



Top tips for improving your non-verbal communication skills

Non-verbal communication is believed to account for anything between 50 – 70% of communication. It can be tricky to improve your non-verbal communication skills as this type of communication is almost completely unconscious and a part of your ‘personality’. In addition, different cultures and social groups have different norms around non-verbal communication.

The first step to improving non-verbal communication is to become aware of it. The next step is to try to alter any habits that may be off-putting – this can take a lot of effort and may feel quite unnatural at first. One useful tip is to ‘fake it until you make it’ – that is, act as though the following non-verbal communication skills come naturally to you, in the hope that, eventually, they will become natural:

Body language: Your posture matters. If you cross your legs and/or arms when talking to others, turn away from them, stand still in a very rigid manner, slouch, or fidget, it can be off-putting for those you are communicating with. Your body language implies that you are uncomfortable and defensive.

Be careful about standing or sitting too close to others, or touching others, when communicating with them. Respect people’s personal space. Remember that different cultures, and different individuals, can have different norms and preferences about proximity and touch.

Work on coming across as relaxed when interacting with others or delivering a presentation. Stand or sit up straight and face your audience openly. If appropriate, move around a bit and use hand gestures to emphasise your points. Try filming yourself delivering a talk to see how your body language comes across. Better still, do this with a classmate and analyse each other’s body language.



Facial expression and eye contact: Facial expressions convey a lot about how a person really feels. If you frown, look terrified, or appear miserable, your audience will feel uncomfortable and may focus, not on what you are saying, but how you look while saying it. Practice relaxing your facial muscles, conveying an open facial expression, and even smiling a bit if you can.

In western cultures, it is generally considered important to make eye contact with others when you speak to them. Doing so conveys honesty and respect. If you are speaking to a group, try to make brief eye contact with everyone in the room. Your gaze should roam around the room and include those at the back. Do not prolong eye contact with anyone, as this can make people uncomfortable.

Tone, pitch, and speed of voice: If you speak in a very monotonous tone of voice, it can be quite dull for your audience, so try to work on coming across as lively and interested in what you are saying. Sometimes when people are nervous their voices become softer, higher, or they can become breathless. You may need to practice projecting your voice. Breathing exercises can help. Nerves can also cause you to speak too fast, which can make it difficult for your audience to hear everything that you have to say. Try to speak slowly, clearly, and in a voice loud enough to reach all of your listeners.

Appearance: Your appearance, funnily enough, is also a kind of non-verbal communication. This includes your dress, make-up, and hairstyle. Depending on the context, you may need to pay attention to your appearance. When delivering a presentation as a student, ensure that you are reasonably well-groomed – this demonstrates that you take the process seriously and have respect for your audience.

Nonverbal communication works both ways! Learn to notice and interpret the body language of others. If your audience becomes restless or otherwise conveys that they have stopped listening to you, it may be time for you to change your approach to re-engage their attention.