



Sensitize Yourself!

By Mark Zust, M.A.

(excerpted from his book, ESP For Everybody)

My wife, Christine, and I pride ourselves on being effective communicators. We both received degrees in public relations/journalism and are comfortable speaking in front of large groups. Yet, rarely a week goes by when our communication with each other doesn't misfire. We share a home office outfitted with the latest computers and labor-saving communication devices. We're both well organized and task-oriented. But the message gets garbled just the same. My wife will ask me: "Did you send out a response to the new business request I sent you this morning?" "Not yet" I reply, casually. Christine looks at me, less than pleased. "Why not? Didn't I tell you that it is a priority?" Fidgeting, I reply: "Well, you did say that, but your tone lead me to believe that it wasn't that big of a deal, so I figured I'd do it tomorrow." She levels her gaze at me and says through clenched teeth: "Please do it before the end of the day". Yikes! Message received, no question about it. Earlier that day, I wasn't being an attentive listener. I had ten other projects on my desk and I chose to hear what I wanted to hear. The right way to have handled this was to ask for clarification, rather than making an assumption based on Christine's tone of voice. I should have asked: "Oh, so is the deadline today? I can get this done by 2 pm, ok?" With that clarification, I would have worked the project into my schedule.

When you're talking with someone, do you ever have a problem with miscommunication?

Join the club. According to studies conducted at Stanford and Yale universities, we communicate only 7% of our intended message through the spoken word. That's right, just 7%. The rest of the content is provided, often unconsciously, through our non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal communication means your "body language" and includes, among others, your eye contact, use of touch and your tone of voice. Let's look at how to strengthen these areas of non-verbal communication and in the process, improve our sensitivity to others.

1. Eye contact

What is your eye contact saying about you? Do you look sincere? Engaged? Bored out of your skull? Studies show that in one-on-one conversations and in small groups, the ability to maintain eye contact relates directly to making others feel comfortable and valued. Let's face it, nobody likes to be talked at, but so often that's the impression we're giving when we choose to read our speech or report. Or perhaps we look off into space when presenting data or answering a question. For most people, it is very uncomfortable to maintain a gaze of more than a second or two, but studies show that powerful eye contact requires at least six seconds and preferably longer. This is not as tough as it sounds. Look the other person straight in the eyes, not slightly above the eyebrows as some speaking books suggest. Looking above the eyes may make you more comfortable, but it's an artificial technique that is obvious to the other person. If you're presenting to a group, single out one person and speak to them for a beat of at least five seconds, then slowly move your head to meet the gaze of a second person. Try to relax and take your time. Flitting from one face to another like a hummingbird is distracting and betrays your nervousness. A good place to practice this technique is at home with family and friends. Naturally, we are more comfortable maintaining eye contact with people we know well, and it's a great way to practice slowing down your delivery and moving your eyes from person to person. The added benefit is that even your family will notice a difference. You will appear more sincere, attentive and engaged, because that's exactly what this process allows you to become. A more focused, deliberate delivery is very powerful and lends extra importance to your words.

2. Touch

Done correctly, making a tactile connection with another person can be a powerful reinforcement of your message. First off, let's be clear what is appropriate and inappropriate use of touch. In Western culture, the "safe zones" are a light touch, lasting no more than 3-5 seconds on the shoulder blade, side of the arm close to the shoulder, or on the back of the arm near the forearm. Inappropriate touch would include

patting or slapping someone on the back (male or female), grabbing an arm or wrist, or generally touching or holding on to these areas for an extended period. Of course, any uninvited touch or brush of any body area is inappropriate and offensive. It is also grounds for legal action. The best rule to follow is: "If in doubt, don't touch."

However, if you have established good rapport and trust with someone, then touch can be effective in reinforcing a point. For instance, if you make a comment such as, "You know, placing the order this quarter will save you 20% in processing fees that go into effect next quarter" and lightly touch the forearm, you have made three connections with the person by using your voice (auditory), your words (intellectual) and your touch (kinesthetic). Later on in the conversation, if you can repeat the 20% savings offer while lightly touching the arm, the point will be more deeply ingrained in their subconscious. Now, you may think this is manipulative, and it is. Advertisers use catchy phrases, jingles, visual hooks, special offers and repetition to lock in their messages. Do we buy based solely on advertising? Of course not, but repetition combined with other stimuli like touch, sound, or strong visuals, is a proven technique that, used properly and with restraint, can give you the edge on your competition.

3. Tone of Voice

Obviously, if you tell someone, "I'm really excited about working with you on this project" in a flat monotone, the person is going to doubt your sincerity. But we also convey a lack of enthusiasm or commitment in more subtle ways. Somewhere along the way, business schools and corporations suggested that the best way to be professional is to be reserved, non-threatening and bland. Have you ever been a patient and had to contend with a bland, unemotional nurse? What about an uninspired teacher, coach or manager? We are inspired by people who are genuinely enthusiastic about what they do for a living.

Now, this doesn't mean you have to shout or stand on your head to be effective. Try smiling more often, especially on the phone. A smile animates your body and puts life and variety back into your voice. Try changing the volume of your voice to create greater variety. Sometimes, the most dramatic way to get attention, especially in a group presentation, is to whisper.

Note: The "soft voice" technique is very effective in a one on one or group situation, as it draws in the listener. But be careful. The same technique over the phone can be disastrous, so match your voice to the situation.

Another way of modulating your voice is to pause for effect. The secret word here is.....pausing. See? It even works in print! Choose your words carefully and give extra punch to a key word or concept by pausing before you deliver it.

When speaking, try speeding up or slowing down your delivery for added impact. You might consider starting off a report briskly, using short action-packed words and ideas, and then slow down when explaining more complex points. Sure, this is common sense, but you'd be surprised how many professional presenters, managers and salespeople I meet who rattle off their points at the speed of sound and then become impatient when I ask questions or seek clarification. Yes, you may have given this same speech a hundred times, but it's the first time for the listener. When in doubt, slow down.

Mirror, Mirror.

This is a somewhat controversial technique, but used sensitively, it can be remarkably effective. It's called mirroring and it requires you to be extra attentive to another person's tonality and mannerisms. For building fast rapport, especially with a tough prospect, it's hard to beat. The premise is simple: People are comfortable with people who are most like them. For instance, a shy, soft-spoken, introspective person is easily put off by someone who is aggressive, loud, and a fast talker. The savvy communicator looks for verbal and visual clues. Does the prospect slow down and look away when asked a question? Do they use certain words to describe their needs? Is their eye contact brief and

hesitant? You may not approve of the other person's communication style, but you need to respect it. Try building rapport by adjusting your approach. Mirror the person by speaking a bit more slowly and quietly, take your time in answering questions, and be willing to look away more often as you're thinking. Where possible, use the same words as the prospect in explaining your product or services, and subtly adjust your body language to more closely match the other person's. They won't be able to say why, but the prospect will feel comfortable with you, as if they had known you for a long time. No wonder!

I first used this technique more than 25 years ago. I was pitching my design services to a gruff, hard-boiled machine shop owner who barely finished high school. He seemed disinterested in talking to (his words) "a snotty-nosed college boy who doesn't know the first thing about manufacturing." It took me about two seconds to realize that I had to find some common ground fast or I was going to get thrown out of his office. I immediately changed my body language by sitting straight in my chair, keeping my gaze fixed on his. Believe me, I've been in stare-downs that were more comfortable! I let my language and pronunciation coarsen a bit and used some favorite industry slang. In my mind, I had nothing to lose, since I figured he was going to throw me out at any moment, anyway. Instead, a remarkable thing happened. This rough and tumble character began to laugh and tell me stories about when he was starting out, then he invited me to lunch. Three hours and several beers later, he said, "I can't put my finger on it, but I feel like I've known you for years. When do you want to get started?" We sealed the deal with a handshake the same day and I worked with his company for many years.

Being sensitive to others has little to do with "touchy-feely" aspects and everything to do with treating others the way they want to be treated. Everyone wants to believe they can connect with others easily, but the reality is, it's hard work. Learning to control your body language while studying others non-verbal communication can make you more attuned to what messages are really being sent.

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