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Non-verbal components of assertive behavior used by school administrators

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Abstract

Assertive communication is the total message that is being sent or received between two or more people (Cooper, 1979). That total message consists of the spoken word and the non-spoken form of communication. Assertive nonverbal communication, often referred to as NVC, has a source and a receiver and like the word communication; NVC has a wide range of definitions. One definition that seems to summarize many authors' views is "Those attributes or actions of humans, other than the use of words themselves, which socially share meaning and are intentionally sent or interpreted as intentional as consciously sent or consciously received, and have the potential for feedback from the receiver" (Burgoon & Saine, "1978, p. 6). Other definitions include "actions without words", "communication without words", "message without words", and "all the cues that are not words". Edward Sapor says "it is an elaborate code that is written nowhere, known to none, and understood by all" (p. 6).

NON-VERBAL COMPONENTS OF ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOR
USED BY SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

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INTRODUCTION

Assertive communication is the total message that is being sent or received between two or more people (Cooper, 1979). That total message consists of the spoken word and the nonspoken form of communication.

Assertive nonverbal communication, often referred to as NVC, has a source and a receiver and like the word communication; NVC has a wide range of definitions. One definition that seems to summarize many authors' views is "Those attributes or actions of humans, other than the use of words themselves, which socially share meaning and are intentionally sent or interpreted as intentional as consciously sent or consciously received, and have the potential for feedback from the receiver" (Burgoon & Saine, 1978, p. 6). Other definitions include "actions without words", "communication without words", "message without words", and "all the cues that are not words". Edward Sapor says "it is an elaborate code that is written nowhere, known to none, and understood by all" (p. 6).

Nonverbal communication is an important concept that educators should strive to understand. Nonverbal communication is important because of the role it plays in the total communication system, the tremendous quality of informational cues it gives in any particular situation and

because of its' use in fundamental areas of a school administrator's life.

The work of Hersen, Eislen and Miller (1973) clearly demonstrated the importance of looking and sounding assertive while delivering assertive statements! Albert Mehrabian (1968), an expert in the field of nonverbal communication, conducted a battery of tests to determine how attitudes were communicated.

School administrators must be taught and coached to observe eye movement. Like other NVC components of assertive behavior, eye contact is actually curvilinear in that too little eye contact is generally perceived as passive while too much eye contact such as staring is perceived as aggressive. This general statement is not universally true, as there are instances in which too little eye contact is also perceived as aggressive when combined with other nonverbal aggressive behaviors. A gaze of longer than ten seconds is likely to induce discomfort (Knapp, 1972).

In the United States, the general rule is that the speaker in a conversation should find a way to break eye contact and look away. The listener shows attention by spending relatively more time looking at the speaker. Because it makes it harder for the speaker to continue, communication difficulties arise if the listener looks away too often. Knowing the impact looking away has can help a school

administrator signal how much longer he or she wishes the other to continue speaking (McCaskey, 1979).

If eye contact is severely deficient, it is suggested that a school administrator look at the shoulders of the recipient and generally move up to where one feels more assertive when maintaining eye contact. All too often, school administrators will successfully maintain eye contact throughout an interchange until the moment of their request, refusal or expression at which point they will discontinue eye contact which lessens the impact of their assertive statement. School administrators must try to maintain eye contact when actually making their request, refusal, or expression (Dittman, 1978).

Exline and Eldridge (1981) found that messages accompanied by eye contact are more favorably interpreted by observers than are messages sent without eye contact. Therefore, if an administrator maintains eye contact with all subordinates communication with them probably will be significantly improved.

Definition of Terms

Aggressive. Primary aim is hurting another person, physically or emotionally, which results in one winner at the expense of another's self esteem (Alberti, p. 21).

Assertive Behavior. Behavior in which a person stands up for his or her rights without violating the rights of others (Alberti, pp. 21-22).

NVC. Nonverbal communication or "unspoken dialogue", a phrase that comes from a quotation attributed to Dag Hammarskjold, the former secretary general of the United Nations: "What happens during the unspoken dialogue between two people can never be put right by anything they say" (Burgoon, p. 4).

Kinesics. The study of body movements or body motion, a term coined by Birdwhistell (Wolfgang, 1979, p. 160).

Proxemics. A term coined by Hall (1969) that refers to the study of the ways individuals use space in their environment in relationship to one another or to objects (Wolfgang, p. 160).

Vocalics. Refers to all stimuli produced by the human voice other than words themselves that affect the auditory sense (Burgoon, pp. 80-81).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Kinesics

Ray Birdwhistell is the accredited authority in the field of kinesics. NVC appropriately begins with body movements and how these movements reveal the character and intentions of the communicator. Kinesic behavior typically includes these

areas: gestures, facial and head expressions, eye contact and posture (Knapp, 1980). Each will be discussed with implications for the school administrator.

Gestures

Non-verbal assertive school administrators move their hands. Research summarized by Bonoma and Felden indicates that positive attitudes toward another person are shown by frequent gesticulation, while dislike and disinterest usually produces few gestures (Levine, 1981).

In our culture, appropriate gesture is loose movement below the shoulders. Hands held in one rigid position are often perceived as passive. Random fidgeting such as drumming the fingers or twiddling the thumbs convey extreme nervousness, restlessness or negative attitudes. Similarly, aggressive gestures with clenched fists and menacing postures communicate hostile feelings while frequent use of relaxed open palms gestures toward the other person communicate positive attitudes (Lock & Baron, May, 1978).

Gestures serve to non-verbally accentuate the asserters' verbal request, refusal, or expression. It is important to remember that too many gestures reveal negative feelings about the subject communicated (Parulski, 1979).

Researchers have stressed that the meaning of any gesture depends on cultural norms, personal style, the physical

setting, what has gone before and what both parties anticipate for the future (McCaskey, 1979).

Facial Expressions and Head

Movements

In order to avoid the sending of double messages, it is important for school administrators to make their facial expressions and head movement congruent with the verbal message they are expressing. For example, it is common to see an administrator nod "yes" when she or he is saying "no" and vice versa (Lock & Baron, 1978).

Similarly, Whitely and Flowers have seen administrators smile when expressing negatives or looking extremely grim when they are delivering positives. Head movements indicate physical and emotional conditions. A furrowed brow could indicate tension or worry; whereas, sweat on the forehead could indicate nervousness. Strength and character can be seen in a wide forehead (Cooper, 1979).

Perhaps the clearest indication of interpersonal attitudes comes from the combined actions of the communicators' head and face. Head nods are signs of positive feelings and as Matarazzo (1973) demonstrated the head and the face have a significant impact on the recipients' behavior. Similarly, head shakes indicate negative attitudes. But, head behaviors can be even more subtle. Lowering the head and

peering over eye glasses, according to Levy (1976), the nonverbal equivalent is "you're putting me on" (pp. 77-78).

Sheridan (1978) observes that cocking the head slightly to one side may indicate rejection or suspicion. Progressively lifting the head backward while the other person speaks also indicates doubt or disbelief.

Facial expressions also indicate communicator attitudes. Rosenfeld (1969) noted that people seeking approval seem to exhibit facial expressions more frequently and Mehrabian and Williams observed that people trying to persuade others also show an increase in facial activity. While facial expressions are relatively difficult to control, they clearly mirror an administrators' intentions and emotional state (Ekman, 1975).

The best way to improve ones' reading of facial expressions is to watch soundless videotape or film of people's faces as they talk. Watch for raising or knitting of the eyebrows, widening of the pupils, flaring or wrinkling of the nose, tightening of the lips, baring or clenching the teeth. To take one example, dilating pupils tend to mean that the listener is interested in what you are saying; contracting pupils suggest he or she does not like what you are saying. But reading a facial expression is a complex process because

the face often shows a mixture of several feelings at once, matching the mixture of feelings that the person may be experiencing inside (McCaskey, 1979).

Eye Contact

The most dominant and reliable feature of the face are the eyes (Wenburg and Wilmont, 1973). An old adage is that "The eyes are the windows of the soul." They provide a constant channel of communication. Eyes can be shifty and evasive conveying hate, fear, guilt, as well as expressing confidence, love, and support. Eyes can both send and receive messages. Eyes can be a giveaway to a positive or negative relationship. People tend to look longer or more often at those that they trust, respect and care about than at those they doubt or dislike (Knapp, 1972).

Eye contact can be manipulated to open or closed channels of communication. For example, two bitter enemies express hostile feelings when they meet by staring each other down. Eyes signal whether you are listening. Observing eyes can be a useful tool in deciding boredom, whether you need a break, or the instructional content is being understood. Positive eye contact always improves communication (Knapp, 1972).

Cooper (1979) found that 55% was transmitted through the body, 38% through the voice, and 7% was communicated through

words alone. In other words, 93% of all communication that affects people is never verbalized (Cooper, 1979). Burgoon and Saine (1978) succinctly stated the importance of Nonverbal Communication as "What happens during the unspoken dialogue between two people can never be put right by anything they say" (p. 4).

School administrators with effective non-verbal assertive behavior present a more convincing stimulus complex. Additionally, assertive nonverbal components can contribute to enhancing school administrators' attitudes about themselves thereby, increasing the probability of assertive responses (Berlew & Hall, 1964).

Because non-verbal communication is not usually under conscious control, men and women at the office have not recognized its' effect on the way they work together. We cannot see ourselves as we interact with others. In order to gain control over these non-verbal patterns, men and women must first become aware of non-verbal communication in general. Vocal tone, intonation patterns, pitch, rate, and stress patterns determine how our speed is interpreted by others. Often it is not what you say, but how you say it that influences the relationship between you and your listener (Cohn, 1983).

Posture

An administrator's posture can tell much about his or her assertive behavior. Stooped shoulders might say that a person is impulsive, passive or inconfident. Retracted shoulders may convey an authoritative or domineering individual. Raised shoulders indicate tension, whereas, squared shoulders convey strength and responsibility (Cooper, 1979).

School administrators should face an individual to whom he or she is speaking and should assume an asymmetrical posture in which arms and legs are not held rigid or in the same position. Symmetrical postures are generally perceived as either passive or aggressive by other interaction. Asymmetry is perceived as more assertive. Asymmetrical posture combined with a relaxed, loose and freely gesturing stance is generally perceived as maximally assertive.

Generally, posture has a message value. In studies of body posture, Mehrabian found a close relationship between posture and liking for the other person. When confronting someone they intensely dislike, women particularly, tend to be very indirect in their direction of face, looking away from the other person as much as possible. If the other person is liked, they vary their direction of face, sometimes looking squarely at that person and sometimes looking away. When

dealing with a total stranger, they tend to look directly at that person (Levine, 1980).

Similar, although less consistent, results were obtained for males. Mehrabian also found that openness of the arms or leg serves as an indicator of liking, as people maintain open positions when meeting those they like, but establish closed postures such as folded arms when speaking with people they dislike. Lastly, a forward lean seems to indicate liking for the other, while a backward lean seems to convey negative feelings (Costley & Todd, 1978).

Proxemics

Proxemics involves the placement of one's body relative to the placement of someone else - their physical proximity. A number of studies have noted a relationship between people's physical distance and the sorts of attitudes each infer the other to hold (Schefflen & Schefflen, 1972). Patterson cites research indicating that people located in relatively close proximity are seen as warmer, friendlier and more understanding than people located further away (Baird & Wieting, 1979). Moreover, Mehrabian (1968) found that status differences are emphasized by physical distance and minimized by greater closeness. Indeed, after reviewing research on proximity, Mehrabian concluded that "the findings of a large number of studies collaborate one another and indicate that

communicator-addressee distance is correlated with the degree of negative attitude communicated to and inferred by the addressee" (pp. 296-308).

People located in relatively close proximity are seen as warmer, friendlier and more understanding than people located further away. Thus, assuming a position close to the staff seems to convey a variety of position attitudes. The distance between the assërter and the recipient is a critical variable. In the American culture, $1\frac{1}{2}$ -3 feet is generally accepted as an appropriate social distance (Cooper, 1979).

Standing beyond three feet is usually perceived as passive and standing closer than $1\frac{1}{2}$ feet is usually perceived as aggressive. While this is a good general rule, it is felt to be very important to consider how distance is used. Closing in quickly is often seen as aggressive, while increasing distance is usually perceived as passive. Assertive use of space is a slight slow movement closer when a point is to be made. For example, imagine one is across a desk from someone who is starting to verbally attack you, but you also have an assertive point you want to make. What should be done in terms of distance? During the initial attack, lean back slowly to increase interpersonal distance and do not try to make the point until the attack peaks and starts to subside. Now lean forward slowly without violating

the other person's space and start your assertive response. School administrators should close interpersonal distance in all assertive interactions (Schneider & Donaghy, 1975).

As a final consideration, Stephenson's (1979) test on body language is helpful in evaluating the assertive nonverbal messages being sent to others.

Touch

Touch is a crucial aspect of non-verbal communication. It plays a part in giving encouragement, expressing, tenderness, showing emotional support and many other things. The growth of "body awareness" and "personal growth" workshops testifies that many Americans feel a need to rediscover communication through touch. These workshops encourage physical contact as a way of breaking through some psychological barriers. People try to become more aware of themselves, other people, and the world around them through physical experiences rather than through words or sight. It is, as is said, a widespread movement reflecting a yearning for human contact (Knapp, 1972). It may also be a movement to restore some unfilled tactile needs. As Montagu (1971) says:

When affection and involvement are conveyed through touch, it is those meanings as well as the

security-giving satisfactions, with which touch will become associated. Inadequate tactile experience will result in a lack of such associations and a consequent inability to relate to others in many fundamental human ways (p. 111).

Bardeen's (1971) study suggests that some people prefer touch over verbal and visual communication.

Most adult Americans associate tactile experiences as private. Touch is an important parameter of assertive behavior, especially in interactions involving intimate relationships. Touching during assertive exchanges can increase the effectiveness of the message delivered by a school administrator.

Moving in and gently or firmly touching or grasping the recipient can dramatically accentuate and increase the power of a request, refusal or expression. Specifically, when a school administrator is delivering a verbal negative, physical touch can serve as a sensitive buffer to the verbal distance being expressed. Whiteley and Flowers suggest that school administrators expand their tactual repertoire to include spontaneous and non-reciprocal touching. A firm hand shake or a pat on the back is culturally acceptable.

Vocalics

The aspects of the voice, such as pitch, volume, quality and rate accompany the spoken words. Apparently people make two sorts of judgments about others on the basis of vocal cues. First, as Addington (1971) discovered, one judges personality characteristics on the basis of voice. Second, and perhaps more important, Davitz (1961) discovered that judgments of emotions are also perceived in vocal cues.

Affection, for instance, seems to be indicated by low pitch, softness, slow rate, regular rhythm and slurred enunciation. Anger is best perceived when the source speaks loudly, at a fast rate, in a high pitch, with irregular inflection and clipped enunciation. Boredom is indicated by moderate volume, pitch, and rate, and a monotone inflection; joy by loud volume, high pitch, fast rate upward inflection and regular rhythm; and sadness by soft volume, slow rate, low pitch, downward inflection and slurred enunciation.

Vocalics can convey meaning beyond words. Ironically, what we say can have many different meanings. For example, the phrase "Thank you" generally means an expression of gratitude but if implied sarcastically, it could insinuate an entirely opposite intention. If your vocal information contradicts your nonverbal expression, the vocal will not dominate (Miller, 1978).

Research by Miller (1980) suggests that vocal cues are also used as accurate indicators of overall appearance, body type, height, personality, race, education and dialect region. When you and I ask our children to apologize for some wrong doing we stress to the child to "act serious and mean it". We expect more than "I'm sorry", but a serious "I'm sorry" and we listen for vocal information to support sincerity.

Through the careful use of vocal cues, school administrators can convey positive assertive attitudes.

Non-content Verbal Components of Assertive Behavior

The aspects of the voice, such as pitch, volume quality and rate, which accompany the spoken words comprise two verbal components and they affect the perception of a school administrator's response. First, as Addington (1971) discovered, one judges personality characteristics on the basis of voice. Second, and perhaps more important, Davitz (1961) discovered that judgments of emotion are also perceived in vocal cues.

Latency

Latency is the temporal interval of silence between the termination of one person's statement and the initiation of a second individual's statement (Knapp, 1972). As with eye contact, latency is curvilinear in relation to assertiveness. Long latencies are perceived as passive by both the asserter

and the person with whom she or he is interacting. Short latencies or negative latencies are usually perceived as aggressive.

School administrators should allow the other person to finish talking except under two specific conditions: 1) The other person is wasting your time, and 2) your goal is to terminate the conversation. Once the other person has terminated his or her statement, the school administrator should speak without hesitation (Addington, 1971).

If the administrator is surprised by what she or he hears or is surprised by the responses she or he may leave a long latency which is often perceived as passive. Phrases such as "that surprises me" or "let me think about that" are perceived as more assertive than a long silence. These "Filler" statements should be made within one or two seconds following the termination of the intractor's response. This is not to say that all silence is inappropriate, but rather that silence produced by stress is a cue to the other person that she or he is right or that the administrator will yield.

Affect

Affect is the transmission of feeling that accompanies a verbal message (Schnapper, 1974). Affection, for instance, seems to be indicated by low pitch, softness, slow rate,

regular rhythm and slurred enunciation. Anger is best perceived when the source speaks loudly, at a fast rate, in a high pitch, with irregular inflection and clipped enunciation. While school administrators may differ in the ways in which they express these emotions, for the most part these patterns seem to reflect the vocalic behaviors typifying particular emotions.

Many people say assertive things, but do it with flattened affect that does not transmit any feeling. If one's affect is perceived to be under immense control such as speaking through a clenched jaw, she or he is usually seen as aggressive: however, flattened affect is more likely to be perceived as passive. Over modulation of the voice is perceived as aggressive or unstable (Schnapper, 1974).

One way to transmit feeling is to model someone else with appropriate modulation by listening to a tape of that person's voice and then practicing until there is an approximate match. Whiteley and Flowers (1974) have found that effective responses can produce or increase in subject feelings of emotion on the part of a school administrator, thus leading to increased motivation and success in assertion situations.

Summary

School administrators require assertive behavior - that is, the ability to interact with finesse - to achieve desired goals and avoid undesired outcomes. Nonverbal communication is truly a new and exciting study. Educators can certainly benefit from basic knowledge and comprehension of NVC.

The school administrator is an expressive communication instrument, both to others and to herself or himself. Since so much of the others response is based on the non-content areas of communication, it is essential that the school administrator transmit the assertion non-verbally while transmitting it verbally. For example, administrators have found that eye contact alone will reduce the amount of time a door-to-door salesperson will take trying to sell something when the prospective buyer is saying no. Congruence between nonverbal and verbal assertive message used by school administrators is essential for effective, assertive communication.

Communication cannot be limited to the spoken word. As pointed out earlier, some psychologists contend that more than two-thirds of our communication is nonverbal. We are many times aware of nonverbal behavior of others, but most of us are unconscious of our own nonverbal actions. Nonverbal messages such as "Please hear what I'm not saying" often dominate the communicated word (Miller, 1978). It is

important for educators to understand and that NVC can and does have dual meanings. The implications of NVC are worth knowing by all people in any profession.

We are truly in a nonverbal society. What we see is many times more important than what we hear, and how we say something is many times more expressive than what we say. As school administrators there is a need to understand and master all nonverbal components of assertive behavior to express what is meant and interpret all messages.

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