

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATIONS

part 2 of 3 parts
— barriers to understanding

In looking at any phase of non-verbal communication we find the same basic types of problems existing in “getting the message across” as is found in verbal communications. However, they are more difficult to diagnose and to understand since they involve emotions, feelings, attitudes, and to some extent unconscious actions and reactions. This can be portrayed as shown in Figure 1.

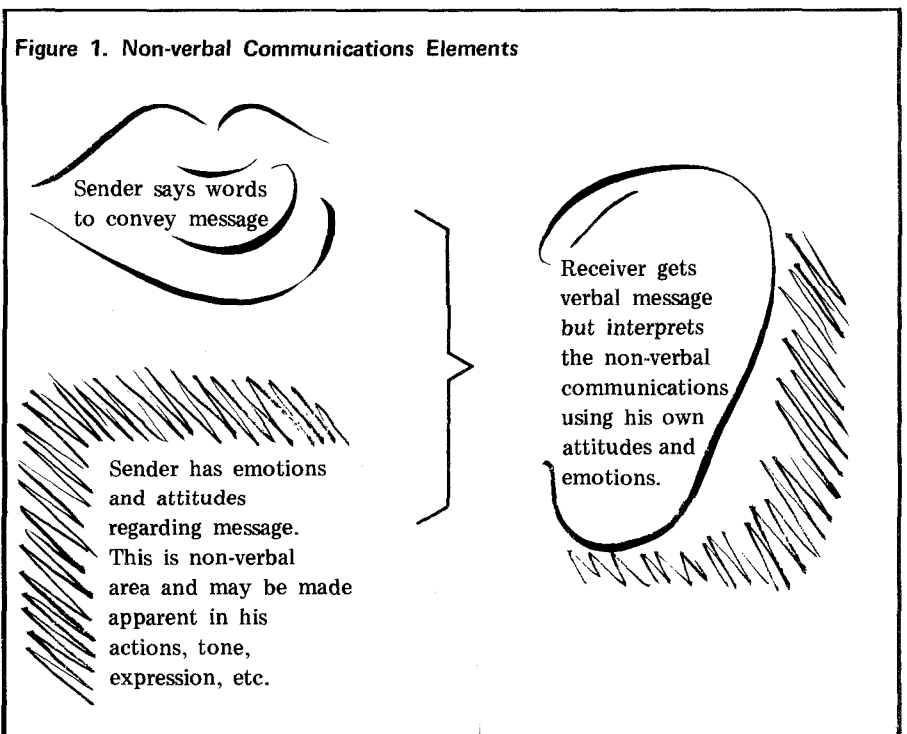
Therefore, we could say that emotions and attitudes both generate problems in the transmission of communications. These two things bring about, consciously or unconsciously, non-verbal communications on the part of the sender.

On the other hand the receiver perceives these non-verbal cues and clues and interprets them in light of his own emotions and attitudes to the end that the original message may or not be understood in the light of its original intent. So how we see the non-verbal communication determines the interpretation.

CASE IN POINT — PERCEPTION

A boss looks out in the office and sees a girl slam down her pencil. How does he read it? Does she have a problem with the work she is doing or is it something which is not apparent to him? If he is skilled in reading non-verbal clues and he sees something like this which he doesn't understand he'll take the time to try to get to the bottom of the problem before he takes any corrective action, if any is called for. However, if he isn't skilled in this area he may make a decision to take an action which could result in a union grievance.

Another important problem lies in the understanding of cultural differences in non-verbal communications. This is especially important in international relationships both formal and informal. Not only do those who deal with other cultures need to be aware of this problem but they also need to know of the complications and results of misinterpreting cultural cues in light of their own upbringing and training. In addition, world travelers need to know of the problems in this area so that they may be kept from making social or



GEORGE W. PORTER
Part 1 appeared in the June, 1969
issue of the Journal.

political errors through misinterpreting other people's non-verbal communications. Many times the non-verbal communication signs of one culture may mean different things within the confines of another group or culture.

CASE IN POINT – CULTURAL

In Arabia, one of the finest compliments you can pay to your dinner host is to belch loudly. This is to communicate that the meal has been extremely good; and you have enjoyed it fully. However, in this country, a belch is not only considered to be socially non-acceptable but also may be construed to mean that the food was not palatable or digestible.

At times we have a compounding of problems brought about by the misinterpretation of non-verbal cues by a third party. See Figure 2.

This problem is often apparent in everyday life when people enter into others' affairs without being invited in by the principals.

In examining those things which cause trouble in the area of non-verbal communications between individuals or within groups, they can be classified into two main categories:

Emotional Those involving actions based on feelings and attitudes—

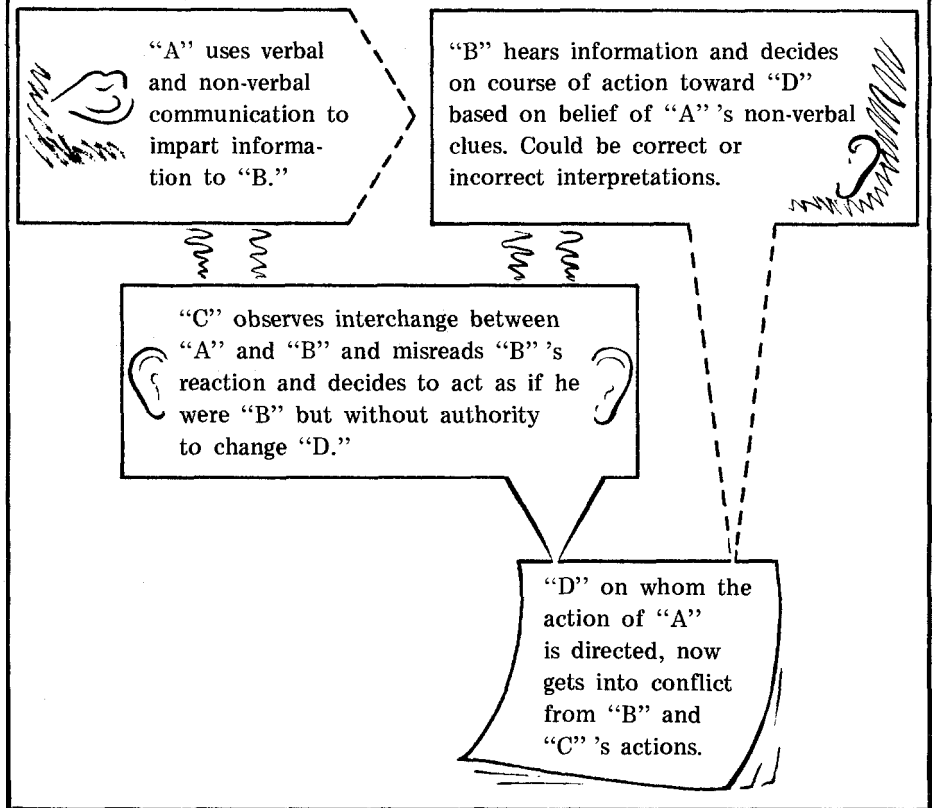
Mechanical Those involving other than feelings or emotions—

One of the greatest emotional problems is that of fear. This feeling runs the complete gamut of turning some people into raving maniacs while others are frozen into complete silence. During either of these behavioral extremes communications become muddled or cease to exist.

FEAR

Fear in interpersonal relationships has various causes. These causes result in actions being taken which are based more on emotion than on reason. When emotion takes over, non-verbal

Figure 2. Communications Misinterpretation



signs are sent out from the person affected and become apparent to another. These may take the form of:

- A glazed look
- Sweating
- Twitching
- Flushed skin
- Rigidity
- etc.

The causes of these non-verbal phenomena may stem from fear of:

- Conflict: could be a physical nature where bodily harm is threatened or it could take the form of a non-physical conflict where mentalities or emotions clash and damage may be inflicted upon one of the adversaries in the clash.
- Exposure: people can live a dual life — one the public

and their friends and loved ones see and the other is known only to themselves. This type of behavior can be illustrated by the person who leads a respectable life, doing his job, providing for his family, etc., and turns to burglary at night. Faced with exposure, nervousness, sweating, flushing and many other non-verbal clues may be seen.

- Betrayal: This fear is like that of exposure except that another person knows of the dual life and is in the position of exposure. Here is where seeds of blackmail flourish.

- Financial Loss: This area affects pocketbooks and reactions to this is much the same as a person who seeks survival. All kinds of non-verbal clues will be seen as a person becomes involved in seeking financial safety.
- Looking Foolish: This area affects a person's ego — his inner self. To protect this, people will remain silent; they will squirm; they will withdraw; they will refuse to take sides; etc. All of these indicators may be cues that the person is fearful of being made to look foolish.

EMOTIONAL BARRIERS

There are many other causes of breakdowns in communication which involve emotions and feelings. Everyone knows that feelings can be and usually are communicated or made known to others through non-verbal means in addition to verbalization. Mentioning a few of these emotional barriers to group or individual communications there are such things as:

- Dislike for a person or persons.
- Physical attraction of one person to another.
- Difference in sexes.
- Prejudices (race, religion, dress, etc.)
- Defensiveness.

The last item, defensiveness, is a rather interesting barrier because although it happens within one person it is usually caused by varying kinds of action of another. For example:

- If the tone of a boss when talking to a subordinate indicates that he is evaluating the subordinate's behavior, it builds defense within him and causes him to react to his boss in a defensive manner.
- If a person sees another as trying to control or influence him unduly it can build a defensive reaction.

Somehow, trying to control another implies that the other person is somewhat inadequate, ignorant, immature, or maybe has *wrong* attitudes.

- Strategy is something else that tends to build defensiveness within a person. When the sender's motives are suspect the receiver will be on his guard against being used. No one wants to be used and unfortunately much of the training in "Human Relations" is training in using people. Usually, strategy implies that someone wants to dominate, to win or to show he's right. This kind of behavior builds intense defense on the part of the recipient.
- Defensiveness is also built within a person when the sender conveys the impression that he is neutral toward the receiver. People like to be cared for and loved. They don't relate to those who are bland or neutral towards them. Rather, they tend to resist those who are too detached.
- Another sure way of building defense in a person is to show superiority. This can be done by name dropping or intimating that it is the custom to associate with the "better" people.
- Finally, when a person is dogmatic and tries to show that he is "the" authority; "he is right - you are wrong;" his ideas are truths that need to be defended; it builds defenses within his listeners.

ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS

In addition to the emotional barriers, there are the attitudinal barriers which closely resemble those involving emotions but vary probably in degree of involvement. Here we find such things as:

- The difference in status of the people involved.
- Aggressiveness by one or more members of a group.
- Hogging the show by one or more.
- Differences in educational levels of the members or participants.

- The lack of empathy of one person for another.
- Pressure of back home business and personal problems. (Hidden agendas.)
- Lack of interest in the subject matter itself.
- Lack of interest in getting clear communications.
- Social implications and taboos.
- Lack of sincerity of either party in the communication process.
- Pure self-centeredness of either party.

PHYSICAL IMPEDIMENTS

Finally, there are certain other situations which hinder all communications — non-verbal and verbal. These might be classified as physical impediments and include:

- The inability to see either the speaker or the silent conferee.
- Hardware (table, chairs, etc.) in the way. This is especially true where non-verbal emotional communications need to be expressed and can only be done through physical contact.
- Poor health including impediments of speech, hearing, sight or smell.
- Legal implications. (This is not purely physical but is in a category all its own.)

SUMMARY

From all this, we can easily see that many barriers are in existence which fog up communications of both the verbal and non-verbal types. It is only when the sender and receiver, both, know what barriers can be in existence that they can be in a position to do something about them. Those of a physical nature can be understood rather quickly. However, those lying in the emotional or attitudinal area are not only more difficult to recognize but also are more difficult to cope with.

Part 3, "How Non-verbal Communications Can Be Used in Training," will appear in the next issue of the Journal.