

# Organizational Behaviour



Edition

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## Interpreting gesture clusters

Cluster signals	Indicating
Flexible open posture, open hands, display of palms and wrists, removing jacket, moving closer to other person, leaning forward in chair, uncrossed arms and legs, smiling, nodding, eye contact	Openness
Rigid, closed posture, arms and legs tightly crossed, eyes glancing sideways, minimal eye contact, frowning, no smiling, pursed lips, clenched fists, head down, flat tone of voice	Defensiveness
Drumming fingers, head cupped in palm of hand, foot swinging, brushing or picking lint from clothing, body pointing towards exit, repeatedly looking at watch, the exit, a book	Boredom, impatience
Small inward smile, erect body posture, hands open and arms extended outwards, eyes wide and alert, lively walk, expressive and well-modulated voice	Enthusiasm
Knitted forehead, deadpan expression, tentative nodding or smiling, one slightly raised eyebrow, strained voice, saying 'I understand' while looking away	Lack of understanding
Blank expression, phoney smile, tight posture, arms stiff at side, sudden eye shifts, nervous tapping, sudden mood shifts, speech toneless and soft or too loud and animated	Stress

Someone who is anxious usually displays 'self-manipulation': stroking lips or an ear lobe, playing with hair. Anxiety can also be signalled by shifting direction of gaze. Some friendship signals can be amusing to observe. When we meet someone to whom we are attracted, we often use 'preening gestures'; smoothing our clothes, stroking our hair, straightening our posture. Watch a group of friends and you will often see them standing, sitting, and even holding cups or glasses in an almost identical manner. This is known as 'posture mirroring'. You can often spot the 'outsider' as the one not using the posture. Friendship groups copy each other's gestures, known as 'gesture mirroring'.

**Power tells** non-verbal signals that indicate to others how important and dominant someone is, or how powerful they would like us to *think* they are.

We also use non-verbal communication to show how important we are with **power tells** (Chapter 22).

The power tells that dominant people display include using open postures and invasive hand gestures, smiling less, looking away while speaking, speaking first and dominating the conversation, and interrupting others. Signals which suggest a submissive attitude include modifying your speech to sound like the other person, hesitations (lots of 'ums' and 'ers'), close postures, and self-comfort gestures such as clasping your hands, and touching your face and hair.

Leading politicians also use non-verbal gestures to signal their dominance (Kirton, 2014). As a 'positive power gesture', Angela Merkel (Germany) grips and then pats the shoulder of political colleagues. To signal that he was confidently in control, Barack Obama (USA) held his hands in front of him, palms facing inwards, as if holding an invisible brick. Some political



leaders, including Margaret Thatcher, a previous UK prime minister) are trained to speak with a deeper voice. Other advice concerns walking with a sense of purpose to appear young and energetic (Ronald Reagan, USA), and making eye contact while shaking hands (Bill Clinton, USA).

## Saying 'sorry' without saying anything

In Japan, the way in which bosses bow indicate how sorry the company is for mistakes, such as Toyota's recall of 8 million cars in 2010 due to faulty accelerator pedals.

A slight bow from the waist, not held for very long, indicates a mild apology.

A deeper bow, at an angle of about 45 degrees, and lasting for about one and a half seconds, suggests contrition, without accepting personal responsibility.

A full 90-degree bow, held for up to seven seconds, indicates personal and/or official responsibility for an incident that has caused significant damage, and for which the person is asking forgiveness.

The most extreme form of bow involves kneeling with one's head on the floor for perhaps 30 seconds. This indicates that, 'The law may punish me, but that does not cover how sorry I am'.

When Toyota recalled its cars, the company president Akio Toyoda performed a 25 degree bow, suggesting that



he was 'quite sorry': 'In bowing terms, it holds the same apology value as you might get from a waiter who had forgotten your order' (Lewis and Lea, 2010).

### STOP AND SEARCH

YouTube for *Intercultural communication*.

## Cultural differences in communication style



The use and interpretation of non-verbal communication differ from culture to culture. In Japan, smiling and nodding implies understanding, but not necessarily agreement. In Australia, raising the pitch of your voice at the end of a sentence signifies openness to challenge or question. In some Asian cultures, it is impolite to give superiors direct and prolonged eye contact; a bowed head signals deference and not a lack of self-confidence or defensiveness. People from northern European cultures prefer a lot of personal space and rarely touch each other. French, Italians and Latin Americans stand closer together and touch more often to show agreement and friendship.

Simple gestures must be used with care. Make a circle with your thumb and forefinger, extending the other three fingers. How will this be interpreted? In America, and to scuba divers, it means 'OK'. In Japan, it means money. In France, it means zero or nothing. In some Arab countries, it signifies a curse. In Germany and Brazil, it is obscene.

**High context culture**

a culture whose members rely heavily on a range of social and non-verbal clues when communicating with others and interpreting their messages.

**Low context culture**

a culture whose members focus on the written and spoken word when communicating with others and interpreting their messages.

Edward Hall (1976; 1989) distinguished between **high context culture** and **low context culture**.

**High context culture**

Establish relationship first  
Value personal relations and goodwill  
Agreement based on trust  
Slow and ritualistic negotiations

**Low context culture**

Get down to business first  
Value expertise and performance  
Agreement based on legal contract  
Fast and efficient negotiations

China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam are high context cultures, where people tend to take a greater interest in your position, your business card, your dress, material possessions, and other signs of status. Written and spoken communications are not ignored, but they are secondary. Agreements can be made on a handshake, on someone's word.

North America, Scandinavia, Switzerland and Germany are low context cultures, where people pay less attention to non-verbal messages. People in German organizations tend to be preoccupied with detailed written rules, and Americans like to have precise legal documents. Agreements are not made until the contract is in writing, and it is signed. If you insist on recording an agreement in writing in a high context culture, you could be accused of not trusting the other party.

These categorizations reflect tendencies and are not absolute. Most countries have sub-cultures with very different norms. In addition, men tend to be more high context than women, but this observation does not apply to all men or to all women. Nevertheless, it is easy to see how misunderstanding can arise when high and low context cultures meet, unless those communicating are sensitive to their respective differences. You can reduce these misunderstandings with the following four rules (Robbins et al., 2010, p.307):

1. *Assume that others are different*, unless you can establish otherwise; we tend to assume that others are more like us than they often are, so you are less likely to make a mistake if you assume difference until you can prove similarity.
2. *Use description and avoid evaluation*, until you have had time to observe and understand the perspectives of the other culture, or cultures, as interpretations and evaluations are based on cultural background rather than on what you observe.
3. *Practise empathy*, putting yourself in the other person's position, understanding their values, background and experience, and frames of reference.
4. *Treat interpretations as working hypotheses*, and keep testing and questioning your conclusions and explanations, using feedback and checking with colleagues.

## Aboriginal culture and communication

Australian Aboriginal culture uses verbal and non-verbal communication in ways that are different from European and North American communication styles (Nelson-Jones, 2000):

- Aborigines value brevity in verbal communication rather than detailed elaboration, and simple 'yes' and 'no' replies are common.
- There is no word for 'thank you' in Aboriginal languages. People do things for you as an obligation.
- In some Aboriginal tribes, it is unlawful to use the name of a dead person.
- The terms 'full-blood', 'half-caste', 'quarter-caste', 'native' and 'part-Aborigine' are regarded as offensive by Aborigines.

- Long silences in Aboriginal conversation are common and are not regarded as awkward.
- To some Aboriginal people, it is not acceptable to look another straight in the eye.
- Some Aboriginal groups do not allow men and women to mix freely.
- Aborigines feel that it is not necessary to look at the person who is speaking to them.
- Aborigines do not feel that it is necessary to attend meetings (an interview, for example) at specific times.

How do these norms and preferences compare with the communication style of your culture?

## Impression management

**Impression management** the processes through which we control the image or impression that others have of us.

We usually send and receive non-verbal signals unconsciously. However, it is possible to control the signals that we send, and to read the cues that others are sending to us. This level of attention and control is difficult to sustain, but it is important in organizational settings when we want to control the image or impression that others have of us. We do this through **impression management** techniques.

Mark Bolino and colleagues (2016) identify five impression management tactics and their uses – and suggest how these tactics can backfire if they are not used carefully:

Tactics	Used in order to be seen as	But can instead be seen as
Ingratiation: favours, conforming to others' opinions, compliments	Likeable	Sycophantic
Self-promotion: boasting, taking credit	Competent	Braggart
Exemplification: staying late at work, appearing to be busy	Dedicated	Self-righteous
Intimidation: making threats	Threatening	Bullying
Supplication: playing dumb	Needy	Incompetent

Research consistently shows that observers respond more favourably to impression management tactics that are consistent with gender stereotypes. Men are more likely to use aggressive (male) impression management tactics than women. Women who want to be seen as leaders thus tend to use male tactics like self-promotion and intimidation. However, there is 'backlash effect'. By contradicting the social norm, women who use those male tactics are usually seen as less likeable, and are not evaluated as favourably as men who use those tactics (Bolino et al., 2016, p.390).

Bolino et al. (2016) offer three pieces of advice about the best way to manage impressions. First, emphasize your genuine qualities and avoid trying to signal traits, skills and competencies that you don't have. Others prefer impression management behaviour that is authentic and not deceitful. You should therefore consider your qualities and emphasize those, and avoid trying to communicate traits, skills, and competencies that you don't have. Second, use impression management tactics in situations where this is appropriate: job interviews, speaking to customers. Third, develop awareness of when and how often to manage your impressions, through practice, self-monitoring, feedback from friends and colleagues, and developing your political skills (see Chapter 22).



### EMPLOYABILITY CHECK (communication skills, interpersonal skills)

At your next job interview, how will you consciously manage your appearance, speech, gestures, postures and other NVB in order to manage the impression that you want to give to the interviewers?

### CRITICAL THINKING

Is impression management deceitful? What ethical problems are raised by suggesting that we should consciously manipulate the impression that others have of us through verbal and non-verbal communication?



As with conversation controls, we can use impression management to manipulate the behaviour of others. We do this, for example, by 'giving off' the impression that we are friendly, submissive, apologetic, angry, defensive, confident, intimidating, and so on. The more effectively we manage the impression we give, the greater the control we can achieve in social interaction, and the greater our power to pursue our preferred outcomes over others.

Some people regard impression management as acting. However, we manage our impression all the time. Do you dress and act the same way at a party as you do when at home? It is hardly possible to avoid sending signals through, for example, our dress, posture, facial expressions, gestures, tone and pitch of voice, and even location in a room. We can distinguish between conscious (by implication more effective) and unconscious (by implication less effective, or misleading) impression management. Conscious impression management has many advantages. Interactions run more smoothly when we give the correct signals to others who in turn accurately decode these signals of our attitudes and intent. Impression management is a critical skill in many organizational contexts, such as counselling, and in selection, appraisal and disciplinary interviews.

## The ethics of impression management

At first, Richard Nixon vowed he would not debate with John Kennedy. He had little to gain from such an encounter, and much to lose. As vice-president, he was better known than the young senator and universally considered a heavyweight. But in the end his fear of appearing fearful overcame his caution. It was a mistake. The camera is unkind to men who look shifty.

At the first debate in 1960, Nixon was not feeling well. After hearing Kennedy turn down the offer of

make-up, he turned it down too, although it might have covered his five o'clock shadow. Kennedy got his aides to apply make-up when Nixon wasn't looking, and presented a tanned and handsome face to the nation. Nixon looked like a sweaty corpse. Radio listeners thought he did well. But on television, Kennedy won by a mile (*The Economist*, 2008).

In your judgement, was John F. Kennedy's behaviour ethical at that debate in 1960?

