9 Nonverbal Communication

Getting dressed for work used to be a snap for executive Ron Demczak. Then his company went casual—every day. With 30 suits and little else in his closet, Demczak spent several thousand dollars buying a new, sporty wardrobe. He learned to call ahead to clients to make sure he didn’t wear corduroys when they were wearing suits. And he dreaded the mornings.

“I hated it because every morning I had to have my wife match new outfits to wear,” said Demczak. He is the liaison for U.S. customers of drugmaker Warner-Lambert. “Now,” he adds, “I’m getting a little better at it.”1

He’s not alone. Robert Park is a manager at Ernst & Young, LLP in northern California. For his firm, the switch to full-time casual dress was spurred by a desire to blend in. In that region, the accounting firm’s clients were mostly from Silicon Valley, where software engineers and other young techies practically invented casual office wear. “We used to stick out like sore thumbs, being the only ones in suits and ties,” he said. “Everybody knew we had to be the accountants or the bankers.”

Still, Park keeps a traditional wardrobe for use when meeting outsiders who expect suits and ties. Some managers even stow suits in their cars so they won’t be uncomfortably surprised. “That’s when it gets complicated,” said Wendy Liebmann, President of WSL Strategic Retail consultants. “Do I go by my code or theirs?”2 Managers who are accustomed to wearing more formal business attire may be comforted by recent studies that indicate suits and ties are making a comeback.3 Still, many of them struggle each day with the uncertainty of knowing exactly what to expect.

Why would managers feel uncomfortable in casual clothes? What’s so complicated or difficult about being dressed differently from others you’re doing business with? The answers to these and thousands of other questions about how humans interact with one another are related directly to how we communicate. For Ms. Liebmann, Mr. Park, and everyone else in the workplace, the questions they are asking have little to do with language and a great deal to do with nonverbal communication.

If I look you directly in the eyes while we’re speaking, is that a sign of respect or defiance? If you stare at a new employee while she’s eating lunch, is that a sign of affection or harassment? When you speak with a friend, how far apart should you stand? How close should you be when the boss asks you a question? If the boss reaches out to pat you on the shoulder, would it be acceptable for you to reciprocate?

Some workplaces, like the commodities exchange, encourage people to speak up and raise their voices. Others demand quiet. Some offices provide private space with doors that close, while others simply push desks together in huge, open rooms. In many instances, understanding what coworkers mean when they speak depends on your ability to understand whether they’re being serious, sarcastic, or humorous.

How can so much information be conveyed without using language? And, perhaps more importantly, how can one person possibly understand all the rules? What means one thing here may very well mean something else there, and what’s seen as harmless in one company may be strictly forbidden in another. Clearly, understanding nonverbal communication is not simply useful for a manager. It’s essential.

A FEW BASIC CONSIDERATIONS

Communication experts have established the fact that less than a third of the meaning transferred from one person to another in a personal conversation comes from the words that are spoken. The majority of meaning comes from nonverbal sources, including body movement; eye contact; gestures; posture; and vocal tone, pitch, pacing, and phrasing. Other messages come from our clothing, our use of time, and literally dozens of other nonverbal categories. Learning how to read and understand such wordless messages isn’t easy, but may be essential to understanding everyone from your customers to your supervisor to your spouse.

Nonverbal communication is widely regarded as the transfer of meaning without the use of verbal symbols. That is, nonverbal refers in a literal sense to those actions, objects, and contexts that either communicate directly or facilitate communication without using words.4 As communication professionals and casual observers alike will testify, though, separating the effects of verbal and nonverbal behavior is never easy, largely because they tend to reinforce each other, contradict each other, or are in some way about each other.

It’s also important to note that, with the exception of emotional displays and certain facial expressions, virtually all nonverbal communication is culturally based. That is, we learn to behave and communicate in certain ways, and to interpret the meanings of those behaviors, as we grow up in our culture. Being enculturated, as we will see in the next chapter, means acquiring values, beliefs, possessions, behaviors, and ways of thinking that are acceptable to others and, in fact, expected of us as members of our society. So what may be strictly forbidden in one culture—exposing an adult woman’s face to strangers in public—may be perfectly normal in another. As members of a global community, we must not only learn and abide by the rules of the society we grew up in but also come to understand and appreciate the rules of other societies.

NONVERBAL CATEGORIES

In a series of early studies of nonverbal communication,5 communication researchers outlined three basic categories of nonverbal language.

SIGN LANGUAGE

Gestures as simple as the extended thumb of the hitchhiker or as complex as the complete system of sign language for the deaf are all part of sign language.

ACTION LANGUAGE

Movements that are not used exclusively for communicating are part of action language. Walking, for example, serves the functional purpose of moving us from one place to another, but it can also communicate, as when we decide to get up and walk out of a meeting.

OBJECT LANGUAGE

All objects, materials, artifacts, and things—ranging from jewelry, clothing, and makeup to automobiles, furniture, and artwork—that we use in our daily lives are considered object language. Such things, including our own bodies, can communicate, whether we intend them to or not.

THE NONVERBAL PROCESS

Nonverbal communication is really a three-step process involving a cue, our own expectations, and an inference.

CUE

We look first for a wordless cue—a motion, perhaps, or an object. On arriving at work, you notice a coworker who is glum, sullen, and withdrawn. You say “Good morning,” but he doesn’t reply.

EXPECTATION

We then match the cue against our expectations, asking what seems reasonable or what seems obvious, based on our prior experiences. If your coworker is normally cheerful, talkative, and outgoing, your expectations are at odds with the cue you’ve just perceived.

INFERENCE

Having picked up the cue and measured its importance and meaning against our expectations, we infer meaning. Because we can’t see an attitude or intention directly, we must draw an inference based on the nonverbal cue and our own expectations. Given the cue and our expectations of this particular coworker, we conclude that he’s unhappy, upset, or depressed for some reason. Note that this conclusion is based on observation alone and not an exchange of verbal information between two people. If we are careful and observant, we can learn a great deal without the use of language. We should be careful, though, because our confidence often exceeds our ability when it comes to accurately interpreting nonverbal cues.

READING AND MISREADING NONVERBAL CUES

“The great majority of us are easily misled,” says Dr. Paul Ekman, a psychologist at the University of California at San Francisco. “It’s very difficult, and most people just don’t know what cues to rely on.” To be sure, research shows that people can usually read someone else’s feelings from the facial expression. “Most of us are fairly accurate in the rough judgments we make based on nonverbal cues,” says Dr. Miles Patterson, editor of the Journal of Nonverbal Behavior and a psychologist at the University of Missouri at St. Louis.6

The new research, however, is pointing to areas where people’s confidence in reading nonverbal cues outstrips their accuracy. Recently, Dr. Robert Gifford reported finding specific nonverbal clues to such traits as aloofness, gregariousness, and submissiveness. His report, which appeared in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, also found that even though reliable clues about character are present, “people read much into nonverbal cues that just isn’t there, while missing much that is,” says Dr. Gifford.7

People are right about their reading of character some of the time, especially for more obvious traits like gregariousness; the problem, according to Dr. Gifford, is that they are overly confident and assume that they are equally adept at reading more subtle aspects of character when they are actually misjudging. For example, in a recent study of people applying for a job, Dr. Gifford had videotapes of the applicants evaluated by 18 seasoned interviewers, most of them personnel officers.

Before going for their interviews, each applicant had taken tests that gauged their degree of social skills and how highly motivated for work they were. The test for motivation, for instance, asked such questions as how willing they would be to work unusual hours if it were necessary. The interviewers were far more accurate about the applicants’ self-evident social skills than about their motivation, a more subtle trait important in employment decisions.

The nonverbal cues that made the interviewers decide whether an applicant had high motivation included smiling, gesturing, and talking more than other applicants. In fact, though, none of those nonverbal patterns was a true indicator of motivation. The practical result of such mistakes is that many people are hired on a misreading of their personality traits, only to disappoint their employers. “Social skills are far more visible than motivation, but coming across well in your job interview is no guarantee of other traits that might matter in your day-to-day job performance,” Dr. Gilford said. “People are being hired for some of the wrong reasons.” A clever applicant might make a point of smiling, gesturing, and talking a lot during a job interview, but a savvy interviewer would be cautious about reading too much into that show of outgoingness.8

FUNCTIONS OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Nonverbal communication can serve any number of important functions in our lives, but researchers identify the following six major functions.

ACCENTING

Nonverbal communication often highlights or emphasizes some part of a verbal message. A raised eyebrow might accompany an expression of surprise; a wagging finger might underscore an expression of disapproval.

COMPLEMENTING

Nonverbal communication also reinforces the general tone or attitude of our verbal communication. A downcast expression and slumping posture might accompany words of discouragement or depression; upright posture, a smile, and animated movement might reinforce a verbal story about winning a recent promotion.

CONTRADICTING

Nonverbal communication, on the other hand, can contradict the verbal messages we send, sometimes deliberately, sometimes unintentionally. Tears in our eyes and a quiver in our voices might involuntarily contradict a verbal message telling friends and family that we’re doing all right. A wink and a nod might deliberately send the nonverbal message that what we’re saying just isn’t so. The fact is, when verbal and nonverbal messages contradict, we tend—for a number of reasons—to believe the nonverbal. In the last analysis, it’s simply much easier to lie than it is to control a range of nonverbal reactions: our facial expression, pupil dilation, tension in our vocal cords, pulse rate, sweating, muscle tone, and many others. Control of such things is, for most of us, well beyond our voluntary reach.

REGULATING

Certain nonverbal movements and gestures are used to regulate the flow, the pace, and the back-and-forth nature of verbal communication. When I want you to speak to me, I’ll face you, open my eyes, open my arms with hands extended and palms facing upward, and look expectantly into your eyes. When I want you to stop speaking so I can either talk or think of what I’m about to say, I will turn slightly away from you, fold my arms, put one hand out with palm facing forward, and either close my eyes or turn them away from yours.

REPEATING

Nonverbal messages can also repeat what verbal messages convey. With car keys in hand, coat and hat on, I can announce: “I’m leaving now,” as I walk toward the door. You might hold up three fingers as you ask: “Is that the best you can do? I’ve gotta buy three of them.”

SUBSTITUTING

Nonverbal communication can also substitute for, or take the place of, verbal messages, particularly if they’re simple or monosyllabic. As a youngster looks toward a parent on the sidelines during an athletic contest, a quick “thumbs up” can substitute for words of praise or encouragement that might not be heard from a distance or in a noisy crowd.9

PRINCIPLES OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

After 50 years of research and 5,000 years of human experience with nonverbal communication, we have identified six principles that are thought to be universally true.

1. Nonverbal communication occurs in a context. Just as context is important to the meaning of verbal messages, so is context important to our understanding of nonverbal messages. Folded arms and laid-back posture may mean disinterest or boredom on one occasion, but may signify introspective thought on another. Professor Joseph DeVito of Hunter College says, in fact, that “Divorced from the context, it is impossible to tell what any given bit of nonverbal behavior may mean.. . . In attempting to understand and analyze nonverbal communication . . . it is essential that full recognition be taken of the context.”10

2. Nonverbal behaviors are usually packaged. Nonverbal behavior, according to most researchers, occurs in packages or clusters in which the various verbal and nonverbal messages occur more or less simultaneously. Body posture, eye contact, arm and leg movement, facial expression, vocal tone, pacing and phrasing of vocal expressions, muscle tone, and numerous other elements of nonverbal communication happen at once. It’s difficult to isolate one element of the cluster from another without taking all of them into account.

3. Nonverbal behavior always communicates. All behavior communicates, and because it is literally impossible not to behave in some way, we are always communicating, even when we aren’t speaking with or listening to others. Even the least significant of your behaviors, such as your posture, the position of your mouth, or the way you’ve tucked (or failed to tuck) in your shirt say something about your professionalism to others around you. Other people may not interpret those behaviors in the same way, or in the way you might want them to, but like it or not, you’re always communicating, even if you’re just sitting there “doing nothing.” Doing nothing, in fact, may communicate volumes about your attitude.

4. Nonverbal behavior is governed by rules. The field of linguistics is devoted to studying and explaining the rules of language. And just as spoken and written language follow specific rules, so does nonverbal communication. A few forms of nonverbal behavior, such as facial expressions conveying sadness, joy, contentment, astonishment, or grief, are universal. That is, the expressions are basically the same for all mankind, regardless of where you were born, raised, educated, or enculturated. Most of our non-verbal behavior, however, is learned and is a product of the cultures in which we are raised. A motion or hand gesture that means one thing in my culture may well mean another in yours. Touching the thumb and forefinger to form a circle is often raised in North America to signify everything is “A-Okay.” In Latin America, that same gesture is used to illustrate the anal sphincter muscle and is employed as a powerful insult.

5. Nonverbal behavior is highly believable. Researchers have discovered what we have known individually for quite some time: We are quick to believe nonverbal behaviors, even when they contradict verbal messages. When an employee’s eyes dart away quickly, or search the floor as he thinks of an answer to a supervisor’s question, most of us would suspect the employee is not telling the truth. Try as we might, there are many nonverbal behaviors we cannot fake. We might convincingly write or speak words that are untrue, but it’s much more difficult to behave nonverbally in ways that are false or deceptive.

6. Nonverbal behavior is metacommunicational. The word meta is borrowed from Greek and means “along with, about, or among.” Thus metacommunication is really communication about communication. The behaviors we exhibit while communicating are really about communication itself, and nonverbal communication occurs in reference to the process of communicating. Your facial expression reveals how you feel about the meal you’ve just been served; your handshake, vocal tone, and eye contact tell us what you think about the person you’ve just been introduced to.11

DIMENSIONS OF THE NONVERBAL CODE

When we talk about nonverbal communication, we’re really talking about the codes we use to encrypt our messages and the signals that contain them. The code we use in verbal communication is language, and through thousands of years of human interaction, we’ve established rules to guide us and a structure for employing and interpreting the messages that language permits us to send and receive. With nonverbal communication, however, the code is neither as clear nor is it as precise, primarily because the meaning of our messages must be inferred without the benefit of feedback.

The code itself is divided into more than a dozen dimensions, each with the power to encode and carry messages from one person to another. Each has different characteristics: Some appeal to just one sense, while others appeal to several; some have a limited range of possible meanings, while others have a huge span of subtleties for encoding human intentions; some belong to the environment—both its physical and psychological aspects—of the communication event, while others belong to the participants in those events.

THE COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT

The communication environment refers to that collection of nonhuman factors that can, and often do, influence human transactions. People often change environments in order to accomplish their communication goals: the choice of a restaurant for a business meeting or a resort hotel to conduct a conference. Often, people will simply say, “Let’s go somewhere quiet where we can talk.” This category concerns those factors that can influence a human relationship but are not, in Professor Mark Knapp’s words, “directly a part of it,” and includes elements such as the furniture, architectural style, interior decorating, lighting conditions, colors, temperature, background noise, or music. It may be something as small as an ashtray or dish left on a table you plan to use or something as grand as the city in which you are meeting.12

BODY MOVEMENT

The study of human motion in communication, often referred to as kinesics or kinesiology, is concerned primarily with movement and posture. The way we walk, sit, stand, move our arms, hands, head, feet, and legs tells other people something about us. This dimension also includes such areas of interest as facial expression, eye contact, and posture. The five basic categories of human movement include:

1. Emblems. These nonverbal acts have a direct verbal translation or dictionary definition, sometimes a word or two or a brief phrase. The thumbs-up sign, the extended middle finger, and the hitchhiker’s thumb are three well-known examples.

2. Illustrators. These gestures often complement our verbal signals, helping to illustrate what’s being said verbally. We can count off the number of items we want on our fingers or measure distance with the space between our hands.

3. Affect displays. These behaviors indicate the type and intensity of the various emotions we feel. Facial expressions, as well as hand and arm movements, are commonly used to communicate emotional or affective states of mind.

4. Regulators. These body movements help to control the flow of communication. Hand movement, arm positioning, and eye contact can easily maintain or regulate the back-and-forth nature of personal conversation, for example.

5. Adaptors. These movements or behaviors involve personal habits and self-expressions. They are methods of adapting or accommodating ourselves to the demands of the world in which we live. We usually engage in these behaviors in private, but sometimes under pressure we will resort to twisting our hair, scratching, adjusting our glasses, or perhaps, picking our noses if we think no one’s looking.

From a workplace perspective, a trend toward incivility is fostering a backlash, especially in response to unwelcome or rude nonverbal behavior. During tense talks in Chicago courts, Southwest Airlines Chief Executive Herb Kelleher crouched and slowly flipped his middle finger toward a pilots’ union lawyer. “It was a joke,” he explained. But other companies are cracking down on crude nonverbal behavior. Cleveland-based American Greetings Corporation has banned obscene talk and gestures. And an official of Roadway Services, an Akron, Ohio, freight hauler, says truckers are told to practice restraint.13

EYE CONTACT

This human behavior is really a part of kinesics, but often deserves separate attention because of the importance it plays in human interaction. Direction, duration, and intensity of gaze are often seen as indicators of interest, attention, or involvement between two people. Keep in mind, however, that nonverbal mannerisms are culturally based, and eye contact is just one example of a human behavior that can vary from one society to another.

In Japan, for instance, looking a supervisor directly in the eyes is a sign of defiance, even insubordination. In the United States and Canada, supervisors expect direct and frequent eye contact as a sign of respect. A senior leader in a large organization once remarked, “I won’t hire a person who won’t look me in the eye.” Why would he feel that way? Largely because in this culture we draw inferences about honesty and integrity from eye contact; if people look down or look away when we’re speaking to them, we assume they are ashamed or being untruthful. Honesty and eye contact are, of course, unrelated behaviors, but people in our society make judgments about them, nonetheless.14

A COMMUNICATOR’S PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

This area is not concerned with movement, as kinesics is, but with aspects of our bodies and appearance that remain relatively unchanged during the period of interaction. Such things as body type (ectomorph, mesomorph, or endomorph), height, weight, hair, and skin color or tone are included. Some researchers also focus on physical attractiveness and people’s reaction to personal appearance. A number of studies, in fact, show that people readily attribute greater intelligence, wit, charm, and sociability to those people whom they judge to be very attractive.15

Another new study found that good looks can yield substantial rewards. Economists Daniel Hamermesh of the University of Texas and Jeff Biddle of Michigan State University found that education, experience, and other characteristics being equal, people who are perceived as good looking earn, on average, about 10 percent more than those viewed as homely.16 Being overweight can hurt your income as well, particularly if you’re a highly educated woman. A study conducted in 2004 in Finland has shown that obese women with good educations earn about 30 percent less than normal-weight or even plump women. Obesity had little or no effect on pay if women were poorly educated, manual workers, or self-employed and, surprisingly, no significant effect at all on men’s pay.17

Naomi Wolf, author of The Beauty Myth, agrees with Hamermesh and Biddle’s conclusions but argues that women often face greater discrimination when it comes to appearance. One recent study looked at earnings of MBA graduates over their first 10 post-degree years. Ratings of beauty based on school photographs correlated positively with starting and subsequent salaries for men. No relationship was evident between the starting salaries of women and their beauty, but attractive women experienced faster salary growth. Dr. Hamermesh suggests that better-looking people may have high self-esteem—from years of compliments—that translates into better performance on the job.18

Independent of such studies, conventional wisdom tells us that others make judgments about us based on our appearance, including everything from hairstyle to body weight, clothing style to skin tone. How you perform on the job may well be the most important aspect of your behavior in the workplace, but if you don’t make a favorable first impression, you may not be given the chance to show what you can do. On the other side of that coin, judging a coworker or prospective employee by appearance may seem intuitive and useful but may also prove inaccurate. Even though you can make some judgments about a book by its cover, you may wish to withhold judgment until you have an opportunity to gather more information.

ARTIFACTS

Artifacts are objects that are human-made or modified. The number and kind of things we might call artifacts is enormous, ranging from clothing, jewelry, and eyeglasses to the objects we own and decorate our offices with. Certainly the way we dress denotes how we feel about an occasion or those we’re with. Every family, for instance, has at least one cousin who will show up at a wedding wearing a corduroy sport coat. It’s not that he can’t afford dinner clothes or a tuxedo; it’s just that he’s thumbing his nose at the rest of the family.

People in the business world make judgments about those they deal with as a result of the artifacts they see in their offices and in the communication environment. A friend once asked if I would trust a stockbroker who drove a ‘97 Toyota to work each day. The implication was that a “successful” broker would have enough money to buy and drive an expensive automobile. And even though investment success and taste in motor cars are not necessarily related, the majority of adults in the marketplace make such judgment-links with great regularity.

TOUCH

Among the more widely discussed and, perhaps, least understood aspects of human behavior is touch. Numerous studies have shown that physical contact is essential to human existence. Adults need it for social and psychological balance; children need it for stimulation, security, and reassurance. Many infants, in fact, will fail to thrive if they’re not regularly offered the reassuring warmth of human touch. Needless to say, touch is conducted on many levels and for many reasons by each of us, with functional, professional, social, and sexual implications for each kind of touch. Perhaps more than any other dimension of the nonverbal code, touching is a culturally determined, learned behavior. The relationship between the two people touching and the norms of the society in which they live—or were enculturated—will determine the length, location, intensity, frequency, acceptability, and publicness of their haptic behavior.

A recent study in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology revealed that a number of important aspects of your personality can easily and accurately be detected during a handshake. Characteristics of a handshake, such as strength, vigor, completeness of grip, and accompanying eye contact can determine whether a person makes a favorable first impression. More surprisingly, evaluators could surmise a number of other key traits, such as confidence, shyness, or neuroticism. Lead researcher William Chaplin said that women should not worry about seeming too aggressive, because the firmer their handshake, the more favorably they are judged. Men, on the other hand, should have some concerns about creating bad impressions with weaker grips and lack of eye contact.19

The rules regarding touch in the North American workplace have changed in recent years from liberal to conservative—from frequent touch to little or no touch. Backslapping, arm-grabbing, and other forms of behavior that ranged from affectionate friendship to adolescent horseplay are now widely banned in most businesses, largely from a fear of lawsuits. A colleague who returned to work following a maternity leave was cheerfully welcomed by friends and coworkers in her office, but no one would touch her until she spoke up, “It’s alright to give me a hug. I would appreciate that.”

The best advice regarding touch is to assume that if people extend their hand, it’s probably alright to shake it. Touching any other parts of their bodies would be considered inappropriate unless you’re specifically given permission to do so. These developments are largely the result of abusive behavior in the workplace, mostly aimed at women. Such developments are particularly unfortunate in view of numerous recent studies presented to the Society for Neuroscience finding that touch, or direct human contact, can have a positive influence on the production of a hormone affecting the body’s reaction to stress. Subnormal levels of the hormone, in fact, have been linked to changes in a part of the brain involved with learning and memory.20 The value of human touch is undisputed. The issue for managers is one of exhibiting good sense and good manners when touching others.

PARALANGUAGE

The term paralanguage refers, very simply, to how something is said and not to what is said. It deals with the whole range of nonverbal vocal cues involved in speech behavior, including voice qualities, vocal characterizers, vocal qualifiers, and speech segregates, and sometimes referred to as vocalics.21

Often, the only real clues we have to a person’s actual intent as we listen to him or her speak are found in paralanguage. If your supervisor approaches you just before lunch one day and says, “Lisa, we need to talk about the LaSalle account,” your reaction to those words may depend on a number of factors, including the communication environment and context, as well as your expectations. But your sense of urgency—how quickly you offer to set up a meeting, whether you postpone a lunch date to talk about the account—may well depend on how those words were spoken. Your cue is often contained in your interpretation not of the words themselves but of the pacing, phrasing, tone, pitch, and intensity of your supervisor’s delivery.

Vocal qualifiers are contained in the speech of every human and are an integral part of every spoken word. They are, in fact, our principal cue to identifying and interpreting sarcasm and cynicism. When you ask a coworker in a meeting if he thinks a new cost-control measure will work and the response is, “Oh yeah, you bet, no problem with that plan,” you’re faced with a brief dilemma. Was your coworker being sarcastic just then, or does he genuinely believe that plan will succeed? Your reaction to his words will depend entirely on how you interpret the tone of his voice.

Paralanguage not only serves to help listeners identify emotional states in the speaker but also plays an important role in conversational turn-taking. People often signal others in a conversation that it’s their turn to talk or that they would like a turn to speak or that they aren’t yet done speaking. Much of the signaling is done nonverbally through vocalics: rate, pacing, pitch, tone, and other vocal, subverbal cues.22

SPACE

The study of how humans use space, including the areas in which we work, live, socialize, and conduct our lives, is often referred to in the research literature as proxemics. We know intuitively that space communicates in many ways in the business world, especially when we examine the subject of office space. Professor Joseph DeVito says, “We know, for example, that in a large organization, status is the basis for determining how large an office one receives, whether that office has a window or not, what floor of the building the office is on, and how close one’s office is to the head of the company.”23

Workers in large organizations have faced two interesting, sometimes discouraging, trends in the allocation of office space: shrinking cubicles and disappearing personal space. With office space becoming more expensive per square foot, facility managers have looked for increasingly creative ways of dealing with the demand for workspace and privacy. The trend over the past 25 years away from huge office spaces with many desks and no privacy brought portable wall dividers known as cubicles into the workspace. The arrangement provided for a minimum of privacy, or in some cases, an illusion of privacy.24

Every couple of weeks, Michael McKay, a 33-year-old business analyst with a Santa Clara, California, Internet-services company, finds his concentration totally disrupted when three colleagues who sit near his workstation hop onto the same conference call—all on speakerphones. “You get this stereophonic effect of hearing one person’s voice live, and then hearing it coming out of someone else’s speakerphone two or three cubes over,” he says. The obvious solution to incessant phone-ringing, very personal conversations, and rising noise levels would seem to be private offices. Don’t count on it, says Jane Smith, a Manhattan office architect. “The open plan is here to stay.”25

Julie Nemetz, a writer for a popular teen magazine, planned her wedding recently from under her desk. “It’s quieter down there,” she says. Nearly three-quarters of all U.S. and Canadian workers now do business in open plan or bullpen office space. And the average office space per person has shrunk steadily since the late 1990s, down by about 13 percent according to the International Facility Management Association. Do workers have a right to expect private space at their employers’ expense? Legally no, it’s a “fringe benefit,” says Robert Ellis Smith, publisher of Privacy Journal. But given that more employees are putting in 60-plus hour weeks, he adds, “It’s in employers’ interests to make these accommodations for personal housekeeping.”26

A second trend has developed in recent years, known as hoteling, to provide office space on demand for workers who have an infrequent need for private or semiprivate space. Greg Bednar is an audit partner in the accounting firm of Ernst & Young, LLP in Chicago. “We began ‘hoteling’ several years ago,” Bednar said, “but expanded the program dramatically.” The entire Chicago office of Ernst & Young, according to Bednar, including more than 3,000 people and 500,000 square feet of office space between the 11th and 17th floors of the Sears Tower, were affected.27

“It seemed like a great idea at first,” he said, “because we were able to save so much money. We got an instant economic benefit from giving up 100,000 square feet of workspace. We also wanted a more technology-literate workforce. People had to be plugged into the system and into our clients. Additionally, we were hoping to develop a more flexible workforce.” What Ernst & Young got was a huge, temporary saving on office space rental but a workforce that felt disenfranchised from the company.28

Each morning, Ernst & Young employees report to work by checking in at the concierge desk in the outer lobby. Once properly identified, they receive access to a cubicle, known as a “four pod,” so called, because four workers occupy one workspace about 20 feet square. They each have a desk and chair, a telephone, and a network connection for their laptop computers. The cubicle offers no overnight storage space, no opportunity to put up pictures, bookshelves, or personal items, and virtually zero privacy.29

“It’s become a morale issue,” said Bednar. “What we’ve gained in revenue by renting less floorspace, we’ve lost in teaming, mentoring, and social interaction. We have no ‘water cooler chats,’ and very little informal interaction with each other. Frankly, no one knows where anyone else is on any given day.” Wayne Ebersberger, also a partner in Ernst & Young’s Chicago office, says, “The loss of this personal space is an important matter. It isn’t just a workspace or productivity issue any longer. We’re losing some of the fabric of our culture.”30

THE EFFECT OF SPACE ON COMMUNICATION

Not long ago, Tom Allen, a professor at MIT, did a study determining the relationship between communication and distance in the workplace. For six months, he examined the communication patterns among 512 employees in seven organizations. He found that at a distance of 30 feet or less, the quality of communication is five times better than it is at a distance of 100 feet. Allen’s research also showed that beyond 100 feet, distance is immaterial because communication is simply ineffective. In other words, ease of communication is largely dependent on physical location.31

CATEGORIES OF PERSONAL SPACE

Cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall has observed and classified four categories of distance, each of which helps to define the relationship between the communicators.

• Intimate. This ranges from actual touching to a distance of about 18 inches. At this distance, the presence of other individuals is unmistakable: Each individual experiences the sound, smell, even the other’s breath. To be given permission to position yourself so closely to another implies a personal relationship involving considerable trust. Often, though, we’re forced to stand or sit next to someone, perhaps actually touching them, without really wanting to do so—in an elevator, a subway car, or an airline seat. Most North Americans feel some level of discomfort at such closeness when they don’t really know the other person. People try to avoid eye contact at this distance, focusing instead on distant or nearby objects.32 Although most people feel uncomfortable at this distance from strangers or casual acquaintances, most are willing to briefly tolerate such closeness in order to get what they need—a trip to the top floor in an elevator, transportation to the next subway stop, or lunch in a crowded café.

• Personal. Each of us, according to Dr. Hall, carries a protective bubble defining our personal distance, which allows us to stay protected and untouched by others. In the close phase of personal distance, about 18-to-30 inches, we can still hold or grasp each other but only by extending our arms. In the far phase (about 30 inches to 4 feet), two people can touch each other only if they both extend their arms. This far phase, according to Professor DeVito, is “the extent to which we can physically get our hands on things; hence, it defines, in one sense, the limits of our physical control over others.”33 The common business phrase “arm’s-length relationship” comes from the definition of this distance, meaning that a proper relationship with customers, suppliers, or business partners might be one in which we are not so close as to be controlled or unduly influenced by them.

• Social. At a distance of about 4-to-12 feet, we lose the visual detail we could see in the personal distance, yet we clearly are aware of another’s presence and can easily make eye contact. You would have to step forward, however, in order to shake hands. Note that during most business introductions, people do just that: step forward, make eye contact, shake hands, then step back. The near phase of social distance (4–7 feet) is the range at which most business conversations and interactions are conducted. In the far phase (7–12 feet), business transactions have a more formal tone and voices are raised just slightly. Many office furniture arrangements assure this distance for senior managers and executives, while still providing the opportunity for closer contact if participants decide it’s necessary.34

• Public. In the close phase of public distance, about 12–15 feet, we feel more protected by space. We can still see people, observing their actions and movements, but we lose much of the detail visible at closer distances. We can move quickly enough to avoid someone and are not forced to make eye contact with people we do not know. In the far phase, more than 25 feet, we see people not as separate individuals but as part of the landscape or scene in the room. Communication at this distance is difficult, if not impossible, without shouting or exaggerated body movement.35

Our use of space varies greatly, depending on where we live and how we were raised, but it varies even more from one culture to another and is a frequent source of difficulty for people who move to another culture as adults. The next chapter, which deals with international and intercultural communication, will explain more about how U.S. business managers adapt to changes in such important nonverbal behaviors as proxemics.

TIME

Our use of time and how we view its role in our personal and professional lives speaks volumes about who we are and how we regard others. This concept, too, is culturally determined to a large extent because the use of time involves extensive interaction with other people in our societies.

In North America, we place considerable importance on punctuality and promptness, announcing to anyone who’ll listen that “time is money.” U.S. and Canadian, and to a lesser extent European, society see time as a commodity that can be saved, wasted, spent, or invested wisely. Mediterranean, Latin, and Polynesian cultures, on the other hand, see time in a much more seamless fashion, moving past them in an inexorable stream. Lateness in South American nations is not only acceptable but often fashionable—a view that regularly frustrates North American businesspeople who experience it for the first time.36

Anthropologists have demonstrated how people from various parts of the world view time in different ways. Edward T. Hall has written at length about people who see the world in monochronic ways, that is, with one kind of time for everyone, while others see the world in polychronic ways, with many kinds and uses of time. U.S. and Canadian citizens, as well as those who live in Germany, Switzerland, and the industrialized nations of the G8, tend to work in precise, accountable ways with an emphasis on “saving time” and being “on time” for appointments and meetings.

People who live and work along the Mediterranean, in Latin America and the Middle East, and in more traditional, developing economies often view time from a multifaced or polychronic perspective. Although being on time for a business meeting may be important in Latin America, it’s probably not more important than a conversation with a friend who has been ill or whom you haven’t seen in some time. Additionally, the pace of life as well as business in such societies can vary considerably but is invariably slower than the pace of activity in Western Europe or North America.37

COLOR

Color, shading, and hue as subtle and powerful message-senders have a long and, well, colorful history. We signal our intentions (“This project has the green light”); reveal our reactions (“That move prompted red flags throughout the organization”); underscore our moods (“I’m feeling a little blue today”); and call our emotions to the surface (“She was green with envy”). We coordinate and carefully select (for the most part) the colors we use in our offices, our homes, our automobiles, our clothing, and even our hair. We even use color to stereotype and categorize others (“She’s that blonde from marketing,” and “He’s one of the original graybeards in this company”).

New marketing research has shown what we have suspected for some time: that color plays an important role in our perceptions of food packaging and food purchase decisions. According to Cooper Marketing Group in Chicago, health-conscious consumers are likely to think that any food, from cookies to cheese, is probably good for them as long as it comes in green packaging. A trip down the fat-free food aisle in your local supermarket will confirm those findings: The top brands, from Snackwell’s cookies to Healthy Choice meals, use green packaging. Hershey Foods spokeswoman Natalie Bailey says, “Green is becoming recognized as a low-fat color.” Elliot Young of Perception Research Services adds, “It’s a risk not to use green. It makes it easier for the shopper to distinguish low-fat items.”38

“Color serves as a cue,” according to Dr. Russell Ferstandig, a psychiatrist whose company, Competitive Advantage Consulting, advises marketers about the hearts and minds of consumers. “It’s a condensed message that has all sorts of meanings.” Some are no more than fads, such as clear drinks like Crystal Pepsi or Coors’ Zima, while others are more enduring, including everything from raspberry Jell-O to traditional school colors.39

Food companies are usually aware of the meanings they send and tend to rely on certain colors until circumstances require a change. According to color researchers, no colors are inherently good or bad; the context affects the meaning. White, for instance, is seen as a good color but no longer in bread, where brown is becoming preferred because of its more healthful and natural connotations. In packaging, the most popular colors have been red and yellow, according to John Lister, a partner in the New York design firm of Lister Butler. “People tend to be attracted to the warmth of these colors,” he added. “They are cheery and friendly.”40

SMELL

A primitive perceptive capability, smell is a powerful communicator reaching far and wide throughout human emotion and experience. Though it is less understood and more subtle than most other dimensions of the nonverbal code, our sense of smell plays an important part in our ability to communicate. According to the Sense of Smell Institute, the average human being is able to recognize approximately 10,000 different odors. What’s more, people can recall smells with 65 percent accuracy after a year, whereas the visual recall of photos sinks to about 50 percent after only three months.41

We wear perfume, cologne, and after-shave lotions to signal others that we are freshly scrubbed and desirable. We use deodorants and antiperspirants to mask natural body odors. We use breath mints to cover the smell of bacteria growing in our mouths, and we use room fresheners to disguise the odors of everyday living trapped in our homes, cars, and offices. Smells can be highly evocative and emotional, in part because they’re associated with one of our most primitive and least-developed sense organs. Everything from the aroma of mom’s pot roast or apple pie cooking in the kitchen to the scent of leather seats in a new Mercedes can have an emotional effect on each of us.42

From a marketing perspective, human response to aromas is personal and highly emotional. According to Dr. Trygg Engen, a professor at Brown University, “Aromas are learned in association with a moment and remain inextricably linked to the mood of that moment.”43 Researchers found that a whiff of baking bread is enough to transport many people back to an idealized childhood. Others are perked up by the smell of lemon or lulled by jasmine. Still others report allergic reactions to smells.

During a recent weekend in New York, shoppers on the prowl for digital electronics unwittingly stumbled into a research project related to olfaction. Riding up the escalator to the third floor of the Shops at Columbus Circle, they encountered a scent like that of a young man or woman primed for a night on the town—a unisex, modern fragrance along the lines of Calvin Klein’s cK one.

The scent wasn’t emanating from one of the many tourists cruising the shops, however. Nor was it escaping from a promotional event at the nearby Aveda store. It was the seductive smell of consumer electronics. Samsung, the Korean electronics giant was conducting a test of its new signature fragrance in its Samsung Experience concept store. Researchers stopped shoppers leaving the store to ask them about whether they thought the scent was “stylish,” “innovative,” “cool,” “passionate,” or “cold,” and—more important—whether the scent made them feel like hanging around the shop a little longer. According to Dr. Alan R. Hirsh, founder and neurological director of the Smell & Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago, “If a company can associate a mood state with a smell, it can transfer that happy feeling to the product.” Those who don’t lock in that connection risk being left behind, he warns.44

Aromatic mood manipulation is an area of increasing interest among productivity consultants, moving well beyond mom’s spice jar and the romantically scented candle. Junichi Yagi, a senior vice president of Shimizu Technology, says, “If you have a high-stress office environment, you want to soothe and stimulate alertness. In a hotel, you might want to create a relaxed mood.” To perk people up, Mr. Yagi has experimented with central air circulation systems to alter or enhance the moods of everyone from office workers to shopping mall customers. Peppermint, lemon, rosemary, eucalyptus, and pine have been shown to increase alertness, while lavender, clove, floral, and woodlands scents create a relaxing effect. Experiment participants described feeling refreshed in the presence of a light citrus mixture.45

From a workspace perspective, most personal scents are deemed acceptable if they are insufficiently powerful to extend beyond intimate distance. Employees, customers, and others have complained—and in some cases succeeded in court—about being exposed to various odors including food, perfumes, tobacco smoke, and unvented product odors. To protect themselves against unwanted and expensive litigation, many business organizations have published policies asking employees to be respectful of others with whom they must share the workspace, keeping colognes, perfumes, and other personal scents to a minimum.

TASTE

Closely related to our sense of smell is our ability to taste. It’s limited to a small grouping of sensations that include salty, sweet, bitter, and other tastes located in a collection of small, flask-shaped sensors in the epithelium of the tongue. It’s a complex response system that involves our abilities to see and smell as well, and one—much like color and touch—that is highly subjective in nature. What is “bitter” to some is “rich and full bodied” to others. For still others, such things as espresso coffee, broiled asparagus, and scotch whiskey are “acquired tastes.” Our appreciation for the taste of various food and drink is a function of both age and enculturation and, like our use of space, can pose problems when we move from one culture to another.

As the demographic makeup of our society changes, it’s important to note that our taste in food is changing along with it. Picante sauce now outsells catsup, and commercially prepared food ranging from fine dining to takeout is available in cuisines ranging from Mexican to Italian, Greek to French, and Thai to Szechuan.46

SOUND

The study of acoustics and its effects on communication is now an important part of nonverbal research. Public speakers are particularly conscious of whether they can be heard by everyone in the room, and those who use amplification and public address systems are involved in a constant struggle with audio system feedback, acoustical bounce, and other peculiarities of microphones, amplifiers, and speakers.

Sound comes in other forms, too, including the melodic ranges of the human voice, the sounds produced by nature as well as mankind and our machines (e.g., jets, cars, jackhammers, and boom boxes), and of course, there’s music. Culture and, more often, subculture can determine our reaction to musical compositions and performances. The melodies of a big band or an orchestra may be attractive to some but sappy and dull to their grandchildren, whose tastes in music may run to salsa, reggae, or hip-hop.

SILENCE

The absence of speech or sound may be used to communicate as powerfully and directly as any verbal code. Some researchers liken silence to acoustics in the same way that facial expressions are related to kinesics. Silence can be used both positively and negatively: to affect, to reveal, to judge, or to activate. Asian cultures, in particular, make extensive use of silence during business meetings and contract negotiations.

Research in interpersonal communication has revealed that silence may serve a number of important functions.

• To provide thinking time. Silence can offer an opportunity for you to gather your thoughts together, to assess what’s just been said by others, or to weigh the impact of what you might say next. U.S. Ambassador Mike Mansfield once observed that he carried his pipe and tobacco with him for so many years because they gave him something to do while the room grew quiet. “I was never at a loss for words,” he said. “I was just reluctant to say the first few that came to mind.”47 Somehow guests or colleagues were more willing to tolerate the tobacco smoke than the silence.

• To hurt. Some people use silence as a weapon to hurt others. Giving someone the silent treatment can be particularly powerful, especially if they expect to hear from you and speak with you. In many business organizations, a drop-off in communication can be an early indication of trouble; often, the recipient of the silent treatment is being eased out of the decision-making processes and, perhaps, the company itself.

• To isolate oneself. Sometimes silence is used as a response to personal anxiety, shyness, or threats. If you feel anxious or uncertain about yourself or your role in an organization, particularly if you are new to the company or are junior in rank to others in the group, silence is a common response. Eventually, even the most junior or introverted of managers will be asked to speak up on important issues. The key is knowing when to speak and how much to say.

• To prevent communication. Silence may be used to prevent the verbal communication of certain messages. An executive may impose a “gag order” on employees to prevent them from discussing sensitive information with others inside or outside an organization. In other circumstances, silence may allow members of a negotiating team or collective bargaining group time to “cool off.” If words have the power to inspire, soothe, provoke, or enrage, then silence can prevent those effects from occurring.

• To communicate feelings. Like the eyes, face, or hands, silence can also be used to communicate emotional responses. According to Professor DeVito, silence can sometimes communicate a determination to be uncooperative or defiant. “By refusing to engage in verbal communication,” he says, “we defy the authority or legitimacy of the other person’s position.” In more pleasant situations, silence might be used to express affection or agreement.48

• To communicate nothing. Although it remains true that you “cannot not communicate,” it is equally true that what you wish to communicate on occasion is that you have nothing to say. Keep in mind that receivers in the communication process will interpret silence, just as they interpret words, motion, and other forms of communication, in their own way. They, not you, will assign meaning to what you are not saying, to whom you are not saying it, and the occasion on which you are not saying anything. From a manager’s perspective, it may be a good idea to call someone and say, “I don’t have an answer for you yet, but I’ll find one and get back in touch with you before the end of the week.” That statement might be preferable to no contact at all. A customer might think you don’t care about him or her; a supplier might think you have lost interest in doing business; an investment analyst might believe you have something to hide if you’re not talking.

THE EFFECTS OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

The following six general outcomes are important for every manager to know.

• Nonverbal cues are often difficult to read. During the 1970s, a number of popular books introduced the general public to nonverbal communication. One popular volume, Body Language, written by a journalist, described the nonverbal studies of several researchers.49 That best seller was followed by others that simplified and popularized research in this area; many of them, however, oversimplified the behavioral science behind the findings in the interest of making a sale, detecting a liar, attracting members of the opposite sex, and so on.

According to Professor Mark Knapp, “Although such books aroused the public’s interest in nonverbal communication . . . readers too often were left with the idea that reading nonverbal cues as the key to success in any human encounter; some of these books implied that single cues represent single meanings. Not only is it important to look at nonverbal clusters of behavior but also to recognize that nonverbal meaning, like verbal, rarely is limited to a single denotative meaning.”50

• Nonverbal cues are often difficult to interpret. What may mean one thing in one context, culture, or circumstance may mean something entirely different in another. Professor Knapp goes on to say, “Some of these popularized accounts do not sufficiently remind us that the meaning of a particular behavior is often understood by looking at the context in which the behavior occurs; for example, looking into someone’s eyes may reflect affection in one situation and aggression in another.”51 The importance of reading context, just as we would with verbal expression, is especially critical. The meaning of all communication, after all, is context driven.

• Nonverbal behaviors are often contradictory. Our posture and vocal tone may say one thing, but our eyes may say another. We try to stand up straight and portray a dominant, confident posture, but our hands fidgeting with a pen may say something entirely different. Nonverbal behaviors do come “packaged” together, and we must often examine several behaviors before we begin to discern a coherent picture of the person before us. The problem with such packages or clusters of behaviors is that they’re not always consistent and not always complementary. Which one should we believe?

• Some nonverbal cues are more important than others. As we examine several behaviors clustered together—vocal pace, tone, and pitch; body posture; pupil dilation; arm and hand movement—it often becomes clear to careful observers that some cues are more important than others. For the most part, the relative importance of a given cue is dependent on habits and usual behaviors of the speaker. In other words, are the behaviors I’m observing usual or unusual for this person? If they’re unusual, do they contradict verbal portions of the message? And, finally, it is important to note that some portions of our anatomy are simply easier to control than others: Even a nervous person can sit still if she makes a determined effort to do so, but few among us can control the dilation of our pupils. Many can control facial expression, but few can determine when tears will flow or when our voices will choke with emotion.

• We often read into some cues much that isn’t there and fail to read some cues that are clearly present. We often look for cues that seem most important to us personally: whether a person will look us directly in the eyes as we speak or which direction they’ve crossed their legs. Such cues may be meaningless. We can also misread cues if we have insufficient information on which to base a judgment. Business leaders seen nodding off in a conference may be judged as indifferent by their hosts; in reality, it may be jet lag that’s caught up with them.

• We’re not as skilled at reading nonverbal cues as we think we are; our confidence often exceeds our ability. Caution is the byword in dealing with nonverbal communication. Even though a substantial portion of what we learn from a human transaction (between two-thirds and three-quarters of all meaning) comes from nonverbal cues, we simply aren’t as skilled at this as we’d like to be. It’s easy to misinterpret, misread, or misunderstand someone. It’s equally easy to jump to conclusions from just a few bits of evidence. The best advice for any manager would be to withhold judgment as long as possible, gather as much verbal as well as nonverbal information as possible, and then reconfirm what you think you know as frequently as possible. The stakes are high in business transactions, almost as high as the chances for error in decoding nonverbal cues.

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CASE 9-1 Olive Garden Restaurants Division

General Mills Corporation

Managers occupying junior- to middle-level positions in large organizations are often called upon to resolve disputes. Some of these are disagreements between lower-level supervisors and employees; some are disputes with suppliers or distributors; others, like the dispute in this case, are between the organization and a customer.

Every customer has a value to an organization, and every customer has a price to that organization. Customers are, of course, the lifeblood and source of revenue to a business, but not all customers are worth saving. Some, in fact, may be more trouble and expense to maintain than they are worth.

Dealing with customers—or with anyone else who is in disagreement with your organization—requires patience, tact, and a certain measure of skill. A variety of response modes is open to the manager who faces an angry customer, along with a range of options in dealing with the case.

This case requires two documents in response: a one-page communication strategy memo and a letter to the customer. The strategy memo should be directed to the president of the Olive Garden Restaurants Division and should describe in some detail how you plan to handle this case and why. The letter to the customer explains what you have chosen to do.

Assume that you are the director of customer service and report through the vice president for sales and marketing to the president. Your memorandum and customer letter should be in finished form, ready to transmit.

[Dated Three Days Ago]

51588 River Forest Dr.

South Bend, IN 46617

Mr. Ronald N. Magruder

President, Olive Garden Restaurants Division

General Mills Corporation

5900 Lake Ellenor Drive Orlando, FL 33809

Dear Mr. Magruder:

Last week, my family and I had a genuinely unpleasant experience in an Olive Garden Restaurant. My first instinct was to dismiss it as another example of bad customer service and forget about it. The truth is, I can’t forget about it. The experience was bad enough that I thought you should hear about it.

On Tuesday evening of last week, I selected the Olive Garden Restaurant at 6410 Grape Road in Mishawaka, Indiana, for a mid-evening meal with my father and two daughters. We’ve had good experiences and great food in Olive Garden Restaurants before and, in fact, think your facilities are generally well run.

We arrived at the restaurant about 8:15 P.M. and were surprised to discover that very few customers were seated for dinner. No one was waiting in the entryway to greet us—something we have come to expect at Olive Garden. After waiting more than ten minutes for a hostess, I went into the bar and asked if someone could seat us. A hostess, clearly annoyed at the prospect of additional customers, offered us a table in an area my father couldn’t walk to. He is an amputee and walks, with great difficulty, on crutches.

After an extended discussion about why we couldn’t take a table in the upper seating area, the hostess showed us a table (not cleaned off) and left the menus. We discovered that I had a luncheon menu and there were no children’s menus available.

Our next challenge was finding a waiter. After an extended wait (10–12 minutes), a young man appeared and wanted to know if we had been helped. He indicated that this table wasn’t “in his station,” but offered to take our orders anyway. We ordered our meals and I asked for a glass of wine. Twenty minutes later (nearly 45 minutes after our arrival), our meals arrived (cold) and I was told that the bar was out of wine. Two additional requests produced silverware and napkins.

When we sampled our meals and discovered they were cold, I asked to see the manager—a large, officious man who was equally annoyed with the prospect of customers at that hour. The meals were prepared exactly as we had ordered and were fine, except that our waiter had forgotten about them. My cannelloni was cold—there is no other way to describe it. My father’s meal was the same but he asked me not to complain. The girls simply ate their meals (equally cold) and didn’t want to become involved in a verbal exchange with the manager. Please keep in mind that I haven’t sent back a meal twice in the past 30 years. I’m not a complainer.

I was given a second plate of cannelloni and the waiter departed—apparently for the evening. We never saw him again. We finished our meals and waited—it was nearly ten o’clock in the evening on a Tuesday with just one other couple seated in the dining room. Coffee and dessert were out of the question. I just wanted a check and, if possible, a brief discussion with the manager about what had happened.

Mr. Ronald N. Magruder

[Dated Three Days Ago]

Page Two

Again, I had to go into the bar to find an employee and wait—5 to 7 minutes—for my check. The manager was absolutely confrontational when I told him what I have just related to you. “What do you want me to do about it?” he said. “Tell your employees that I’m a customer and not a nuisance in their evening,” I answered. Then, unbelievably, he asked “Are you lookin’ for a free meal or somethin’?” I was stunned.

I signed the American Express charge slip and turned to leave. Your manager mumbled, just loud enough for me to hear, “No tip, huh?” I turned and said to him, “I’ve got a tip for you, friend. Get out of the food business.”

It’s been nearly a week since the event and I’m still upset, partly because of his behavior and the experience my father and children went through, and partly because I genuinely like Olive Garden Restaurants. I must tell you, in all honesty, I cannot now imagine returning to that one.

Thanks for listening to my story. I know it’s not easy to listen to a customer with a “bad service” story, but I feel better having shared it with you.

Sincerely,

Martin A. Wallace, M.D.

This case was prepared from public sources by James S. O’Rourke, Concurrent Professor of Management, as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation. Personal and corporate identities have been disguised.

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CASE 9-2 Waukegan Materials, Inc.

Managers are often called on to recognize the achievements and accomplishments of their employees and others within their organizations. Public acknowledgment of exceptional work, career milestones, and special events in people’s lives are important, not only to those being recognized, but also to others who carefully observe how the organization treats its people.

Those who have worked in and for large, complex organizations will often acknowledge that it’s difficult to monitor and properly appreciate individual achievements. Many financial, sales, production, and profit goals are predicated on group activities; individuals often are made to bask in the reflected glory of group membership.

Among the more useful observations regarding letters of appreciation are these: If it isn’t worth writing as a personal, individual document, it isn’t worth receiving. Generic, one-size-fits-all letters are frequently the subject of employee scorn. Letters of appreciation, in general, should be brief, warm, and specific. They should probably not extend beyond two or three paragraphs, they should reflect a controlled enthusiasm for the message recipient, and they should comment specifically on the achievements or accomplishment for which the receiver is being recognized.

Waukegan Materials, Inc., is a regional distributor in the building and construction industry. They conduct both wholesale and retail operations and are a nonunion firm. You may assume that you are general manager of the Lakefront Division. This case requires two documents: a one-page transmittal memorandum and a letter of appreciation to an employee. The memo should be directed to the company president and should respond to the president’s questions posed in the case. Both documents should be in final form and ready to dispatch.

Waukegan Materials, Inc.

3400 Sheridan Road

Waukegan, Illinois 60620

DATE:

[Today’s Date]

TO:

General Manager, Lakefront Division

FROM:

Paul Magers, President, Waukegan Materials, Inc.

SUBJECT:

Employee-of-the-Quarter Awards

Your suggestion that Waukegan Materials, Inc., begin a program of employee recognition was a good one. As you know, we have had more than two dozen nominations for the first of our quarterly employee recognition awards, and it’s been difficult to select just one who is more deserving than the others for this honor. After several long and very trying sessions, the awards committee has selected our first recipient.

The Waukegan Materials Employee-of-the-Quarter is Mr. Delbert R. Finch of our roofing supplies branch. Finch is an all-around good fellow with a very impressive work record. In fact, he hasn’t missed a day’s work in the nine years he has been with Waukegan. He tracks the ordering of materials in our roofing supply branch, arranges for shipment to retailers and construction contractors, supervises stock assortment and reshelving operations, and generally keeps an eye on things in the Lakefront Warehouse.

Please help me and the committee by providing us with a letter to recognize Mr. Finch’s good work. I would like to present him with the letter and some sort of appropriate gift or memento at our quarterly supervisors’ luncheon next month. I don’t want to spend a fortune on this program, but I do want the gift to be both appropriate and suitable. The letter should be a good one, too; I’m thinking about having it framed for him and giving a copy to the local newspapers.

Tell me what you plan for us to give him, what this will cost, and how much you think we should spend annually on the program. Please draft a letter today acknowledging his achievements. I’d like to see something by the close of business. Thanks for your help.

- PM -

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(Management Communication: A Case-Analysis Approach, 4th Edition. Pearson Learning Solutions p. 256).

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