# Optimist Notes on Effective Communication

## Exercising Non-Verbal Communication Skills in a World of Technology

Today's technology has no doubt made a heavy impact on social interactions. Rather than call, we text or send a Facebook message. Instead of walk across the office, we use online chat or email. While all of these are examples of verbal communication, only the voice-to-voice and face-to-face examples include forms of non-verbal devices that help all parties involved better understand the full message being delivered. This can sometimes seem like a good thing – for example, no nervousness is shown through a text, but a call may reveal a raspy voice and lots of "ummms". However, much needed tone is often lost when the average composer lacks the vernacular variety to imply it. (So goes the saying, "I wish there were a sarcasm font.) There also exists the problem of spending so little time in traditional communication settings that we start to lose our fluency in these ever important nonverbal cues, and more often misunderstand or offend others in offline social situations. Let's look at a few ways these non-verbal faux pas can happen, and how they can be avoided.

Understand Basic Kinesics
Your mother was right when she told you not to slouch. Not only is it bad for your spine, but it sends a message of your boredom and general disinterest. Sitting up straight is just one example of polite kinesics. You should understand how all of your body positioning is interpreted by others. Turn towards those who speak to you, don't fold your arms, and be sure nod your head to confirm your understanding.

Be Conscious of Eye Movement
We all know that person that rolls their eyes, seemingly without realizing they did – don't be that person. Make eye contact with your conversation partner(s), and be aware of your facial expressions.

Use Appropriate Tone, Pitch, and Volume When Speaking
If you're not accustomed to using your voice around others, you may communicate the wrong message with the way that you speak. Being too loud can be annoying and being too quiet will cause your input to be passed over. It's equally important to not be too dry or low-pitched when speaking. Although unintentional, you will likely come off as being rude, sarcastic, a know-it-all, or disinterested. They only way to hone these skills is to use them with around others.

Understand the Area of Others' Personal Space
Have you ever met a "close talker"? The behavior of standing within 18 inches of someone with whom you are having a casual, and not intimate conversation is very unnerving to most people. A good guide for conversational distance between yourself and an acquaintance, extended family member, or colleague is

about the length of your arm. Business meetings, conferences, and other professional settings require at least 4 feet of distance, if not more.

Are You a "Toucher"?

Although different cultures have slightly different rules, it's important to know the most commonly accepted levels of appropriate touch for different relationships in your particular social situation. Most Americans value a handshake or shoulder pat from a colleague or business partner. Hugging, shoulder rubbing, and hair touching are only appropriate within friendships and family, as they are more intimate. If you don't know the difference between what one may consider a friendly shoulder squeeze and an intimate shoulder touch, you should avoid it altogether.

Value Others' Time

Because the world of text, chat, and email has given us the freedom to respond at leisure, we tend to forget that face-to-face interactions require more consideration for timeliness. Most people understand that you should arrive on time to interviews, meetings, and lunch dates – but they don't understand why or see it as important. Being on time demonstrates respect, thoughtfulness, and interest.

If you feel you don't understand all of the nuances of non-verbal communication, you're not alone. There is a rising concern over the decline in "real" social interaction. You can avoid this by committing to face time (no, not the Apple App) with friends, family, or a social club at least once a week. It seems as though staying sharp in your non-verbal communication skills may actually give you a competitive edge as time goes on and the online generation becomes the majority.

Differences Between Oral and Written Communication

Most of us intuitively understand that there are differences between oral and written language. All communication includes the transfer of information from one person to another, and while the transfer of information is only the first step in the process of understanding a complex phenomenon, it is an important first step. Writing is a fairly static form of transfer. Speaking is a dynamic transfer of information. To be an effective speaker, you must exploit the dynamism of oral communication, but also learn to work within its limitations. While there is a higher level of immediacy and a lower level of retention in the spoken word, a speaker has more ability to engage the audience psychologically and to use complex forms of non-verbal communication

The written language can be significantly more precise. Written words can be chosen with greater deliberation and thought, and a written argument can be extraordinarily sophisticated, intricate, and lengthy. These attributes of writing are possible because the pace of involvement is controlled by both the writer and the reader. The writer can write and rewrite at great length, a span of time which in some cases can be measured in years. Similarly, the reader can read quickly or slowly or even stop to think about what

he or she has just read.   More importantly, the reader always has the option of re-reading; even if that option is not exercised, its mere possibility has an effect upon a reader's understanding of a text.  The written word appeals more to a contemplative, deliberative style.

Speeches can also be precise and indeed they ought to be.  But precision in oral communication comes only with a great deal of preparation and compression.  Once spoken, words cannot be retracted, although one can apologize for a mistake and improvise a clarification or qualification.  One can read from a written text and achieve the same degree of verbal precision as written communication.  But word-for-word reading from a text is not speech-making, and in most circumstances audiences find speech-reading boring and retain very little of the information transmitted.

On the other hand, oral communication can be significantly more effective in expressing meaning to an audience.  This distinction between precision and effectiveness is due to the extensive repertoire of signals available to the speaker: gestures, intonation, inflection, volume, pitch, pauses, movement, visual cues such as appearance, and a whole host of other ways to communicate meaning. A speaker has significantly more control over what the listener will hear than the writer has over what the reader will read.  For these techniques to be effective, however, the speaker needs to make sure that he or she has the audience's attention--audiences do not have the luxury of re-reading the words spoken.  The speaker, therefore, must become a reader of the audience.

Reading an audience is a systematic and cumulative endeavor unavailable to the writer.  As one speaks, the audience provides its own visual cues about whether it is finding the argument coherent, comprehensible, or interesting.  Speakers should avoid focusing on single individuals within an audience.  There are always some who scrunch up their faces when they disagree with a point; others will stare out the window; a few rude (but tired) persons will fall asleep.  These persons do not necessarily represent the views of the audience; much depends upon how many in the audience manifest these signals.  By and large, one should take the head-nodders and the note-takers as signs that the audience is following one's argument.  If these people seem to outnumber the people not paying attention, then the speech is being well-received.  The single most important bit of evidence about the audience's attention, however, is eye contact.  If members of the audience will look back at you when you are speaking, then you have their attention.  If they look away, then your contact with the audience is probably fading.

Speeches probably cannot be sophisticated and intricate.  Few audiences have the listening ability or background to work through a difficult or complex argument, and speakers should not expect them to be able to do so.  Many speakers fail to appreciate the difficulties of good listening, and most speakers worry about leaving out some important part of the argument. One must be acutely aware of the tradeoff between comprehensiveness and comprehension.  Trying to put too much into a speech is probably the single most frequent error made by speakers.

This desire to "say everything" stems from the distinctive limitations of speeches:  after a speech, one cannot go back and correct errors or omissions, and such mistakes could potentially cripple the persuasiveness of a speech. A speaker cannot allow himself or herself to fall into this mentality.  At the outset, a speaker must define an argument sharply and narrowly and must focus on only that argument.  There are certainly implications of an argument that are important but cannot be developed within the speech.  These aspects should be clearly acknowledged by the speaker, but deferred to a question-and-answer period, a future speech, or a reference to a work that the audience can follow-up on its own.  Speakers must exercise tight and disciplined control over content.

As a rule of thumb, the audience will remember about one-half of what was said in a twenty-minute talk.  After twenty-minutes, recall drops off precipitously.  Oral arguments should therefore be parsed down as much as possible.   There are very few circumstances in which an audience will recall a great deal of the information in a speech longer than twenty minutes.  Most evidence suggests that audience recall declines precipitously after 16 and one-half minutes.

Oral communication uses words with fewer syllables than the written language, the sentences are shorter, and self-referencing pronouns such as I are common.   Oral communication also allows incomplete sentences if delivered properly, and many sentences will begin with "and," "but," and "except."

The upshot of these differences is that one should not think about speeches as oral presentations of a written text.  Speeches are genuinely different from written prose, and one should not use the logic of writing as a basis for writing a speech.

## Communication Laws – When to Use Email or Pick Up the Phone



If you're like a lot of people, you rely far too heavily on email, even when you'd be better served by talking in real time. That impulse is understandable. After all, email lets you carefully think through exactly what you want to say, choose the perfect words, and avoid the risk of accidentally blurting out something you'll later regret. And it also lets you avoid conversations that might be awkward if they happen face-to-face. But while email is a perfectly sound tool in many cases, some topics call for a real-time conversation – meaning a discussion in-person, or at least over the phone.

That's not to say that you need to communicate in real time for everything – you don't – but you should be thoughtful about what communication mode you choose, and you should keep in mind that email and other written forms of communication are notorious for causing mis-communications about tone and intent.

## 5 times you should never use email, and an unbreakable rule

You should never use email for any of the following:

1. Giving critical feedback, especially serious or nuanced feedback.
2. Talking about complex projects or tasks where you need to hash out what the outcome should look like, explain complicated or nuanced information, or otherwise have a discussion as opposed to simply assigning.
3. Delivering a difficult, sensitive, or sticky message, such as turning someone down for a raise or promotion, discussing concerns about attendance, or ending someone's pet project.
4. Anything likely to be heated or conflict-filled, or even just where your tone could be misinterpreted.
5. Any topics where part of the value of communicating at all is in the discussion (such as talking about performance concerns) and where a one-way delivery of information will deprive you of that.

***And here's the unbreakable rule of email:*** If you're dreading the conversation or it feels uncomfortable to you, you shouldn't be using email. That's the sign of a conversation that's sufficiently delicate, emotionally charged, or ripe for misinterpretation that you should have a conversation, not send an email.

## 2 times to put it in writing

But let's not give email short shrift. It's a hugely valuable communication tool (there's a reason, after all, that most of us have embraced it so heartily). And while email is good for plenty of routine communications, there are two times in particular when email really shines:

- When you want a written record of what was said – to refer back to later or provide documentation of what was relayed
- When something is so complicated that you want someone to have details in writing, such as a new procedure for database entries or login instructions for your website

Ultimately, all of this is about choosing the communication tool that best fits the situation – not always picking one or the other, or even the one that's most comfortable, but being thoughtful about what your context demands.