SPECIFIC ROLE OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN BUSINESS

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Abstract

Communication and business stand side by side and at contemporary world its significance has risen a lot. To be successful, it is not enough to have appropriate professional knowledge, it is inevitable to be able to communicate it well to business partners. In the globalized world of differences between cultures and potential culture clashes, it is important to possess suitable intercultural competence based on knowledge what particular cultures make different from others. Moreover, not only verbal or written signs add to the fact what make business negotiations successful or not. Nonverbal communication is a specific form of communication that has been achieving a certain place of interest, however its role , significance or balance may be still underestimated from time to time. The paper is an attempt to give some more details on this topic and persuade professional business people that training soft skills deserves their attention.

Keywords: Body language, eye contact, culture clashes, intercultural communication

Introduction

Communication belongs to top words and is among the most frequently used ones in a number of branches of our modern globalized world. It has been very much preferred in business, too where it can lead to great success accompanied with large profits or be blamed for failure and large losses. However, communication is far from being just about words or letters. Quite frequently communication is also about success in business, politics, art or good interpersonal relations. Many times it has been used just for excusing or covering failure, negative results or misunderstandings among business partners, political opponents, employers and employees, colleagues, friends, neighbours or even family members. There have been quite a number of various definitions on its basic function, that is, to underline its role of shifting messages – either verbal, written or nonverbal ones – from a person or a group of persons to another person or a group of

LIVEWORKSHEETS

people. There are certainly a number of more sophisticated versions of definitions but the basic idea that lies behind has not changed too much during the years – to let people understand a certain information and react to it – either positively or negatively.

There are notable differences between written and verbal messages and, of course, nonverbal communication. Generally, nonverbal communication and signs account for the major part of the communication contents. We are quite strongly cnvinced that nonverbal communication leaves its traces behind in written forms of communication, too though it may not be as significant as within verbal communication. In this paper, however, we would like to omit the written communication due to its specific position and also due to the fact that modern times allow easy access to face-to-face communication utilizing modern IT technologies and transport facilities bridging over long distances, therefore verbal communication might be slightly preferred.

Communication and Culture

Communication and culture have been closely linked and cannot be considered separately. The term "culture" has gone through a long-lasting progress during the history of mankind – starting with cultivating soil, plants and growing crops denoting to ancient agriculture, later it passed to a higher level when its meaning started to mark cultivating human spirit.

Communication is a process when messages are encoded on one side, and decoded on the other. The very core of the utterance and its contents may be transmitted with certain expectations and reactions. A receiver, following his cultural background responds to it in a certain way. If the expectations on both sides have not been fulfilled, the communication process more or less failed. The failure may have a number of reasons as communication is never performed in a totally isolated or culture-free environment. One party usually has some extent of more favourable position that apparently results in more advantageous pre-requisites for achieving positive outputs. A great number of other factors as language – native or foreign, noise, time, climate, place, etc. influence the final effect of such information spreading.

Another important fact should not be omitted – communication is not only about speaking, it is also about listening to partners, watching and trying to foresee their reactions. Many times problems occur that those sharing the process of communication focus too much on what they intend to forward to their counterparts. They may be so much concentrated on their own utterance that they totally neglect their partners´ reactions or they do not let them enter the conversation. It is good to be flexible to changing

LIVEWORKSHEETS

conditions as they may cause success or failure in intercultural communication.

Even though we can observe efforts to advance the culture to higher level throughout the history – whether it was in Ancient Greece or Rome, through Rennaisance Era – its real boom started in the twentieth century. A great number of scientists, including anthropologists, sociologists, linguists focused on details of processes running within development and progress of different cultures. Among them, the American anthropologist A. L. Kroeber deserves some attention, particularly for the attempt to focus on culture and its processes within the framework of its long-lasting development. He believed that culture was a universal human characteristic and to be able to understand its specifications it was inevitable to penetrate into the very core of particular cultures discover the patterns of culture phenomena and reveal what made them so unique. Kroeber believed that a complete understanding of culture must contain explanations not only of specific cultures but also of cultural elements and patternings that transcend specific cultures (Kroeber: 1987).

While Kroeber focused on revealing and exploring ancient cultures, Geert Hostede focused on international units working for particular companies, thus creating their specific multicultural environment performing under certain circumstances. The renowned Dutch expert defined culture as "the collective mental programming of the human mind which distinguishes one group of people from another. This programming influences patterns of thinking which are reflected in the meaning people attach to various aspects of life and which become crystallized in the institutions of a society." (Hofstede: 2000. pg. 32). His major contribution was establishing some categories that could be applied in international or multicultural environment and thus helping for becoming acquainted with differences in culture and avoid possible culture clashes. His criteria form the basic dimensions in differences among cultures. Even though his outputs may be slightly outdated now, they are still of great importance and many of his followers draw from his research or were inspired by him for their further activities in communicaction and culture-oriented research.

These are just two significant scientists out of many, who put fundamentals in what has been so widely treated at present – intercultural communication and its consequences for business, social life, politics or diplomacy.

Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is basically information exchange between two or more parties with different cultural background. It may be rather complicated, if participants do not share the same language, or their

LIVEWORKSHEETS

language skills are insufficient, and more over, they may vary in respecting moral, ethical, religious or some other values. Cultures may significantly differ concerning specific rules, rites or commonly accepted norms. Gender or race related attitudes, appropriate age categories suitable for communications or negotiations, may also intrude into final positive or negative outputs. Intercultural communication should follow such a way of information exchange that would lead to mutual respect between communicating parties and eliminate expressions of animosity or antagonism to utmost level. This process should result in creating intercultural competence that would lead to successful communication with different culture representatives avoiding misunderstandings or clashes between cultures. Thus, intercultural communication can significantly influence and accelerate as well as complicate or totally devastate negotiations in various areas of professional activities. Possessing adequate intercultural, cross-cultural and multi-cultural abilities and competence may result in completing endless negotiations in a favourable way, saving human lives or significantly change existence of millions of people.

The real achievement of mutual intercultural understanding lies in determining specific standards that make two (or more cultures) similar, what they have in common and those what make them different. The former may eliminate tensions or facilitate the communication process with positive results for both parties. The latter, on the other side, are important for participants on both sides to be prepared to face unexpected reactions or try to find appropriate solutions to avoid clashes between cultures or "save one´s face."

To gain as much knowledge of potential partners´ culture as possible, it is inevitable to avoid traps that would result in misleading conclusions with insufficient consequences. What we have in mind are prejudices or stereotypes that may be frequently spread all around on some cultures. They are quite frequently subjects of jokes or comments mocking some cultures with the aim of looking down upon some of them. However, such prejudices or stereotypes may result in total ignorance, insult and at the end of the day in communication failure between partners coming from different cultures, the consequences of which may be fatal.

It is not only about lost profit, it is also about political or diplomatic negotiations they may be led for saving people´ s lives or solving serious economic, political or military issues. Prejudices towards some culture are very often derogated or neglected as some people do not even think they may be harmful. They are based on emotions, prioritizing mostly negative qualities of individuals, aiming at generalizing these upon the whole communities or cultures.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

Similarly, stereotypes tend to overestimate usually negative trends and expectations on some phenomena, events or people that may not be (and usually are not) true. One (or some) quality accompanied by some skin-deep signs have been highlighted as typical features for groups, nations or cultures thus providing over-simplification or destortion in particular nations´ perception (Šroněk). Stereotypes have their roots in traditions, customs with historic backgrounds that tend to survive due to media, education, traditional verbal communication frequently in the form of jokes or (more or less) witty comments. Even though they may have some historic justification, they should not be passed to a culture as such in general, as in spite of the fact that cultures show some characteristic attributes or forms, it is impossible to presume that their members would behave in the same way in similar circumstances, ignoring their own individual features typical to their own characters that may be accepted either positively or negatively all over the world.

Another factor being taken in account with mostly negative side-effects is ethnocentrism. It is a relatively dangerous form of focusing upon one specific culture that is superior to all. Its danger lies in preferring all standards, patterns of behaviour, values, etc. of a certain culture that are absolutely and indisputably considered as the only positive and correct ones. Ethnocentrism totally ignores differences between cultures, creates cultural barriers for all those whose behavioural standards, opinions or communication forms are different. Ethocentrists are absolutely convinced that their culture is unique and they are superior to other cultures. Any indications of doubt or distrust in contact with "the preferred culture" are unacceptable on the side of its followers. To a great extent such a view-point is not only implausible it is harmful and incompetent as it frequently supports xenophobia and chauvinism. In the human history there have been plenty of examples that this philosophy may lead to wars, genocides and other disasters with fatal consequences. The overall communication, however, is substantially influenced by another factor that should not be marginalized, namely nonverbal communication.

Nonverbal Communication

People communicate even if they do not talk. As soon as two or more people meet, they transmit some signals to their counterparts and before negotiations start, clever and aware participants may be a step forward in their observations and thus gain some advantage that may help them achieve better chances for final decisions. Nonverbal communication includes those important but unspoken signals that individuals or groups of people exhibit, without saying a word, using just specific parts of their bodies, namely eyes, hand gestures, facial expressions, physical appearance, etc.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

As generally stated, and mentioned above, verbal communication makes up only as little as 10% of messages we send to one another. In fact, 90% of messages that are being sent back and forth require no words at all, even though estimates slightly vary in the percentage score. In any case it means that even before we open our mouths to speak, our appearance, gestures and body language send some signals to people we tend to communicate with.

It is hard to prove that a business deal or political negotiation have failed just because of improper behaviour and lack of knowledge of partner´s culture, an awareness of nonverbal communication and the cultural differences in the way that it functions can help people to avoid misunderstandings. We should be aware of knowing what message our business partner is sending and, at the same time, be aware of the possible impact of the messages our partner is receiving from us. Most of the time, this process is unconscious, so it requires a bit effort to pay closer attention to nonverbal cues we send or receive. Even though some people may tend to ignore or neglect it as something unimportant, it is worth of some extra work for gaining this key skill and focus on it during the process of communication.

Types of Nonverbal Communication:

It is important to remember that it is not only cultural differences that influence the way we communicate. Some behviour is, of course, specific to each individual. On the other side, there are some special tendencies that are related to age, professional culture or gender – our communication will depend on a complex mixture of situatios and relationships. It differs when speaking to strangers or friends, managers and subordinates, customers and suppliers, etc. Thus, nonverbal communication can be divided into some categories.

Most apparent forms of nonverbal communication that accompany or stress the information forwarded are body movements and gestures (kinesics), eye contact (oculesics), the sense of touch (haptics), the sense of smell (olfactics), etc. It is good to be aware of the fact that there are cultural differences regarding hygienic standards as well as to what smells are acceptable or desirable. While some cultures require the covering up of body odour with cosmetics, others consider it to be natural and pleasing.

The distance between communicating partners (proxemics) is an important signal of belonging to certain culture. According to Edward T. Hall, human perception for space has been closely linked to our senses that are common to all (Hall:1996). Nevertheless, there are vast differences in physical distances between partners when communicating together and it is believed to be an important factor, as there are quite significant space

LIVEWORKSHEETS

differences for appropriate business communication. Reasons why some cultures prefer closer physical distance when communicating with each other and some other cultures stand more apart have not been explicitly clarified so far. There are just some assumptions that limits concerning one´s own personality in particular cultures are ambiguous resulting in different spatial distances during the process of communication. E. T. Hall means that when communicating, people intuitively create "a safety bubble" – it helps individuals to keep clear distance between one´ s own body and their counterparts (Hall: 1996).

Physical distance is very close and typical for Latin American or Mediterreanean nations and touching,, hugging or even kissing our business partners is quite typical there. On the other side, some Asian cultures avoid physical contacts with partners – even shaking hands is unacceptable, it is replaced by bowing (Japan, China) and its angle is subject to cultural differences and the partner´s rank in corporate hierarchy.

Some other factors add to nonverbal communication that are linked to movement (more dynamic or slow motions). These, however express not only cultural differences, they may express an individual´s general attitude to life. It is believed that optimistic approach is reflected in the way such a person moves, in his firm body-control, relaxed face and optimistic look. Pessimists, on the other side, tend to be tense, frown and in defensive approach. Forms of appearence - what is acceptable and what is not concerning clothes, jewellery or hairstyle (adornment) - they all send out signals to our communication partners. A person can hide his uncertainty and gain more self-confidence by wearing a specific outfit, or he can also tend to demonstrate his role in a company hierarchy in this way.

It is important to be aware of what might be appropriate in specific situation in particular culture and that people judge others on the basis of their looks. How people look can have a significant impact on how others listen to them. Inappropriate look may reduce the credibility of their message. [1]

Communication through colours (chromatics) can be especially worth of specific attention in intercultural communication. Colours influence our mood, emotions or impressions on the surrounding environment. In different cultures different colours tend to account for either positive or negative denotation. There are significant differences between colours of joy versus those of sorrow throughout cultures. Ignoring such an information can lead

[1] The former US Foreign Secretary Madelaine Albright was renowned for her brooches she used for transmitting signals to her partners concerning her attitudes in international negotiations.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

to failure in business communication or at least to some embarassment for both counterparts.

Physiological aspects – breathing, sweating, blinking, or the degree of nervosity accompanied by shaking, trembling hands or unclear throats - also tend to influence communication and its flow.

Body Language

Human body reflects particular man´s character and it reacts to specific situations due to belonging to certain culture. Body talk is an inherent component of man´s existence by means of which he communicates both with his environment as well as with himself. Human body intuitively (sub-consciously) transmits certain signals defined by particular culture and the environment reacts to them. We communicate by means of almost all parts of our body as well as posture and appearance. Probably most important signals are transmitted by facial expressions that involve eye contact, smile, mimicry, etc. Facial expressions, even if identical, can have different meanings. The same is true for eye contact that may be crucial as it belongs to first contacts when meeting partners for communication. Eye contact is important in all cultures, although rules differ about who looks at whom and for how long. In some cultures looking in the eye is seen as a sign of openness and trust, while in others respect is often shown by avoiding eye contact. Anthropologists have identified a number of universal human facial expressions – grimacing, raising one´s eyebrows or smiling – showing emotions like joy, surprise, anger or fear. Yet people´s reactions to certain facial expressions can vary. Smiling, for example, is not always a sign of relax, good mood, politeness or confidence. In some cultures giggling or smiling may rather reflect embarassment, nervousness, superficiality or even unprofessionalism.

Gestures should be carefully watched, as they may be interpreted either positively or negatively throughout diffferent cultures. Sometimes excessive gestures may express disharmony between verbal communication and body talk resulting in artificial and unnatural behaviour. It has been generally believed that there is nothing like acceptable or unacceptable gestures. Our body is either in harmony with what we tend to communicate or it is in disharmony with both verbal information and way of thinking.

The way the body is positioned also sends out signals – it may reflect anxiety (looking down, hunching the shoulders), self-confidence (straight position, raised chin), hesitation (moving from one foot to another), etc. On the other side, there might be attempts to learn some forms of body talk with the aim of achieving positive impression or some advantage. Many experts agree, this rarely works as people tend to feel discrepancies between verbal and nonverbal forms.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

The way people greet each other, as mentioned above is different in different cultures. Shaking hands for greeting may be appropriate for many cultures, however its frequency varies a lot. Different cultures vary also in the way the same touch is used and confusions can result if w are not aware of different cultural standards.

Paralinguistics and Meta-Communication

Even though paralinguistics has been connected to oral form of conveying messages it is considered to be part of nonverbal communication as it involves paralinguistic aspects such as volume and speed of speech, tone or pitch of one´s voice, intonation, fluency of speech, emotional capacity of words, etc. These forms express a certain level of emotions both positive or negative, impatience, anger or fear – very often accompanied by other forms of nonverbal communication (gestures, or other body part motions). Cultural differences concerning speed or pitch of voice are significant among nations and may result in misunderstandings or failures if not recognized in proper way. Care should be taken not to interpret the patterns found in one language based on the criteria of another language.

Meta-communication includes hidden meanings beyond words that may be inserted into an information either on purpose or deliberately. The utterance may be enclosed into a written message (reading between the lines), directly expressed (a compliment may be pronounced in ironic way with the aim to hurt somebody), etc. In the context of different cultures it may lead to misinterpretations. That is also why using humour, sarcasm or irony can be very controversial and it is advised to be avoided as much as possible. Similarly, historic truths or events, comments on national, religious, racial or gender differences or allusions may have scandalous endings.

Perception of time and communication (chronomics) referring to the way time is considered – it is also subject to cultural differences as well as potential misunderstandings. In monochronic cultures punctuality is considered as a positive attribute signalizing nonverbal message containing the idea of respect towards business partners while inaccuracy or delay are considered rude or ignorant. "Time is money" is the keyword for these cultures. Polychronic cultures, on the other hand, tend to be more flexible concerning the beginning of negotiations, their flow as well as deadlines in general. It is good to know the best period of day when negotiations could have successful flow and positive conclusion. Some cultures prefer early morning meetings, in others early afternoon is the time for relax (siesta), in some cultures late evenings are most convenient for negotiations.

Silence and pauses are also involved in nonverbal communication. Its interpretation, however may be rather controversial depending upon

LIVEWORKSHEETS

specific situation, its duration or mutual relations between communication partners. Periods of silence may be highly valued in some culture´s conversation. In others, long periods of silence may be considered very awkward or may indicate lack of interest, disagreement, anger or derogation. Longer pauses of silence may be very embarassing if people are not well aware of particular cultural specialties. In any case, we should keep in mind that even when we remain silent, we communicate in some way.

Conclusion

When using a foreign language, people tend to focus on verbal aspects of communication – use proper vocabulary, correct grammatical forms or pass comprehensive information to our counterparts. Quite often, however, we tend to exploit important features of nonverbal communication that can add both clarity and impact to our message.

It is impossible to provide a definitive checklist of do´s and don´ts regarding nonverbal communication as it is rather personal, denoting belonging to a certain community or culture and it very much depends on specific situations. Business meetings always follow their specific aims focusing preferably on spreading business activities and increasing profit. In the global world, existing financial crisis, surrounded by a huge number of competitors, business people should be well aware not only of their professional, managerial skills and knowledge, but they should possess good soft skills that still tend to be overlooked or neglected. Fluency in speaking a foreign language accompanied with appropriate knowledge of nonverbal communication as well cultural differences may provide clever professionals with comparative advantage to become successful in their efforts. Life pace is getting more and more accelerated and due to lack of time these factors may still be somehow underestimated. However, it should be mentioned that the field of nonverbal communication has progressed a lot over the last few decades. Apart from business, it has reached its application in international relations, education, media, etc.

Managing different dimensions of nonverbal communication is demanding. Controlling the way we speak, move or involve our body in the process of communication may lead to a certain degree of uncomfortable ways of one´ s behaviour. The ability to understand and use nonverbal communication is a powerful tool that can help in contact with others, navigate challenging situations, build better relationships in professional as well as private areas.

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