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90 of all communication is nonverbal

We've all heard that 90% of communication is nonverbal, but is there any truth to this adage? When someone reads a transcript of a politician's impassioned speech, are they really missing out on the majority of the message? While the audience may get the essence of what's being said, there will always be something lost in translation when nonverbal communication isn't conveyed. Conversely, nonverbal communication can shed light on the hidden truth within a message. Information is no longer limited to print. It's delivered through social media, television, blogs, and other channels of communication. Professionals interested in a communications career have to concern themselves with not only what's being said but how it's said. Let's take a look at how much of communication is nonverbal and how professionals with a Bachelor of Arts in Communication can use nonverbal signals to better their personal and professional lives. The 55/38/7 Formula The 90% figure wasn't plucked out of thin air. It was Albert Mehrabian, a researcher of body language, who first broke down the components of a face-to-face conversation. He found that communication is 55% nonverbal, 38% vocal, and 7% words only. This is where the idea that the vast majority of communication is nonverbal originated, but does this really mean that less than 10% of information is conveyed in spoken words? It turns out that the above formula was developed with a specific purpose in mind: comparing facial and vocal components to decipher a person's attitude. According to Mehrabian, "When there are inconsistencies between attitudes communicated verbally and posturally, the postural component should dominate in determining the total attitude that is inferred." Is 90% of communication nonverbal? No, information is conveyed verbally, but in a face-to-face conversation, body language and facial expressions can have an incredible impact on how information is interpreted. In "The Definitive Book of Body Language," Allan and Barbara Pease analyzed thousands of recorded sales negotiations from the 1970s and 1980s and found that body language accounted for the majority of the impact made negotiating. They also considered how the person with the strongest argument usually wins in negotiations over the phone but not always in face-to-face conversations. Although the idea that 90% of communication is nonverbal can be put to rest, a person's body language and our first impression of them can heavily influence our decision-making. The Power of Body Language Now that we know that we know the important role nonverbal signals play in communication, how can we use body language and tone to communicate more effectively? Perhaps more importantly, how can we prevent nonverbal forms of communication from falsely influencing our perceptions of others? Making a Good First Impression If you're interested in a communications career, you'll come to learn the true value of a first impression. Allan and Barbara Pease also assert that when we meet people for the first time, we make snap judgments about their friendliness, assertiveness, and appearance. Without a single word being spoken, without even realizing it, people use nonverbal communication to size people up. According to the 55/38/7 formula, nearly 40% of a person's attitude is conveyed vocally through tone and inflection, so try to ensure that your tone matches whatever message you're trying to convey. You can also try speaking in a deeper voice. Research has shown that people who speak with a low-pitched voice are rated more authoritative and competent than those who speak with a higher pitch. Although people are rarely conscious of their body language and facial expressions, there are a couple of behaviors a person can tweak to improve their communication skills. For instance, research has shown that it takes conscious effort for a person to frown when looking at someone smiling—a smile is literally infectious. Research also shows that both men and women are more attracted to people who make eye contact and smile more often. A smile and just the right amount of eye contact can help you effectively convey information during first impressions and long after. Hand gestures can not only express your thoughts but also convey your enthusiasm and passion for a topic. According to body language expert Dr. Carol Kinsey Goman, "Gesturing can help people form clearer thoughts, speak in tighter sentences and use more declarative language." As with tone, try to ensure that your hand gestures match what you're saying, otherwise people will notice the mismatch and may be less likely to trust you. Interpreting Body Language Body language can also provide insight into a person's emotional condition. For example, you likely already know that someone who crosses their arms is guarded or discontent even when they claim the contrary. Reading body language is like learning a second language and can help separate perception from reality. According to Dr. Jeff Thompson, we can better decipher nonverbal signals by remembering the three C's of nonverbal communication: context, clusters, and congruence. We've already covered congruence—comparing spoken words to body language and tone. Applying context means better understanding the setting. For example, knowing that someone has anxiety can explain why they appear tense during a fireworks display. Finally, using clusters means using not one but multiple expressions or movements to influence our interpretation of a person's body language. There's So Much More to Communication How much of communication is nonverbal? It may not be exactly 90%, but nonverbal communication—eye contact, smiling, hand gestures—heavily influences how people interpret and react to information. This is an important lesson to learn for anyone interested in a communications career, and it's only the tip of the iceberg. The University of Texas Permian Basin offers an online BA in communication program that teaches theories on communication with regard to human interactions, groups and organizations, intercultural interactions, and mass and social media. Whether you're working toward a career in journalism, speechwriting, or social media, our online program can empower you with the skills needed to convey your message clearly and profoundly. Learn more about UT Permian Basin's online BA in communication program. Sources: As a young attorney I went to a two day training on communication. At the time I remember being a bit hummed at the fact that both of my weekend days were being absorbed by this training. I felt communication was something I was already good at, and as a trial lawyer, my weekends were my only time to recharge and to prepare for the coming week. This training started early and went late both Saturday and Sunday. However, my mindset changed within the first hour of attendance. This was not the typical lawyer training. It was participatory, mind opening and really had little to do with traditional law and everything to do with being an effective communicator. The focus of the training was not so much about what we as lawyers said, but more about how we said it, and more importantly how people reacted. The trick to being an effective trial lawyer is getting 12 people, a judge and even the prosecutor- all with very different personalities, to be able to hear what you have to say. As a criminal defense lawyer, one generally starts behind the pack in that despite our Constitutional "presumption of innocence". The reality is the opposite. Most jurors assume your client is guilty, and if he weren't he wouldn't be sitting there. If one is to change that opinion, effective and persuasive communication is critical. Hand in hand with that is realizing that being persuasive means being absolutely aware of your audience and that what may seem totally persuasive to you, may not be at all for over half of your jurors. All of this brings me back to that communication training. In two days I learned the most useful information about communication and connection, that I have since used in both the courtroom and every aspect of my life. The most important communication is that which is non-verbal. The juror who agrees with you verbally in voir dire, but has her arms crossed tightly across her chest is actually saying no. You have just lost the vote of the Justice who was nodding seemingly in agreement with you, when there is a slight raise of the corner of the eyebrow. The witness who says she can't remember and is looking down or away is not trying to remember and likely not telling you the truth. Being aware of, and in touch with the non-verbal clues people constantly give out, is so much more, and more reliable, than their words. I feel knowing and realizing this has likely been one of the biggest factors leading to my success as a criminal defense attorney over the last 32 years. When I started working with horses, I soon realized part of my ease with them was that I was already trained to tap into the non-verbal. This may seem somewhat simplistic in that there are very few Mr. Ed's out there that can vocalize and talk in the language we are accustomed. Often the human expectation is that others will conform to us and with horses many have that expectation. We tell them what to do, where to go, what to eat, how to hold their head, how fast to go and the list goes on. And when they do not comply they are labeled as bad, oft mistreated or forced into submission. Instead of always telling or demanding, what if we came up with a new model? What if first we took the time to listen. What if, just like the juror I wanted to persuade with the crossed arms, I took a moment to be thoughtful enough to figure out what had caused the arms to be crossed. Or in the case of the horse, the ears to pin or any number of other signs that they so readily give us, and we mostly ignore. What if we stopped talking so much and instead trained ourselves to listen. What would our horses say, and would we be willing to hear? If there were ever numbers associated with body language and nonverbal communication, they would be 55, 38, and 7. People often refer to these numbers as the standard for understanding nonverbal communication and expressing its importance—specifically over the words being spoken. How often have you heard someone say over 80% (or even 90%) of communication is body language or nonverbal? Perhaps even you might have said it, but do you know where it originates from? The numbers represent the percentages of importance that varying communication channels have. The belief is that 55% of communication is body language, 38% is tone of voice, and 7% is the actual words spoken. Is that true? Well, yes and no. Firstly, the history behind this often quoted, and equally often misunderstood magic set of percentages is often unknown, which I think happens to be the main reason it is not fully understood. The famous (at least in nonverbal communication circles!) researcher Albert Mehrabian is responsible for this percentage breakdown detailing the importance of nonverbal communication channels compared to verbal channels. Actually, it was two research studies (Mehrabian & Wiener, 1967 and Mehrabian & Ferris, 1967) combined that resulted in the 55/38/7 formula. The Mehrabian and Ferris study actually consists of a predecessor formula to the 55/38/7 formula: 60/40. The 60/40 formula they created represents the comparison of importance between facial (60%) and vocal (40%) components in regards to a person's attitude. The problem with this, as with the general study of nonverbal communication, is that it is inaccurate to claim that a formula is absolute and applies to every situation. What does Mehrabian think of this? He agrees! The formula was created for a specific context—when the nonverbal channel and the verbal channel are incongruent (not matching). As he writes in his book Nonverbal Communication: "When there are inconsistencies between attitudes communicated verbally and posturally, the postural component should dominate in determining the total attitude that is inferred." So should you still quote the 55/38/7 percentage at the next dinner party to show your nonverbal communication knowledge? Should you include an asterisk? Well, when I mention the 55/38/7 numbers, I clearly state that this applies to certain situations and, more importantly, should not be used as a deciding factor to try and understand the situation. A proper analysis needs to occur to fully grasp what the person's current emotions are at that moment. Source: 3 Cs of Nonverbal Communication. Jeff Thompson One way of increasing your accuracy is by applying the 3 C's of Nonverbal Communication: context, clusters, and congruence. Context includes what environment the situation is taking place in, the history between the people, and other factors such as each person's role (for example, an interaction between a boss and employee). Looking for nonverbal communication gestures in clusters prevents us from allowing a single gesture or movement to be definitive in determining a person's state of mind or emotion. Sure, crossing your arms at your chest can be a sign of being resistant and close-minded. However, if the person's shoulders are raised and their teeth are chattering, they might just be cold! Finally, congruence we already discussed above in regards to the formula. Do the spoken words match the tone and body language? After someone falls, and they verbally state they are fine, however their face is grimacing and their voice is shaky, you might want to probe a little deeper. The 55/38/7 percentage and the 3 C's of Nonverbal Communication remind us that, when trying to understand others, a single gesture or comment does not necessarily mean something. Instead, these theories allow us to take note and observe more to get a better understanding of what is going on. References Mehrabian, A. (1972). Nonverbal Communication. New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction. Get the help you need from a therapist near you—a FREE service from Psychology Today. 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