "I want . . ."
- If you are in a position of power, refrain from talking and interrupting more than others and asking more questions than others.
- Speak in a specific and active voice ("I haven't finished the report due next week") rather than an abstract and passive voice ("The task hasn't been completed").
- Ask group members to address you by your first name or nickname.
- Encourage group members to express disagreement and listen patiently to dissenters.

FIGURE 5.2	The Dimensions of Team Talk[9]	
Team Talk Dimensions	**Successful Examples**	**Unsuccessful Examples**
1. Identification. Members use plural pronouns rather than singular ones when talking about the group and its work.	"Let's keep working on this until we're ready for lunch."	"I don't think you should quit until you've finished."
2. Interdependence. Members use language that acknowledges shared needs, solicits opinions, and expresses the need for cooperation.	"If we can develop a plan, our work will be much easier to schedule. What do you think?"	"We can develop this plan without input from the group. I'll tell the boss that Fred and I will do it on our own."
3. Power Differentiation. Members talk to one another on equal terms.	"Sorry. My other meeting ran overtime. Is there a way I can catch up?" "Fred, could you tell me more about that? Thanks."	"Stop and tell me what's happened so far." "I don't like this. If you can't do it, we'll have to assign this to someone else."
4. Social Distance. Members use casual language, nicknames, slang. Members express empathy and liking and avoid titles.	"What's up, Doc?" "Fred, try to find out where Bob stands on this." "Hey, guys!"	"Let us review our progress thus far." "Mr. Nunez, contact Dr. Ford after the meeting." "Ladies and gentlemen . . . ."
5. Conflict Management Techniques. Members express interest in solving problems and use a nonthreatening tone and nonjudgmental language. Members paraphrase others.	"What do you need to know from us to do this?" "Could we back up and look at this from a different angle?"	"How many of you think that Fred is right?" "We're not getting anywhere, so I'll take it up with Dr. Ford after the meeting."
6. Negotiation Process. Members ask "what if" questions, propose objective criteria for solutions, and summarize areas of agreement.	"What if we wrote up a justification for the cost?" "Does this meet our standard?" "What else could persuade us to do this?"	"We've always done it this way." "Why? Because I just don't like it, that's why."

- Ask more "what if" questions and make fewer "we can't do it" statements.
- When in doubt, rephrase or ask questions about what someone else has said to ensure understanding.

LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES

Many misunderstandings in group discussions can be avoided by overcoming language-based barriers to communication. Among the most common language difficulties are bypassing, offensive language, and jargon.

Bypassing

When group members have different meanings for the same words and phrases, they risk engaging in **bypassing,** a form of miscommunication that occurs when people "miss each other with their meanings."[11] An entire group project can be compromised if there are differences in the interpretation of a single word or phrase. Note the problems created by the following example of bypassing:

> At a routine staff meeting, a vice president asks her managers to "survey the members of your department to find out whether they are satisfied with the new email system." During the following week, the vice president receives a copy of a memo from one manager requesting that everyone in his department fill out a two-page questionnaire about the email system. The vice president telephones the manager and asks, "What's this questionnaire all about?" The manager replies, "I thought you said I have to survey everyone in my department."

> What the vice president had in mind was for the manager to informally ask staff members for their initial impressions rather than ask for a detailed analysis of the new system. Although the manager heard the vice president's words, the communicators "missed" each other's meaning.

> "Communicators who habitually look for meanings in the people using words, rather than in the words themselves, are much less prone to bypass or to be bypassed."[12] In other words, it's not what words mean but what speakers mean when they use words that is most important.

Offensive Language

Offensive language employs terminology that demeans, inappropriately excludes, or stereotypes people. For example, using sexist language in a group may alienate and offend both male and female members of that group. Referring to women as "girls" implies that women are childlike and not capable of adult thought and responsibilities. Refer to female group members as "girls" only if you also refer to male members as "boys." Avoid words that specify the gender of individuals in particular roles or occupations. Instead, use words that refer to

both men and women. For example, instead of referring to the *chairman,* use the term *chair* or *chairperson.*

You should also avoid language that stereotypes people based on their culture, race, religion, or lifestyle. Language perpetuates discrimination. Therefore, avoiding language that stereotypes people in this way can help prevent discrimination.[13] Words such as *nigger, trailer trash,* and *faggot* are offensive and demeaning. Is it OK to use these words if none of your group members would be targeted by them? Absolutely not! This type of language can offend and alienate everyone in the group. A member of an insurance investigation team recounted the following experience:

> We were meeting to discuss ways to better recognize fraudulent claims. At one point, another member said, "I'm working on a claim now involving a carload of wetbacks." I couldn't believe he used that term. He obviously didn't know that my husband is Latino. I was insulted. Other group members were offended, too.

Two problems occur when you label someone or accept a label that you hear or see. First, you reduce an entire person to a label—black doctor, dumb blonde, deaf cousin, or rich uncle. Second, the label can affect your perceptions of or relationship with that person. For example, if you label a person as inconsiderate, you may question the motives behind an act of kindness: "I wonder what prompted her to do that?" When you label someone as near perfect, you may go to great lengths to justify or explain less-than-perfect behavior: "Tiger Woods is still the best player in golf; he's just having an off year." Labels also influence how we interpret the same behavior:

- I'm energetic; you're overexcited; he's out of control.

- I'm laid back; you're untidy; she's a slob.

- I'm smart; you're intelligent; Chris is brilliant!

Jargon

Jargon is the specialized or technical language of a profession. Groups use jargon as "verbal shorthand that allows members to communicate with each other clearly, efficiently, and quickly."[14] In some groups, the ability to use jargon properly is a sign of team membership. In other groups, jargon can make ideas difficult to understand and may be used to conceal the truth. Members who are unfamiliar with a group's jargon are easily intimidated and frustrated. Consider the experience of the vice president of a large technology corporation:

> When I first joined the company, I had to learn the lingo of the various groups in which I worked. I remember attending my first CMG meeting (I didn't even know what that meant at the time) and listening to people talk about red files and green files. Do we color-code files? No, there is no such thing

ETHICAL GROUPS

Sticks and Stones May Break Your Bones, but Words Can Hurt Forever

In his book on toxic language, Arthur Bell examines the ways in which abusive words hurt groups and their members. When under assault by abusive language, group members can become discouraged, withdrawn, and isolated or can be provoked into shouting matches with their attacker. Abusive language has the "immediate result of spoiling relationships (and productivity based on such relationships), and the long-term effect of ruining morale, teamwork, and loyalty."[1]

The following list depicts several characteristics of verbal abuse:

- *Tone of voice:* Harsh, sarcastic, angry, or belittling
- *Content:* Sexual references, racial slurs, cruel comments about someone's appearance
- *Language choice:* Foul or obscene words
- *Nonverbal cues:* Insulting facial expressions, gross gestures, threatening movements
- *Speaking volume:* Loud, screaming voice or hissed messages[2]

Ethical communicators *both* take responsibility for what they say *and* take action when others use abusive language. Here we offer several techniques for avoiding, interrupting, challenging, and stopping verbal abuse:

1. *Express your objections.* At the first sign of verbal abuse, calmly explain that you feel abused, but you are willing to continue the discussion if the language becomes less inflammatory.
2. *Ask for repetition.* Ask the person to repeat what he or she has just said, as in, "Please repeat that. I want to make sure I heard what you said."
3. *Step back.* When someone is verbally abusive, step back four or five steps, as if to say that you want to talk about the problem, but you don't want to be yelled at or insulted. If the abuse continues, walk away.
4. *Quote the law.* When a discussion becomes abusive, quote the law or group norms: "That kind of language is illegal in the workplace" or "that word violates company policies."
5. *Take a time-out:* Say "Time out" when a discussion becomes uncomfortable or abusive. Follow that with "Let's take a minute to calm down before we continue."
6. *Practice what you preach.* If you take action against others, make sure that you avoid all forms of verbal abuse:

   - Do not raise your voice.
   - Do not swear.
   - Do not call members insulting names.
   - Do not use sarcasm to wound others.

7. *Listen.* Listen more than you speak when you're upset, particularly if you're so mad that you're afraid of what you might say. As you listen, try to calm down physically and mentally.[3]

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[1] Thomas J. Housel, "Foreword," in Arthur H. Bell, *You Can't Talk to Me That Way!* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press, 2005), p. 11.
[2] Based on Arthur H. Bell, *You Can't Talk to Me That Way!* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press, 2005), pp. 24–25.
[3] Based on Bell, pp. 192–200.

as an actual red or green file. Rather, the terms *red file* and *green file* refer to different pricing structures for our products. I also discovered that the same term might be used differently from one group to another. For instance, in some meetings *IP* refers to Internet provider. However, in other groups, it's short for information professional. As an attorney, I use the term to refer to intellectual property. I'm now familiar with the language of our company, but I know how confusing it can be when you're new to the team.

Some people use jargon to impress others with their specialized knowledge. Such tactics usually fail to inform others and often result in misunderstandings and resentment. Use jargon only when you are sure that all the members of your group will understand it and that it's absolutely necessary. If some of the jargon or technical terms of a field are important, take the time to explain those words to new members.

ADAPTING TO LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

Most groups include diverse members who influence how we use and listen to language. Although there is nothing right or wrong about the different ways in which people use language, these differences can create misunderstandings among group members.

Language and Gender

As we explain in Chapter 3, "Group Member Diversity," men and women inhabit gender-based cultures that account for differences in perspectives and communication styles. We recommend that all group members monitor and adapt to the different ways in which women and men interpret the world and express their opinions.

Linguist Deborah Tannen maintains that men and women use language quite differently.[15] Women tend to use language to maintain relationships and cooperate with others. Many women speak tentatively. Their speech is more likely to contain qualifiers and tag questions. A qualifier is a word that conveys uncertainty, such as *maybe* and *perhaps.* Tag questions are questions connected to a statement. For instance, "It may be time to move on to our next point, don't you think so?" is a statement made tentatively with a tag question. This tentative style does not necessarily represent a lack of confidence. Instead, it can be viewed as a cooperative approach that encourages others to respond.

In general, men tend to use language to assert their ideas and compete with others. Men are less likely to express themselves tentatively. Male speech is generally characterized as direct and forceful. One style of communication is not better than the other. The two are simply different. Effective group members use elements from both male and female approaches to language.

Language and Culture

For most groups, a single language is the medium of interaction, even though members from different backgrounds, generations, and geographic areas may speak the same language quite differently. Variations in vocabulary, pronunciation, syntax, and style that distinguish speakers from different ethnic groups, geographic areas, and social classes are referred to as **dialects.** Dialects are distinct from the commonly accepted form of a particular language. In the United States, there are southern dialects, New England dialects, Brooklyn dialects, and a whole range of foreign accents. Approximately 80 to 90 percent of all African Americans use a distinct dialect at least some of the time.[16]

No one dialect is superior to another. However, Standard American English is the most commonly accepted dialect and is spoken by as much as 60 percent of the U.S. population. If, however, you enjoy *pizzer* and *beah* instead of pizza and beer, you may be from Massachusetts. If you say, *"Ah nevah go theyuh,"* you could be from Alabama or parts of Texas. Unfortunately, studies repeatedly find that "accented speech and dialects provoke stereotyped reactions in listeners so that the speakers are usually perceived as having less status, prestige, and overall competence."[17] Moreover, people with Appalachian dialects and "those who speak Black Standard English, are sometimes unfairly assumed to be less reliable, less intelligent, and of lower status than those who speak General American Speech."[18] The implications of such research are clear: Group members who do not use Standard American English in business and academic settings may be viewed as less articulate or less competent.

Because dialects have the potential to influence the perceptions of group members, speakers may engage in codeswitching as a way to avoid negative stereotypes related to language. **Codeswitching** refers to the ability to change from the dialect of your own cultural setting and adopt the language of the majority in particular situations. In other words, the dialect you speak at home may not be the best way to communicate in a business meeting. In reviewing the research on dialects, Carley Dodd concludes "that: (1) people judge others by their speech, (2) upward mobility and social aspirations influence whether people change their speech to the accepted norms, (3) general American speech is most accepted by the majority of the American culture, and (4) people should be aware of these prejudices and attempt to look beyond the surface."[19] Thus, you should try to understand, respect, and adapt to the dialects you hear in group communication contexts.

IMPROVING VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Without intelligent and appropriate use of language, groups cannot achieve their goals. As Suzanne Beyea, director of nursing research at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, aptly observes, "Imagine an OR [operating room] in which members of the team never talk to each other."[20] Quality health care depends on a medical team's effective use of language.

TOOLBOX 5.1

An Accent and a Dialect Are Not the Same Thing

Accents and dialects are not the same thing. An **accent** is the sound of one language imposed on another. For example, some Asian speakers have difficulty producing the "r" and "v" sounds in English. **Dialects** differ from accents in that they represent regional and cultural differences within the same language. What people call a southern accent is really a southern dialect.[1] In general, dialects refer to the use of different words for a similar object or idea as well as variations in the pronunciation of common words.

Linguists have identified eighteen regional dialects of American English. For example, a carbonated soft drink is called *soda* in the Northeast; *pop* in the inland and Northwest; *tonic* in eastern New England; and *soda pop* in parts of southern West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, western Carolina, and eastern Tennessee.

Dialects may also have a distinctive sound. Northeast dialects, for example, range from the unique sound of New York City residents to the loss of "r" sounds in New England (in words such as *park, car, Harvard*, and *yard*). Southern dialects are also marked by the loss of the "r" sound as well as by distinctive phrases such as *y'all*.

A consistent finding across several studies is that speakers of Standard American English are judged as more intelligent, ambitious, and successful, even when the judges themselves speak a non-standard American dialect.[2] However, having an accent or dialect does not stop anyone from being an effective communicator. What matters is that you speak loudly enough and clearly enough for others to hear and understand—and that is true no matter what language or dialect you speak.

[1] Isa Engleberg and John Daly, *Presentations in Everyday Life: Strategies for Effective Speaking* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), pp. 347–349; William O'Grady et al., *Contemporary Linguistics*, 5th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), pp. 627, 635.
[2] Ethel C. Glenn, Phillip J. Glenn, and Sandra Forman, *Your Voice and Articulation*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1998), p. 10.

The previous section emphasizes what *not* to do if you want to be understood and respected by the other members of your group. Fortunately, there also are positive steps you can take to improve your use of language.

Improve Your Vocabulary

Although words have great power, they also pose many challenges. As Mark Twain, the great American humorist, observed, "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning."[21] Finding the "right" word is a lot easier if you have a lot of words to choose from.

As you learn more words, make sure you understand their meaning and usage. For example, you should be able to make distinctions in meaning among the words in each of the following groups.[22]

• absurd, silly, dumb, preposterous, ridiculous, ludicrous, idiotic

• abnormal, odd, eccentric, foreign, strange, peculiar, weird

• pretty, attractive, gorgeous, elegant, lovely, cute, beautiful

The difference between the almost right word and the right word really *is* a very large matter. Although you learn the basic grammar of language before you start school, you must work on improving your vocabulary throughout your life.

Usually, there is a big difference between the words we use for written documents or formal presentations and the words we use when working in groups. Our advice: *Say what you mean by speaking the way you talk, not the way you write.* This is the language of team talk.

- Use shorter, familiar words. For example, say *home* rather than *residence.*

- Use shorter, simpler sentences. For example, say *He came back* rather than *He returned from his point of departure.*

- Use more informal colloquial expressions. For example, say *Give it a try* rather than *You should attempt it.*

Use "I," "You," and "We" Language

When you use the word *I*, you take responsibility for your own feelings and actions: *I* feel great; *I* am a straight A student; *I* am not pleased with the team's work on this project. Some people avoid using the word *I* because they think they're showing off, being selfish, or bragging. Other people use the word *I* too much and appear self-centered or oblivious to those around them.

Unfortunately, some people avoid "I" language when it is most important. Instead, they shift responsibility from themselves to others by using the word *you.* "You" language can be used to express judgments about others. When the judgments are positive—"You did a great job," or "You look marvelous!"—there's rarely a problem. When *you* is used to accuse, blame, or criticize, you can arouse defensiveness, anger, and even revenge. Consider the following statements: "You make me angry." "You embarrass me." "You drive too fast." Sometimes, the word *you* is implied, as in "Stop telling me what to do." and "What a stupid thing to do."

Successful teams use the plural pronouns *we* and *you* when talking to one another.[23] Plural pronouns are inclusive. They announce that the group depends on everyone rather than on a single member. Plural pronouns also share credit for team achievements. Successful teams use pronouns in specific ways.[24] Members say *we*, *us*, and *our* when talking about the group and its work. When members say *you*, they are usually addressing the whole group.

Use Appropriate Grammar

Do you ever say to yourself, "Because I don't know if I should use *who* or *whom*, I won't even ask the question?" Probably not. If you're like most people, when you're talking, 98 percent of the time your grammar is fine and is not an issue. As for the 2 percent of time your grammar is a problem, many of your listeners won't even notice your mistakes.[25]

Your ability to use grammar correctly makes a public statement about your education, your social class, and even your intelligence. Think about the television

shows and films you've seen. What do many scriptwriters do when they put words in the mouth of a dumb character? They break grammatical rules. "Him and I was out partying." "I don't know nothin'." "She know better."

Grammar is important. However, worrying about it all the time may make it impossible for you to write or speak. If you have questions about grammar, consult a good writing handbook.[26] Although most listeners will miss or forgive a few grammatical errors, consistent grammatical problems can distract listeners and seriously harm your credibility.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Nonverbal communication refers to the behavioral elements of messages other than the actual words spoken. Your appearance, posture, and facial expressions also send messages. Research has suggested that between 60 and 70 percent of all meaning is derived from nonverbal behavior.[27] That is, people base their understanding of what you mean not only on what you say, but also on what you do.

In their anthology of group communication research, Robert Cathcart and colleagues note that "groups provide a rich source of nonverbal messages because so many behaviors occur simultaneously."[28] Using and interpreting nonverbal behavior are critical to effective communication in groups. Unfortunately, we often put more thought into choosing the best words than into selecting the most appropriate behavior for conveying our ideas.

TOOLBOX 5.2

Silence Speaks Volumes

The well-known phrase "silence is golden" may be based on a Swiss saying "Sprechen ist silbern, Schweigen ist golden," which means "speech is silver; silence is golden." This metaphor contrasts the value of speech and that of silence. Speech is important, but silence may be even more significant. The power of silence is recognized and embraced in many cultures:

- Those who know do not speak. Those who speak do not know. (*Tao Te Ching*)
- Silence is also speech. (African proverb)
- Silence is a friend who will not betray. (Confucius)

- A loud voice shows an empty head. (Finnish proverb)
- The cat that does not meow catches rats. (Japanese proverb)

Understanding the communicative value of silence is important for several reasons. We use silence to communicate many things: to establish interpersonal distance, to put our thoughts together, to show respect for another person, or to modify others' behaviors.[1]

[1] Virginia P. Richmond and James C. McCroskey, *Nonverbal Behavior in Interpersonal Relationships*, 5th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2004), p. 103.

NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR

Group members send messages through their personal appearance as well as through their facial, vocal, and physical expression. When all of these nonverbal elements are combined, they add enormous complexity and subtlety to group interaction.

Personal Appearance

When group members meet for the first time, they know very little about one another beyond what they see. Physical appearance is influential in forming first impressions. Based on physical appearance, we draw conclusions about someone's education, level of success, moral character, social position, and trustworthiness.[29] For better or worse, attractive people tend to be perceived as friendlier and more credible than those who are considered less attractive. Older people may be viewed as more knowledgeable and experienced than younger people. Men may seem more assertive than women. One study found that good-looking people tend to make more money and get promoted more often than those with average looks.[30]

Even the clothes you wear send messages to other group members. Peter Andersen maintains that "effective small group members should view clothes and hair styles as an important silent statement made to the group. Dress that is appropriate is perhaps most important."[31] Thus, casual attire is more acceptable in informal groups, whereas a professional appearance is expected in business settings and important group presentations. Your appearance should communicate that you respect the group and take its work seriously.

How does the nonverbal environment promote or inhibit group interaction?
(© Bob Daemmrich/Stock, Boston)

Facial Expression

Your face is composed of a complex set of muscles and can produce over a thousand different expressions.[32] Facial expressions allow listeners to continuously contribute to an ongoing group discussion.[33] The facial expressions of group members let you know if they are interested in, agree with, or understand what you have said. Generally, women tend to be more facially expressive, while men are more likely to limit the amount of emotion

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TOOLBOX 5.3

Tattoos and Body Piercing Can Damage Credibility

In many cultures—both past and present—people have pierced and tattooed their bodies. These markings often commemorate a rite of passage, such as puberty, marriage, or a successful hunt. However, in most Western cultures, tattoos have been associated with people of lower social status and members of groups such as gangs, "bikers," and lower-ranked military.

Today, pierced ears on women—and a few men—are fairly common. In the past, piercing the nose, tongue, eyebrow, lip, navel, and other body parts was virtually unheard of in mainstream society. However, that too has changed. Tattooing and body piercing have become a popular trend, especially among adolescents and younger adults. Yet, professional men and women in corporate settings rarely display tattoos.

Tattoos and body piercing create an impression that may not serve you well or be what

you intend. In one survey, 42 percent of people polled said that they have negative perceptions of employees who display tattoos or body piercing. More than 50 percent of employees with tattoos or body piercing conceal it on the job.[1] Public perception may change as a younger generation of tattooed and pierced college graduates rises to leadership positions in companies and communities. In the meantime, recognize that a tattoo or body piercing can distract from and misrepresent the impression that you want to create. As many young job seekers have learned, you may have to conceal tattoos and remove body piercings for job interviews and in many professional settings.[2]

[1] "Tattoos, Body Art and Piercing" (February 2003). Available from FindArticles, Inc., San Francisco, CA. Copyright National Recreation and Park Association and Gale Group.
[2] Mark Hickson, III, Don W. Stacks, and Nina-Jo Moore, *Nonverbal Communication: Studies and Applications*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing, 2004), p. 187.

they reveal. Good listening requires that you look at a speaker's facial expressions in order to comprehend the full message.

Of all your facial features, your eyes are the most revealing. Generally, North Americans perceive eye contact as an indicator of attitude. Lack of eye contact is frequently perceived as signifying rudeness, indifference, nervousness, or dishonesty. However, perceptions of eye contact are culturally based. According to Guo-Ming Chen and William Starosta, "direct eye contact is a taboo or an insult in many Asian cultures. Cambodians consider direct eye contact as an invasion of one's privacy."[34]

Eye contact influences interaction in groups. A seating arrangement that allows group members to face one another and establish eye contact helps to maintain interaction. Eye contact also tells others when you want to speak. Returning eye contact to a group leader indicates that you are ready to respond, whereas avoiding eye contact is perceived as an attempt to avoid interaction.

Vocal Expression

Vocal expression is the way you say a word rather than the word itself. Some of the most important vocal characteristics are pitch, volume, rate, and word stress. Variations in these elements can result in different messages. For example, a group

GROUPTECH

Nonverbal Emoticons

When groups meet face to face, members can listen to how words are said and observe nonverbal behavior. However, most virtual groups rely on technologies that don't allow the members to hear or see one another. Participants can't see the facial expressions, head nods, gestures, or posture of other group members. As a result, early users of computer-mediated communication developed emoticons to function in place of nonverbal cues. An **emoticon** is the use of ordinary typographical characters to convey a nonverbal expression. For example, ☺, :-), ;-), :-(, and <g> are commonly used emoticons that convey smiles, winks, frowns, or grins.

In theory, emoticons serve as substitutes for nonverbal behavior. However, research suggests that emoticons have become less and less useful as nonverbal cues. Joseph Walther and K. P. D'Addario found that emoticons have little or no effect on the interpretation of a typed message.[1] Thus, virtual group members are more likely to rely on your words than on your emoticons when interpreting the intention of your message.

Walther and D'Addario also suggest that "the emoticon is now over-used, and the impact that it is supposed to have diminished, either culturally/historically, or as an individual user is first entertained, and later bored, with the cuteness of them all."[2] In their book *Rules of the Net,* Thomas Mandel and Gerard Van der Leun offer the following suggestion: "Nothing—especially the symbols on the top row of your keyboard—can substitute for a clear idea simply expressed. Avoid :-) and all associated emoticons as you would avoid clichés, e.g., like the plague."[3]

Generally, we advise you to avoid emoticons. However, if using emoticons is a norm within your group, ☺ away.

[1] Joseph B. Walther and K. P. D'Addario, "*The Impacts of Emoticons on Message Interpretation in Computer-Mediated Communication.*" Paper presented at the meeting of the International Communication Association, Washington, D.C., May 2001.
[2] Walther and D'Addario, p. 13.
[3] Thomas Mandel and Gerard Van der Leun, *Rules of the Net: Online Operating Instructions for Human Beings* (New York: Hyperion, 1996), p. 92.

may find it difficult or unpleasant to listen to a member with a very high-pitched or a monotone voice. A loud voice can convey anger, excitement, or dominance. Group members speaking quietly may signal that the information is confidential. Your volume should be adjusted to the group setting and type of activity. A group may be bored by or stop listening to a member who speaks too slowly. A speaking rate that is too fast makes it difficult to understand the message.

When pitch, volume, and rate are combined, they can be used to vary the stress you give to a word or phrase. **Word stress** refers to the "degree of prominence given to a syllable within a word or a word within a phrase or sentence."[35] Notice the differences in meaning as you stress the italicized words in the following three sentences: Is *that* the report you want me to read? Is that the report you want *me* to read? Is that the report you want me to *read*? Although the same words are used in all three sentences, the meaning of each question is quite different.

Physical Expression

The study of body movement and physical expression is referred to as **kinesics.** Gestures are one of the most animated forms of kinesics. They can emphasize or stress parts of a message, reveal discomfort with the group situation, or convey a message without the use of words. For example, Jeff points to his watch to let the chairperson know that time is running short. At the end of a discussion, a thumbs-up gesture from several group members signals that everyone is satisfied with the group's progress. Many people have difficulty expressing their thoughts without using gestures. Why else would we gesture when we are speaking to someone on the phone? Research suggests that gesturing helps ease the mental effort when communication is difficult.[36]

Even your posture can convey moods and emotions. For example, slouching back in your chair may be perceived as lack of interest or dislike for the group. On the other hand, sitting upright and leaning forward communicates interest and is a sign of attentive listening.

One of the most potent forms of physical expression is touch. Touch can convey a wide range of meanings. In groups, touch is typically used to express encouragement, support, or happiness. Peter Andersen points out that "touch in a small group may establish greater teamwork, solidarity, or sharing."[37] Some group members, however, are more comfortable with touch than others. At one end of a continuum are touch avoiders; at the other end are touch approachers. Misunderstandings can occur between these two kinds of people. Approachers may view avoiders as cold and unfriendly. However, avoiders may perceive approachers as invasive and rude. It is important to remember that gender and culture influence touch avoidance. Women are more likely to avoid opposite-sex touch, whereas men often avoid same-sex touch. In particular, Far Eastern women exhibit more touch avoidance than individuals from other cultures.[38]

THE NONVERBAL ENVIRONMENT

Nonverbal communication extends beyond the behavior of group members; it also includes the group's environment. Two important aspects of a group's nonverbal environment are the arrangement of space and perceptions of personal space.

Arrangement of Space

The way members are seated in relation to one another significantly affects group interaction. Arrangements that physically separate group members make group interaction difficult. For example, the traditional classroom arrangement of rows facing the teacher promotes interaction between the students and the teacher, but it does not encourage communication among the students. Arrangements that bring people closer together and permit direct eye contact among all members promote

group interaction. Group members arranged in a circle or around a table can more easily interact with one another.

Your choice of seating position in groups has a direct effect on interaction and influence.[39] A number of studies have demonstrated that group members prefer corner-to-corner or side-by-side seating for cooperative activities. Such an arrangement allows them to be close enough to share materials. Members who anticipate competition or disagreement often choose seats across from each other.

Leadership and group dominance often can be determined by seating positions. Group leaders are more likely to choose or be assigned a seat at the head of a table. Task-oriented leaders are attracted to the head of a table, while the middle position at the side of a table attracts more socially oriented leaders—members who are more concerned about group relationships and encouraging everyone to participate.[40] These two locations place the leader in a position to see and be seen by everyone in the group. Choosing one of these centrally located positions also makes it easier for a member to gain speaking opportunities.

Even the arrangement of a room or the shape of a conference table sends a message to group members. A long, rectangular table gives a group's leader a special place of prominence at its head. A round table allows all members to sit in equally important positions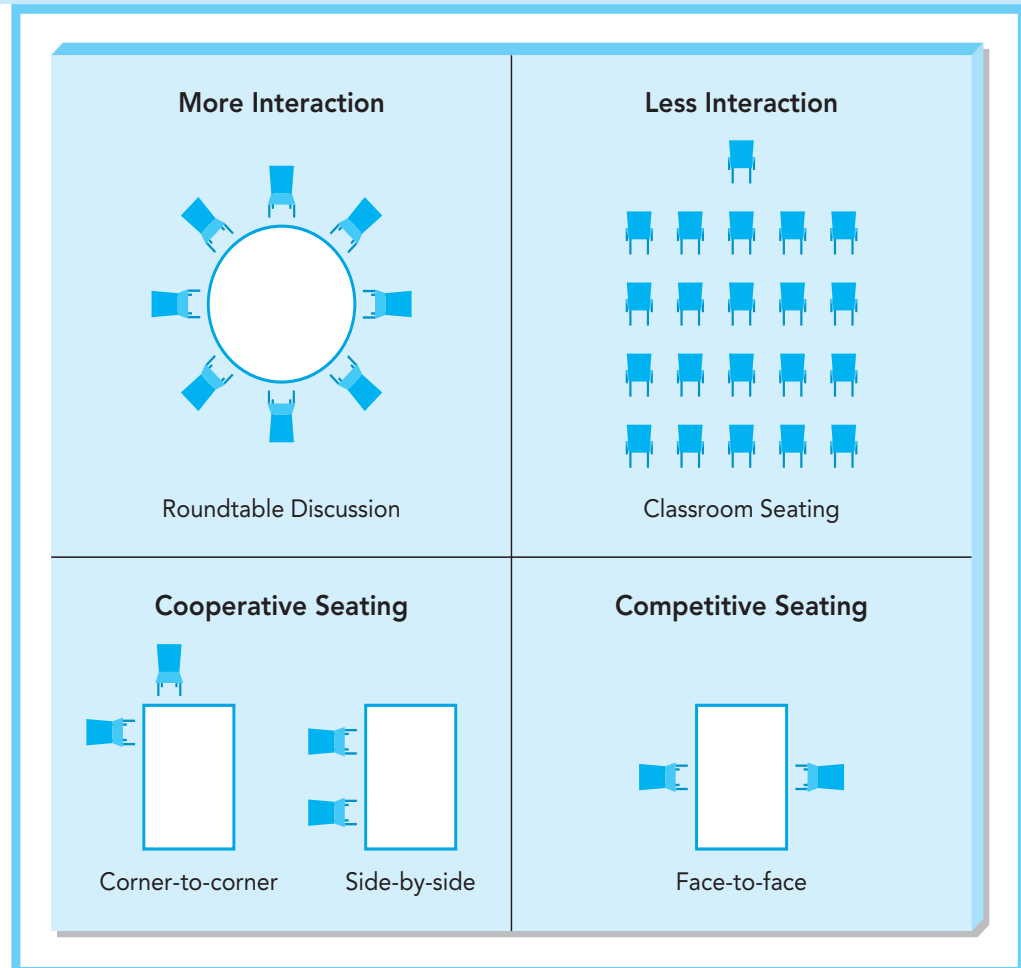. The Paris peace talks that helped end the war in Vietnam were bogged down for eight months until delegates from South Vietnam, the National Liberation Front, and the United States agreed to a round table as the setting for negotiation. When the leaders of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia met at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio, the United States made sure that each party had equal seating space around a modest but perfectly round table. The arrangement of space is not a trivial matter when the success of a group is so consequential.

In addition to seating arrangement, the décor of a room can have a direct influence on a group and its work. A New England advertising agency learned this lesson the hard way when a fistfight broke out during a focus group session.[41] Facilitators reported that regardless of the topic being

How does the group's seating arrangement affect the group's interaction?
(© Masterfile)

| FIGURE 5.3 | **Seating Arrangements** |

More Interaction

Roundtable Discussion

Less Interaction

Classroom Seating

Cooperative Seating

Corner-to-corner   Side-by-side

Competitive Seating

Face-to-face

discussed, no one ever seemed happy in the room. Participants were grumpy, negative, and resistant to new ideas. The company discovered that the problem was the room itself: It was cramped, stifling, and forbidding—a cross between a hospital room and a police interrogation room. The solution: a total redesign and redecoration. The room was expanded and given long, gently curved walls. Soft, indirect light filtered in through curved windows. Participants were given seating choices of armchairs or small couches surrounding circular coffee tables. The results were better than expected. There were no more fistfights. Instead, focus group participants became much more cooperative and positive.

Perceptions of Personal Space

Groups and their members may function quite differently depending on how they perceive the space and people around them. The study of how we perceive and use personal space is referred to as **proxemics.** Within groups, two important proxemic variables are territoriality and interpersonal space.

Territoriality. **Territoriality** is the sense of personal ownership that is attached to a particular space. For instance, in most classrooms, students sit in the same

place every day. If you have ever walked into a classroom and found another person in *your* seat, you may have felt that your territory had been violated. Ownership of space is often designated by objects acting as markers of territory. Placing a coat or books on a chair lets others know that that space is taken. As a group develops, members often establish their individual territory. They may sit in the same place near the same people during every meeting. Individuals who fail to respect the territory of others are violating an important group norm.
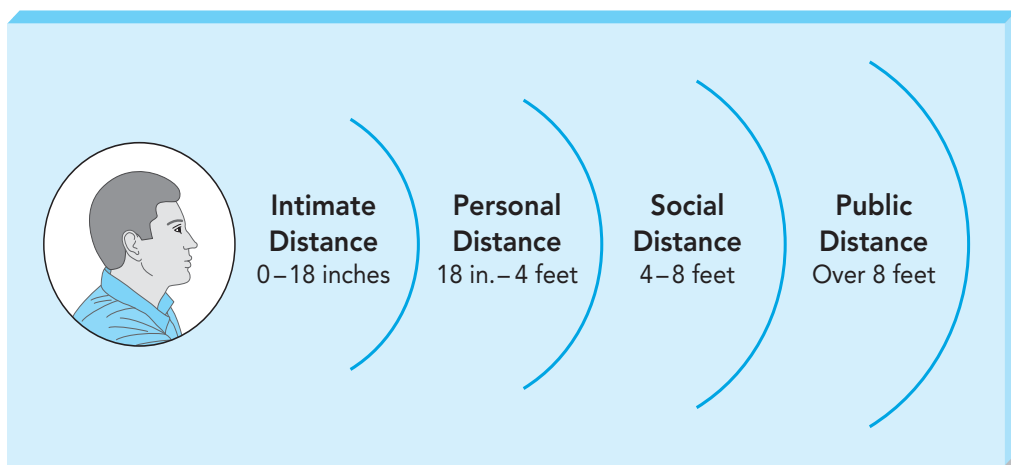
Interpersonal Space. **Interpersonal space** can be thought of as an invisible, psychological "bubble" surrounding each person that expands or shrinks depending on the communicators and the context. Anthropologist Edward T. Hall identifies four zones of interaction used by most North Americans.[42]

- Intimate distance: touching to eighteen inches
- Personal distance: eighteen inches to four feet
- Social distance: four to eight feet
- Public distance: eight or more feet

Intimate distance ranges from touching to approximately eighteen inches apart. Close friends, some family members, and lovers are normally permitted to come this close. Peter Andersen notes that "at such close distances group members will feel inhibited from interacting and will make an attempt to restore their personal space bubble by moving back even if that means leaving the group."[43]

Personal distance ranges from about eighteen inches to four feet apart. The typical distance is an arm's length away. This zone is used for conversations with friends and acquaintances. Members of most well-established groups interact with one another at this distance. They feel close enough to engage in discussion but far enough away to be comfortable.

FIGURE 5.4   **Zones of Personal Space**

| Intimate Distance 0–18 inches | Personal Distance 18 in.–4 feet | Social Distance 4–8 feet | Public Distance Over 8 feet |

Social distance encompasses a range of four to eight feet apart. We usually interact with new acquaintances and strangers in this zone. Groups in which members use the outer limits of this zone will find it difficult to maintain interaction.

Public distance extends beyond eight feet. Lectures and speeches are usually presented using this distance. Groups are unlikely to use this zone unless they are making a presentation to a larger audience.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

When we interact with group members from different cultural backgrounds, interpreting their nonverbal behavior may be as difficult as translating an unfamiliar foreign language. The multiple meanings of nonverbal communication in other cultures can be illustrated by focusing on two elements: personal space and eye contact. Research on personal space indicates that most Latin Americans, Arabs, and Greeks require less distance between people than North Americans do. Cultural differences also are evident when measuring the amount and directness of eye contact. If, for example, a white supervisor reprimands a young black male, the employee may respond by looking downward rather than looking at the supervisor. In some cases, the employee's response may anger the supervisor and be interpreted as inattention or defiance. Intercultural researchers report that "members of certain segments of black culture reportedly cast their eyes downward as a sign of respect; in white cultures, however, members expect direct eye contact as a sign of listening and showing respect for authority."[44]

There is a danger, however, of stereotyping people from different backgrounds and cultures on the basis of their nonverbal behavior. Latino, Arab, and Greek group members may not be comfortable with less personal space than a North American. Young black males may look directly at a white supervisor with respect. When interpreting nonverbal behavior, try to understand, respect, and adapt to individual differences rather than assuming that all people from a particular culture behave alike.
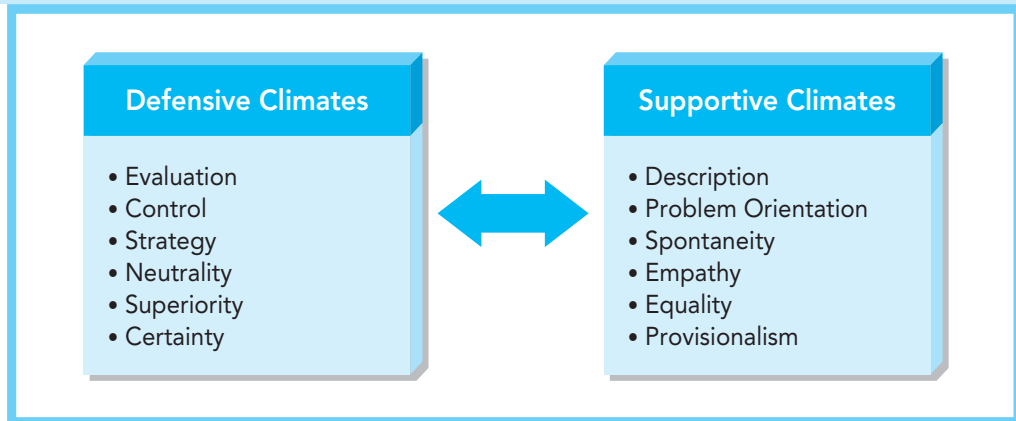
If you are unsure about the appropriate way to respond nonverbally, ask. Too often, we find out about the nonverbal rules of another culture only after we have broken them.

CREATING A SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION CLIMATE

Our use of and reaction to language and nonverbal communication establishes a unique group atmosphere or climate. Specifically, a group's **climate** is the degree to which the group's members feel comfortable interacting. In some groups, the climate is warm and supportive. Members like and trust one another as they work

FIGURE 5.5   **Group Communication Climates**

Defensive Climates	**Supportive Climates**
• Evaluation	• Description
• Control	• Problem Orientation
• Strategy	• Spontaneity
• Neutrality	• Empathy
• Superiority	• Equality
• Certainty	• Provisionalism

toward a common goal. In chillier group climates, defensiveness and tension pollute the atmosphere. Members may feel threatened by and suspicious of one another.

Jack Gibb has described six pairs of communication behavior that influence whether a group's climate is defensive or supportive.[45] When the group climate is defensive, members devote attention to defending themselves and defeating perceived opponents. Synergy occurs only when a group functions in a supportive climate.

Chapter 1, "Introduction to Group Communication," introduces the notion of dialectic tensions and the need to balance those tensions in effective groups. Gibb's dimensions constitute dialectic tensions that characterize a group's communication climate. Similarly, groups must effectively balance defensive and supportive behaviors. For instance, successful groups must balance the need to evaluate the group's work with the use of supportive behavior. The need to approach problems strategically must be balanced with the need for spontaneous communication. And, successful groups recognize when neutral behavior is needed and when expressions of empathy are more appropriate.

Evaluation and Description

Which of the following statements would you prefer to hear from a member of your group: "That's the dumbest idea you've ever come up with" or "I'd like to think we could do that, but I have some concerns"? The first statement evaluates the person and the idea, whereas the second begins a description of the speaker's reservations. Statements and behavior that evaluate or judge others elicit defensiveness. Nonverbal behavior such as laughter or groans can be as evaluative as the sharpest verbal criticism. Description includes neutral requests for information and statements that do not attack other people's opinions or actions. Although groups cannot and should not completely eliminate evaluative communication, highly judgmental remarks aimed at particular individuals should be avoided.

One of the best ways to move from evaluation to description is to substitute specific "I" statements for critical "you" statements. Beginning a statement with,

"You disappoint me when . . ." can promote defensiveness. "You" implies blame. "I" clarifies what you think and feel, while "you" can make a person feel criticized. "I am disappointed that the report isn't complete" acknowledges that you are responsible for your own thoughts and feelings while describing the situation that you find troublesome.

Control and Problem Orientation

Problem orientation implies that members are highly committed to the group and its goal. Control implies that some members are more interested in gaining power and achieving their own personal goals. For example, the overly aggressive salesperson or telephone solicitor is trying to separate you from your money rather than understanding and finding the solution that best meets your needs. If you think that someone is trying to manipulate or control you, you are likely to resist. Approaching communication from the perspective of problem orientation results in a message that indicates that you are not trying to control or impose a predetermined solution upon the group.

Strategy and Spontaneity

Strategic communication suggests that hidden agendas are operating within the group. Members suspect that their ideas are not being listened to fairly. Spontaneous communication implies the use of honest and open responses. How would you feel if, after what appears to be a sincere and spontaneous discussion, someone in your group says, "I just happen to have a proposal that George and I put together—it's written and ready to sign off on." Suspicion and defensiveness would be a natural reaction to such a strategic move by two group members.

Neutrality and Empathy

Neutral behaviors are impersonal and fail to express concern for another person's emotional needs. Empathic communication conveys an understanding of members' feelings. When your words and nonverbal behavior communicate a lack of concern or understanding, resentment and defensiveness can result. If you are explaining why you have not met a deadline and other group members sit stone-faced, they may be telling you that your personal problems are of no interest to them. If group members nod their heads and look concerned when you describe the difficulties you have encountered, their understanding and sympathy have created a much more supportive group climate.

Superiority and Equality

A meeting may be the worst place to show off and brag about your accomplishments and status. If your communication style and comments suggest that you are better than other members, your suggestions may be met with hostility and

defensiveness. Arranging a meeting room so that some members have more prominent seats or better chairs than other members suggests that not all members are created equal. Conveying a willingness to cooperate with group members implies an attitude of equality. When all members are viewed equally, then loyalty, respect, and effort can be expected from everyone.

Certainty and Provisionalism

Members who insist that they are always right and focus on winning arguments produce a climate of certainty. As a result, other group members are inclined to make greater efforts to defend their own ideas. An attitude of provisionalism suggests a willingness to modify one's own attitudes and behaviors as a result of group feedback. If you are certain, you are less likely to listen to other members and less likely to alter your opinion. If you can be flexible and focus on achieving the group's goal, there is a greater likelihood that the group's performance and outcome will be successful.

BALANCING LANGUAGE AND NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR

There is an inseparable connection between language and nonverbal communication. When verbal and nonverbal behavior reinforce and complement each other, communication is enhanced. When verbal and nonverbal messages contradict each other, the group can become confused and defensive. If members put too much emphasis on the meanings of words, bypassing is more likely to occur.

In a supportive group climate, members are more likely to feel comfortable and confident. By avoiding statements and actions that are highly evaluative, controlling, strategic, neutral, superior, and certain, a group is more likely to succeed in working together toward the achievement of a shared goal.

Groups must achieve a balance of language and nonverbal behavior in order to maximize the effectiveness of both forms of communication. Although language and nonverbal behavior are powerful tools, they will be only as effective as the member who uses them.

GROUPWORK

Context, Context, Context

Goal: To demonstrate the extent to which the meanings of words and nonverbal behavior are dependent on social climate and group circumstances

Participants: Groups of at least three members

Procedure

1. Each group should create a situation in which the following sentence is uttered: "I don't think that's right." The group must

   - Decide what sentence came before and after "I don't think that's right."
   - Decide upon the physical setting and situation confronting the group in which a member would say, "I don't think that's right."

   Each group should then create and stage a "scene" in which at least two group members "act" the parts in an incident where "I don't think that's right" is part of the "script." The group may introduce the scene to the class by describing the "roles" and "setting" before the scene begins.

2. After all the groups have "performed" their scene, the class should discuss the following questions:

   - How did the context or situation change the meaning of "I don't think that's right"?
   - How did the nonverbal behavior and setting differ in each scene?
   - How could each group's "I don't think that's right" be paraphrased into a different sentence?
   - Which component communicated the most information about the meaning of the scene—the words, the nonverbal behavior, or the situation?

GROUPASSESSMENT

Auditing Team Talk

Directions: Circle the term that best describes the extent to which the members of your group engage in productive team talk.

When your group communicates . . .

1. Do members use plural pronouns rather than singular ones?	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely
2. Do members use language that acknowledges shared needs?	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely
3. Do members solicit opinions and express the need for cooperation?	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely
4. Do members talk to one another on equal terms?	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely
5. Do members use casual language, nicknames, slang?	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely

6. Do members express empathy and liking?	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely
7. Do members express interest in solving problems?	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely
8. Do members use a nonthreatening tone and nonjudgmental language?	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely
9. Do members paraphrase one another?	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely
10. Do members ask "what if" questions?	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely
11. Do members propose objective criteria for solutions?	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely
12. Do members summarize areas of agreement?	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely

Scoring: Analyze your group's team talk by looking at the number of times you circled *Very often, Sometimes,* and *Rarely.* The more times you circled *Very often,* the more likely it is that your group engages in productive team talk. The more times you circled *Rarely,* the more likely it is that team talk inhibits the progress and success of your group. To get a more accurate assessment of team talk for your entire group, everyone should complete the questionnaire and share their responses. Is there a consistent response to each question? If there are significant disagreements on several questions, the members of your group may benefit from a discussion about the nature of their team talk.

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