
How to Read Non Verbal Communication in Organisations

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Non verbal elements of communication are often overlooked and considered relatively insignificant in the overall communication process. Most studies performed in this area, however, dispute this perception and credits the non verbal aspect with being a major contributor to the process of human communication.

In order to stress this importance, consider what occurs when verbal versus non verbal messages received are in conflict. This results in a distrust of the sender. To resolve this conflict, the receiver will typically accept the non verbal message over the verbal one. This human behavioural trait helps substantiate the old adage that "actions speak louder than words".

Non verbal communication comprises a large area of human behaviour consisting of numerous distinctive elements. The following discussion will focus on the non verbal messages which pervade the business organisation, which when correctly interpreted, can reveal an organisation's values and culture.

Organisational Culture

A culture is the collection of external influences which can create an environment, and includes such things as knowledge, beliefs, morals, customs, and policies. It is important to understand that cultures are learned, they vary, and they influence behaviour. A very descriptive definition of an organisational culture is offered by Marvin Bower, author of *The Will to Manage*, who describes the informal cultural elements of a business as "the way we do things around here".

Every organisation has a culture. Regardless of whether the culture is weak or strong, it has a powerful influence on practically every occurrence in the organisation. It affects the way people dress, the working conditions, who gets promoted, and it even influences the individual's after work activities.

The culture is made up of various elements, but values are at the very heart of it. Values are what provide the unified direction for everyone in the organisation, and they establish the constraints on daily behaviour.

Cultures vary significantly between organisations. Acceptable behaviour in one company would not be allowed by another. A manager who achieved outstanding results in one company can apply those same techniques in a different company with disastrous results. The culture determines what

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works and what does not. Recognising the tremendous impact the culture has, it becomes apparent that a person's success within a given organisation is very much a function of how well he works within the guidelines that the culture has established.

Having identified the importance of working within a culture, it seems reasonable to surmise that one's ability to read and interpret the culture is a key factor to success within that organisation. Let us now examine the various non verbal messages which give us some insight into the values and overall culture of the organisation and the people working within it.

The Physical Environment

A company's facilities are a very visible statement about its culture. Senior managers usually make the building investment decisions, and these are the same people whose primary function is to manage the organisation's culture. Therefore, a company with a strong culture and a lot of pride in itself will typically reflect that pride through its physical environment. Bold statements echoing the perceptions that companies have about themselves can be found everywhere. Bank of America's San Francisco head-quarter is a large, dark structure that dominates the skyline and is out of scale with all of the other buildings around it. This is a powerful indication of how they perceive themselves. Digital Equipment Corporation's refurbished mill site makes the statement that they are a modern company (by the physical appearance of the facility) but they have their roots in New England, therefore respecting tradition. An image of stability and importance is conveyed by the fortress-like headquarters of General Electric in Fairfield, Connecticut. The location of the company's buildings along with the consistency of locations also makes a statement about its beliefs. For example, the corporate headquarters may be a spectacular facility in a most desirable location, while the division sites are run down buildings in nondescript locations. This inconsistency does not say much about the way upper management feels about its employees and probably points to a fragmented culture. Considerations must be given to the age of the facility, its purpose, and the use of its environs; however, the indications are usually clear.

The office environment gives additional insight into the culture. A company that encourages constant communication among members of a group will provide an office environment that is open and unencumbered by walls. Individuals may be separated into distinct cubicles by low partitions, or there may be no partitions at all. In either case, the symbolic barriers to communications (such as high partitions or floor to ceiling walls) are noticeably absent.

The office furniture, or the discrepancies in the types of office furniture, provide additional understanding of the culture. Companies which are very formal, tend to be heavily regulated, and/or are very procedure oriented have tightly structured hierarchies which resemble class systems. One of the

ways in which this class system is visibly manifested is through the office furniture. An individual's position in the hierarchy can be readily determined by the type of furniture he possesses. For example, the lower class may have a small steel desk and a simple chair. The next class may have the same desk, but have a chair with arms and a small table. As you progress up the class system into the managerial ranks, your furniture may consist of a large desk, conference table and chairs, and a bookshelf. Finally, vice presidents have those items plus thick carpeting, sofa, and other accoutrements.

Meetings

The formal meeting contains a wealth of information that can provide knowledge of the organisation's culture. All companies employ formal meetings in some form, however, the various components which comprise these meetings can vary widely between organisations. The following is a look at these various aspects of meetings.

- * *Quantity Held* - The number of formal meetings that are held varies considerably. Some organisations require many, others very few, if any. Formal companies may have regularly scheduled meetings with structured agendas because "that is what we have always done". Newly formed companies may do the same thing for a different reason. They may have many regular meetings just to establish the lines of communication among people who have no history of working with each other (i.e., no strong culture to guide them).
- * *Where They Are Held* - Meetings may be held in formal conference rooms or in more informal settings.
- * *Shape of the Table* - A large table with a very distinct head is likely to be found in formal organisations with tightly structured hierarchies. This type of a table reinforces that hierarchy. On the other hand, round conference tables tend to equalise peer standings among the participants of the meeting.
- * *Who Attends* - In a company with a formal culture, regular meetings are attended only by peers. In more informal cultures, these meetings may be comprised of both junior and senior members of the organisation.
- * *Who Sits Where* - In structured, formal organisations, the boss is at the head of the table, with his most important people seated next to him. The hierarchy is very clear in this type of an organisation when people sit down at the conference table. The closer you are to the head of the table, the higher you are in the hierarchy. In less structured organisations (such as many new, high-tech firms), there are no "reserved" seats at the conference tables and attendees sit wherever they choose.

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- * *Format* - The degree of formality existing in the company's culture is often directly related to the formality of the meeting. Some regular meetings are extremely formal with highly structured agendas, possibly even consisting of sophisticated multi-media presentations. No one speaks out of turn, and all participants know their role. Other meetings have a very loosely structured agenda along with an atmosphere of give and take throughout the course of the meeting.

There is no attempt here to make judgements as to which meeting form works better. The point being made is that the meeting is a reflection of the culture. By noting the different meeting aspects, one can gain insight into the company's culture.

People

How do people in the organisations present themselves? The answer to this question varies between organisations and will also be a function of physical locations. Nevertheless, the values of the area or region of the country in which you are operating are a part of your company's culture. It is one element of your environment, and therefore influences your culture.

Manner of dress is a highly visible non verbal sign. Highly structured organisations will typically reflect that formality in the way the employees dress. Conservative business suits prevail in these types of cultures. In contrast, informal, loosely structured organisations such as some newer high-tech businesses, accept a very casual manner of dress. Tennis shoes and T-shirts is not uncommon attire for technical professionals in some of these organisations. Companies that operate in industries that entail high risk and generally get quick feedback regarding their decisions tend to have a culture where the individual is stressed. In these cultures, people typically dress in a fashionable manner. There is an effort made to look different from their peers, but not too different. The latest trends in fashion are commonly found in these cultures. Examples of industries falling into this category include advertising, venture capital, and the entertainment industry.

How are people initially greeted in this organisation? The characteristics of the reception area more than likely reflect the values. Characteristics include formal vs. non-formal, simple vs. ornate, and fashionable vs. conservative. In organisations that are very customer service oriented, you will more than likely be serviced immediately, your coat taken and a cup of coffee offered. In contrast with this greeting, in the individualistic cultures mentioned in the previous paragraph you are likely to be paid little attention by the receptionist and wait for long periods of time for your appointment. This is a reflection of the culture that caters to its stars; if you are not one, you can wait. In the environment which is laden with bureaucracy, you will probably be subjected to an elaborate sign-in procedure, involving security, phone calls, and appropriate company badges.

Organisational Design

A strong emphasis on culture and its role in the success of so-called excellent companies can be found in current management literature. One of the views that has been furthered in some of the more contemporary writings has been the theory that the organisational structure and strategy may be more symbolic than anything else. The organisations with strong values will reflect those values and beliefs through the formal organisational design.

Examining the formal organisational structure can prove to be quite enlightening. If all key positions in the organisation are filled by ex-sales persons, for example, it is rather clear that the company is sales oriented, and the road to the top goes right through that department. Let us look at the example of a company that puts a strong emphasis on tightly controlling costs as part of its inherent strategy. What will their organisation structure look like? Typically, the controller and the vice president of finance would be prominent members of the top management team. In many cases, the divisional controllers would report directly to the corporate controller rather than through the division general manager. This company's management systems will be geared towards budget development and control.

A company whose values centre around the marketing function will most likely have several senior marketing vice presidents in its top management structure. Similarly, within companies that focus on the research and development aspect, you are likely to find ex-engineers occupying prominent positions in the top management team. It is important to recognise that organisational values play a crucial role in determining how far one can progress within a company.

Miscellaneous Factors

There are many other non verbal signs that exist in the organisational environment that provide insight into various aspects of the company. The formal title that a person possesses allows you to determine where he or she fits into the hierarchy. In bureaucratic companies, titles and classes are sometimes inseparable. Other symbols which indicate position in the hierarchy include parking spaces, the privilege of using the executive dining room, the ability to come and go during working hours (such as leaving the building for coffee), and your work schedule. The formal memo system within an organisation provides culture indicators. The quantity, length, and formality of the memo are reflections of the amount of bureaucracy which exists, the degree of formality that is present, and the desired means of communication throughout the organisation. For example, companies that encourage a lot of face-to-face, daily interaction among members will generally have far fewer formal memos than companies who do not stress this philosophy. A person who has volumes of technical books and/or journals in his office and certificates and degrees on the walls is communicating a message to the observer. This message is that he is keeping up with his field. He is saying that he went

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through the proper procedures and is qualified for the job he is doing. In most cases the books are not heavily used for his work, but their symbolism is more important than their functionality. People who most frequently exhibit this tendency include doctors, some technical people, and people in the academic world such as university professors.

Summary

This is by no means an exhaustive study of all of the non verbal communication which exists in organisations. Since organisations are comprised of people, any human characteristic has some effect on the organisation and the behaviour within organisations. Other non verbal forms of communication such as paralanguage (extra-speech sounds) and kinetics (body language) are important in the interpretation of overall human behaviour, and how they relate to the organisational environment. Much can be learned from the interpretation of the non verbal elements present in the culture in which we function. The messages communicated by these elements, and the degree to which they are consistent with each other, can communicate to the observer the strength of the culture, and the values which lie behind it. This can be valuable information in attempting to understand what an organisation is all about.